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Facing Danger

Chapter 1: The End of the Beginning (Year 5)

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“Elladora, Corona, loves, do come and meet darling Sirius,” caroled the wizened witch. “These are my precious granddaughters, Sirius dear. They were at Hogwarts after your time, but being as close to the school as you are, perhaps you’ve heard of their accomplishments...”

Sirius Black bowed, acknowledging the women’s curtsies and thinking hard about the dossiers he’d been supplied on the current crop of young purebloods. “Ravenclaw,” he hazarded to the darker one, Elladora, who was probably about twenty-five. “You took the Transfiguration prize five years running.”

“Oh!” Her hand went to her mouth. “Imagine you knowing that!”

“And you were Slytherin,” Sirius went on, turning to the fairer sister, Corona, who couldn’t be more than twenty. “Care of Magical Creatures, wasn’t it? You calmed that berserk unicorn in your sixth year?”

The young woman inclined her head. “Are you a Legilimens, M’sieur Black, that you know so well what we pride ourselves on?” she asked.

“How could I forget what I have heard of such intelligent, beautiful ladies?” Sirius hedged. After two weeks, the speech and manner of pureblood interaction was beginning to come easily to him again.

Not that it’s something I was eager to remember how to do, but it’s necessary right now.

The social season for purebloods, a round of house parties, hunting, concerts, and other high-cultured delights, was hosted at one luxurious manor after another. It began in July, when children of marriageable age returned from Hogwarts, and in most years lasted through mid-August. This year, something that no one would discuss openly had cut the season short.

Maybe a lack of males, since most of them are off either doing Voldemort’s bidding or courting his favor? And quite a few of the females, too. I get the feeling Voldemort doesn’t care about sex. As long as they can hold a wand and shout “Avada Kedavra,” they’re in.

“Your eyes are far away,” said Corona, startling Sirius into a jump. “May I know where?”

Sirius recalled himself to the present moment, and his duties. “Nowhere that so fair a lady should be troubled with,” he said gallantly.

Corona pouted. “I had hoped you would be different than the men Grandmother shoves into my face, day in, day out,” she said. “She’s constantly casting it up to Elladora and me that we’re old maids, that the line will never continue, that we’ve failed in our duty. But how can we do our duty

when half the men are our cousins and all of them are horrid?”

“Does my lady desire that I be different?”

A smile tugged at one corner of Corona’s mouth. “I doubt I am your lady, M’sieur Black. Or is Grandmother right about you? Does your appearance here mean that you have at last grown past your ‘childish fantasies of true love’?” She mimicked her grandmother’s speech admirably.

Sirius sighed. “Mam’selle Corona, I know not what to say,” he answered. “I have always been taught that it is wrong to call a lady a liar.”

“Grandmother is no lady,” said Corona frankly, “and I want the truth.”

“As do I.” Sirius smiled darkly, appreciating for a moment the double meanings in Corona’s words, the meanings she was surely not aware of.

God, Aletha, I miss you. You and Pearl. Thoughts of his beautiful wife and daughter flooded him, quickly joined by others. Moony and Danger, my Wolf, Neenie and Fox...

He shook himself out of his reverie. “The truth may be a dangerous thing, Mam’selle,” he said. “Particularly in such company as we keep.” He nodded towards the dancers on the floor and their elders sitting and standing around it, some sipping at drinks or nibbling chocolates and fruit. Talk and laughter rose above the genteel music to which the dancers moved, but to Sirius’ ear, the talk was shrill and nervous, and the laughter held a brittle, frightened edge.

I’d give anything to be home. Eat a decent meal, even if Danger makes me do the dishes afterwards. Tell the cubs dirty jokes until Letha beats me up for it. Romp with Moony under the full moon...

That had been hardest of all, spending a den-night away from the Pack. The house-elf must have wondered when she found his bedding on the floor the morning after full moon, but proper pureblood-owned house-elves never asked their masters or their masters’ guests anything, unless it was a question of how they should punish themselves today.

“You say that the truth is dangerous,” Corona murmured, stepping closer to his side. “But I fear neither death nor pain.”

“What do you fear, then, my lady?” Sirius returned in the same quiet tones.

“A cage.” Corona’s gaze darted about the elegant ballroom as if the windows were barricaded and the doors locked against her leaving. “To stay behind bars until use and old age accept them, and all chance of valor is gone beyond recall or desire.”

Sirius remembered with sympathy his own days trapped in the expectations of a pureblood family, but remained wary. Purebloods were adept at lying, and at saying one thing and meaning another. “You quote prettily, Mam’selle.”

“I mean every word.” Corona dropped her fingers onto his arm. “Will you escort me outdoors? I feel a need for fresh air.”

“Gladly.” Sirius made for the nearest door, Corona beside him.

Across the room, Elladora Gamp leveled a glare of pure hatred toward her sister and the returned prodigal of the Black family.

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“Out, out, *out!*”

Danger Granger-Lupin winced as she Apparated into the living room of her family’s home, the Marauders’ Den. *What’s Neenie mad about now?*

“You’re *scaring* her, leave her *alone*, get *out!*”

Her. Danger began to catalogue current female residents of the Den. Her baby sister was out, since not even Hermione Granger-Lupin referred to herself in the third person. Ginny Weasley had inherited her mother’s lungs and a good deal of Molly’s famous temper, and was thus perfectly capable of defending herself. Something similar could be said of Hermione’s Pack-sister, Meghan Black, at twelve the youngest child in the house but far from helpless. Even dreamy Luna Lovegood usually wouldn’t need Hermione to be screaming in her defense.

Usually, of course, being the key word. Nothing about this particular set-up is usual. The members of the Order of the Phoenix who had underage children – Arthur and Molly Weasley, Gerald Lovegood, and Frank and Alice Longbottom, along with Danger, her husband, and their two best friends, the foursome commonly known as the Pack – had agreed that those children should be housed together in the safest of the family homes until a Headquarters of the Order could be found and made safe and marginally habitable.

And rebuilding the wards on Hogwarts leaves us with very little time to go house-hunting. Though I liked Sirius’ suggestion in his latest letter, and I think Albus does as well...

Her thoughts had carried her up the stairs towards the source of Hermione’s shouts. Two identical faces lifted at her approach. “We didn’t do it,” said Fred and George Weasley in unison.

Danger crossed her arms. “You never do.”

“Honestly, we didn’t do anything,” said Fred.

“We just walked in the room, and Luna started screaming,” George picked up.

“Then she went out the window into the tree.”

“And now she’s sitting out there, and she won’t let anyone near her.”

“Draco tried to calm her down, but she just screamed at him too.”

George frowned. “She actually screamed louder at him. I thought she liked him.”

A door to Danger’s left opened. “I thought she liked me too,” said Draco Black, leaning against the doorframe. “But she drew blood. Look at this.” He held out his arm. His usual summer sunburn was peeling, but beneath it Danger could see three scratches, recently healed.

“Meghan?” she asked, running a finger along her Pack-son’s arm.

Draco nodded. “I don’t get it. I didn’t do anything.”

“Anything you remember, you mean. Or nothing you’re willing to tell me about.”

“No, I mean I didn’t do *anything*.” Draco jerked a thumb behind him. “Ask them, or the girls, if you don’t believe me.”

Danger looked over Draco’s shoulder. Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom looked up from their game of wizard chess. “He really didn’t,” said Neville. “It’d be hard to hide it, with us all in close quarters this way.”

“Even going outside doesn’t help,” Ron added, looking out the window at the almost-darkness of late evening. “We still know everything we’re all doing.”

Danger turned at the sound of another door opening behind her. Ginny and Meghan stepped out, Meghan dodging past the older girl to claim a hug from her Pack-mum. “Luna won’t let anyone close,” the dark-skinned girl said, her voice muffled against Danger’s robes. “Her body isn’t hurt, but I think her soul is, and I don’t know if I can fix it.”

Danger refrained from mouthing platitudes at Meghan. Aletha Freeman-Black had insisted her born daughter not be sheltered from the truths that the girl’s three adopted siblings had learned early, so Meghan knew well that although her talent for healing was remarkable – it had been largely responsible for the restoration of the Longbottoms – it couldn’t do everything. Instead, she hugged her goddaughter closer and met Ginny’s eyes. “Anything to add?” she asked.

“I think it might be something she Saw.” The slight emphasis on the word made Ginny’s meaning unmistakable. Luna had recently reclaimed her ability to see things that other people couldn’t, an ability she had renounced after watching an evil spell try to harm Draco more than a year ago. Danger, saddled with yearly prophetic dreams and occasional unscheduled ones, could sympathize.

“And you want me to do something about it,” she asked the crowd in general.

Heads nodded up and down the hall.

“I can certainly try.” Danger gently disengaged Meghan and stood up just in time to catch Draco holding his hands above his head like ears. “Don’t even start, fox-boy,” she said, flicking one of

his real ears. “That joke is dead and buried, and we are not making an Inferius out of it.”

“Aww,” Draco complained half-heartedly.

“If you still want that treat tomorrow...”

Draco zipped a finger across his lips.

“That’s my boy.” Danger moved up the hall, contemplating the strange way in which the phrase had become truth. Two weeks shy of eleven years earlier, the Pack had been kidnapped from their home by Lucius Malfoy. His various uncouth plans for them had never come to pass, mostly because of the courage of one woman.

Narcissa. Danger could still see the aristocratic face, wondering and frightened, as the pureblood woman admitted that she loved her four-year-old son. Narcissa had made a bargain with the Pack – she would free them, and remove the threat of Lucius from their lives, if they would take Draco and raise him with their other three children.

“Teach him what I never could,” Narcissa’s voice echoed in Danger’s memories. *“Teach him to love and be loved.”*

And I like to think we have.

Danger tapped on the door. “I said, go *away!*” shouted Hermione from within. “You’re not helping!”

“How do you know? I just got here.”

The door opened. “Sorry,” said Hermione, stepping back to let Danger into the room. “I thought it was the twins again. Or my stupid twin again, for that matter.”

“What happened?” Danger directed the question to both Hermione and the open window, where she could see a flash of white in the juniper tree growing by the corner of the Den.

“We were talking,” said Hermione. “Then Fred and George came in, and Luna stared at them. They made some crack about her, and George started to come closer, and Luna screamed and climbed out the window before I could stop her. I think they may have seen what she can do now.”

Danger sighed. “They were going to find out eventually. As Neville said, it’s close quarters here. I’ll remind them exactly what’s at stake if they spill. What then?”

“Draco heard her screaming and came running in. He tried to get her to come back in, but she just scratched at him and went on crying, or whatever you want to call it. She’s still doing it.” Hermione fell silent, looking towards the window. Quiet noises like a girl’s sobs drifted in, holding the desperation of a wild creature caged.

“Do you want me to try?” Danger asked softly.

“Please.” Hermione crossed the room, never taking her eyes from the window, and Danger held her. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“I know. You did very well with what you had. And I’ll need to ask you something later tonight, so don’t disappear on me.”

“I won’t.” Hermione laid her head on Danger’s shoulder for one moment, then pulled away. “I’ll go find something to do. Maybe we can get Winky to make us some popcorn and watch a movie.” Molly Weasley had sent her recently hired house-elf to take care of the Den and its young inhabitants, since she, her husband, and Percy could fend for themselves more easily than could her twins and seven-eighths of the rambunctious group known as the Pride.

I wish we had them all here, but he’s safer where he is...

Danger shook her head as Hermione slipped out of the room. *And I need to be concentrating on what’s in front of me. Finding out what has Luna so on edge, and calming her if I can.*

Sitting down on one of the four beds in the room, Danger began to sing, a light-hearted song from a light-hearted musical.

Poor sweet baby,

Poor poor sweet sweet baby,

Show me where it hurts, I’ll tell you how to make it well;

I’ve won lots of loving cups for playing show-and-tell,

My poor sweet baby...

The sounds from the tree outside diminished, then were gone. As Danger came into the last verse, small scratches on the windowsill told her that her quarry was moving closer. She held the last note out until her voice quavered from lack of breath, then ended it and turned to see what was behind her.

A white owl perched on the next bed over, her talons embedded in the afghan Danger’s mother had crocheted long ago.

“Do you want an Owl Treat?” Danger asked, letting only the most gentle of teasing tones into her voice.

The owl shook her head.

“Sit with me, then?” Danger patted the space beside her.

The owl waddled to the edge of the bed, then flapped awkwardly across the space between beds. Danger blinked as wing feathers brushed her face. “You’re doing well,” she said.

The bed sagged slightly as the weight on it increased. “No, I’m not,” said Luna, pushing her hair out of her face. “Why is everyone lying to me today?”

“I wasn’t lying to you. Flying is hard. You’re doing well for a beginner.”

“Ron flies very well when he’s Redwing.”

“Ron learned to fly as a hawk by falling out his dorm window. I don’t think you want to go that far.”

Luna stiffened, quivering. “He’ll fall again,” she whispered. “He’ll fall with a friend, and he’ll have to decide which of them to save – he could do magic and save his friend, or he could transform and save himself...” She clapped her hands over her eyes with a little cry.

Danger reached out and pulled the girl close. **Enough**, she said sternly and silently, though not to her husband, with whom she most usually spoke silently. **Didn’t any of you think to show her how to moderate this? Or isn’t there a way?**

There is, answered a female voice, cool and calm. **But because Luna’s power has been so long denied, it is overwhelming her attempts at moderation. Also, she has lost her skill at moderating it through lack of practice.**

Quit trying to guilt-trip her, she can’t hear you, Danger retorted. **I think it’s pretty low of you to do this to her.**

I never intended my statements to make anyone feel guilty. They are merely facts.

Yes, well, intended or not, she’s being torn apart by this, and I don’t know of anyone who can help her. Are you going to do something about it, or not?

A silent sigh. **What would you have us do? We cannot put the power to sleep again now that she has reawakened it. She knew this.**

Yes, but there has to be some way to limit it. To tell it when and where to come, and how much to show her. She won’t last long if she’s seeing every bad thing that’s going to happen to us until this war is over.

A long pause. **We must think on this**, the voice said finally. **You have the power to provide a stopgap measure, if you wish.**

I do wish. Danger couldn’t keep a sarcastic tone from her mental voice. **How long will you need to think?**

Three weeks should be sufficient, the other answered, seemingly unaware of Danger’s sarcasm.

The price to you will be nine hours.

Danger checked her wristwatch. Nine o'clock. **Begin it at nine-thirty, then,** she said. **I want to talk to her before I pass out.**

Very well. The connection shut off abruptly.

“Ravenclaws,” Danger grumbled. “Luna, look at me.”

Luna shook her head frantically, her eyes shut tight. “I can’t,” she said. “I’ll See something terrible. I do when I look at everyone, or when I think about them even...”

“In half an hour, you won’t anymore. At least not for a little while.”

Luna’s head came up. “How long?”

“A few weeks. If you were having this much trouble with your Seeing, why didn’t you tell someone?”

“I thought it would go away,” Luna said shakily. “But it just keeps getting worse...”

“We’re in for a rough time, Luna. A war. Do you want to talk about any of what you Saw?”

“Do you think that would help?”

“It helps me to talk about frightening things. I can look at them honestly, with another person’s help, and see what frightens me about them. But if you don’t want to, I’ll respect that.”

Luna looked down at her feet. “Blood,” she said softly. “I see blood on everyone. On their hands and feet, on their wands, on their daggers.” One hand rose to her lips. “On some people’s mouths.”

Danger swallowed, careful not to let the girl hear it.

“And I think... I think I see who will die. At least some of them.” Luna’s eyes were bleak. “And the things that will happen before they die, and those are worse.”

“Oh...” Danger held Luna again, silently cursing the fate that had forced itself on a fourteen-year-old girl.

“I could stand it if they just died, but some of them are tortured.” Luna’s voice shook. “And some of them have to decide whether they live or die, and they decide to die. And one...” A sob. “One of us changes sides.”

“What?” Danger pulled back quickly to look Luna in the face. “Are you sure?”

Luna’s face twisted once, then she nodded.

“And you know who it is.”

Another nod, which turned into frantic head-shaking as Luna realized what the next question would be.

“Luna, I have to know.” Danger pinned Luna’s arms by her sides and held the girl where she was. “It could mean all our lives – please, Luna, you must tell me...”

“No!” Luna cried, twisting beneath Danger’s hands. “No, no, no!” She began to shrink into the form of the white owl again. Danger let her go and drew her wand just in time to shut the window and lock it. Luna loosed an almost human scream and flung herself at the door, reaching it a moment too late.

Danger held her wand loose but ready. “Neither of us is leaving this room before you tell me,” she said with quiet determination. “So we might as well get it over with.”

The owl screeched again and launched herself from the floor, swooping at the woman. A tan wolf reared up to pluck the owl from the air, and a human girl landed on the ground, yanking her arm away from the wolf’s jaws.

Danger regained human form and backed up several paces. “Never do that again,” she said, shaking. “Don’t you know what could have happened if I’d bitten you?”

Luna turned her back and sank to the floor between the beds, disappearing from Danger’s view. Danger moved cautiously closer, but instead of preparing to attack, Luna was curled into a ball, her hands over her eyes once more, sobbing. Danger frowned as certain words made themselves clear.

That would explain why she’s so upset...

She sat down. “What exactly did you see?” she asked quietly.

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Aletha Freeman-Black Apparated into the music room of the Den and immediately raised a storm of protest.

“Down in front!”

“I can’t see!”

“Hello to you too,” Aletha said wearily, stepping out of the way of the television screen.

“Mama Letha!” Meghan leapt up to hug Aletha. Draco did the same, as the rest of the Pride and the twins waved.

Hermione hit the pause button before she joined the hug. “Danger’s upstairs with Luna,” she

said. “Luna’s unhappy about something, but we don’t know what yet.”

“I’m sure Danger’s dealing with it. Or will deal with it.” Aletha broke off as something beeped in her pocket. She reached in and withdrew a shiny metal lighter, which she flipped open, revealing a green flame. “Freeman-Black,” she said.

“Are you home yet, Letha?” asked Remus Lupin’s voice from the flame.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Hi, Moony,” Hermione called.

“Hello, Kitten. I’ll be home myself soon. Letha, would you mind running upstairs and letting Luna out of the girls’ bedroom? Danger locked it up magically and took a nap.”

“Grand.” Aletha smiled one-sidedly. “I assume there’s a reason.”

“Yes, but it’s complicated. I’ll explain when I get there.”

“Understood. Freeman-Black out.” Aletha snapped the Zippophone shut. “Had an eventful day?” she asked the children.

George shrugged. “We’ve had worse.”

“How informative. Love you, Pearl.” Aletha hugged Meghan once more, then started for the stairs. “Turn that down,” she called over her shoulder as the movie started again.

Two or three of the Pride booed her.

Luna was gazing out the window when Aletha opened the bedroom door, and turned to greet the woman with something like her usual serenity. “Thank you, Mrs. Letha. I didn’t know how long I’d have to wait.”

Aletha looked at Danger, asleep across one of the beds. “May I ask?”

“Mrs. Danger wanted to help me with my Seeing,” Luna explained. “To stop me from Seeing all the time, even when I don’t want to. But she had to pay the price for it, and she wanted to start it as soon as she could. We started to talk, though, and the time she set ran out before she realized it. She apologized, and told me someone else would be here soon, but she didn’t know how soon.”

“You seem a bit calmer than you were,” Aletha commented, not sure if she should, but needing to say something – Luna had been crying in corners, eyeing people oddly, and staring at nothing in the middle of conversations for the two weeks she’d been at the Den.

“Oh, I feel much better. Mrs. Danger reminded me that some of the things I See might not happen, and that I might be coming to the wrong conclusions about others of them.” Sadness flickered across Luna’s face. “But I still need to do something about one of them. Not tonight,

though. And not tomorrow. The day after.”

Aletha nodded, but held her peace, instead drawing her wand to levitate Danger down the hall into her bedroom.

There's only one person who won't be here tomorrow. And he's just the person Luna would least want to hurt.

This war is going to change us all.

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Harry Potter sat at his window, chin resting on one hand, staring down at the streetlights of Privet Drive and letting his mind wander to all the places he'd lived. From Godric's Hollow to Privet Drive, from Privet Drive to Crozer Street in London, from Crozer Street to Ottery St. Catchpole, from Ottery St. Catchpole to Hogwarts, and now he was back again to Privet Drive...

And both times I've been here, it's been because someone's after my arse. Coincidence? I don't think so.

He sighed, getting up. *Two more weeks, that's all. After that, I don't ever have to come back. I'll spend term at Hogwarts, and holidays at Headquarters, until...*

His mind tried to shy away. Harry caught it and dragged it back to topic. *Until I kill Voldemort. That is what I have to do. There's no good trying to ignore it.*

As expected, the memories of the graveyard surged up into his mind. Sour fear and bitter hatred filled his mouth as he watched Cedric try to escape – Voldemort would never really have let him go, Harry realized, he'd been playing cat and mouse with him, playing with both of them.

The only difference is, I beat him. And it wasn't even because of anything I did – it was because he was distracted, because Luna was Looking at him. If she'd Looked earlier, could we both have got away?

Harry broke off that train of thought with an angry growl in his throat. *It's over. Playing "would have, could have" won't help anything.*

Dropping onto his bed, he shut his eyes and called up the mental fire he used for Occlumency. Somewhere in between the imagining and the willing, he found himself actually sitting on his broomstick, high above the graveyard. The fiery shield around him started to flicker and waver.

I need to get down. Harry dived and got his feet onto the grass just as his shield went out. Around one gravestone appeared Voldemort, laughing quietly; around another, Wormtail, gasping and sobbing as his wounded arm bled onto his robes. Nagini slithered up to her master's side, her eyes glazed over in death, the ragged wound on her neck no longer bleeding. Cedric stumbled past, and Voldemort's spell, unspoken, dropped him to the ground almost at Harry's feet.

That's it. I have had it. Harry called fire again, but this time with a difference. This time, instead of simply engulfing himself with the flame and pushing the memory outside it, he gathered the memory in his hands, crumpling it like parchment, and summoned fire to and around it, directing the flames to consume it.

You will have no more power over me, he told the memory as it struggled to escape. *You are past. I will learn from you, but you will not haunt me anymore.*

The memory shredded in his hands, trying to save pieces of itself. Harry wasn't having any. He freed one hand and snatched each piece as it tried to fly past, thrusting it back into the fire and naming it as it was consumed.

Voldemort – burn, you bastard, burn. You will, when I get my powers unbound as Heir of Gryffindor, and when I catch up with you. His lips curled back off his teeth. *You fooled me once. Too bad you're not getting another chance like that.*

Nagini . An Inferius now, are you? Shame corpses don't eat. I hear they burn very nicely, though. I guess I'll get a chance to find out at some point.

Wormtail. Wonder how to barbecue a rat? Maybe a nice teriyaki marinade, or a honey-mustard glaze. He snickered. *I'll just have to find out what you hate, and work from there.*

Cedric. This was chancier territory. Harry nodded a salute to his memory of the older boy. *I hope you don't mind, but I'd rather remember you alive. I liked you, and I'm sorry you're dead, but it wasn't my fault and I can't let it hang on me. Please take this in the spirit it's meant – cremation, I guess – and thank you for everything you ever did for me, and everything you ever tried to do.*

The memory of that night shivered once and fell into ashes in Harry's hands. His open left hand held a huge heap of filthy black soot with green tinges to it, while his right hand was closed around a smaller pile of honest gray ash such as might come from wood or charcoal.

Slowly, Harry knelt, and set both piles down, noticing how all the ash fell from his hands in a way it never would in the real world. He dug a small hole in the ground and swept the ashes of Cedric's memory into it. "Rest in peace," he said aloud, and filled in the hole, tamping the dirt down with the heel of his hand.

Then he stood up, changed forms, and let the rest of that night know how little he valued it.

And that's the end of that...

Well, no. Wolf changed forms again, and the human Harry sat down and leaned his back against a granite mausoleum. *Probably not the end.*

But it might be the beginning of the end.

Or the end of the beginning. Who knows?

The graveyard blurred, and Harry let it. The memory was unlikely to be back tonight. Tomorrow, possibly, or the day after, but not tonight...

His white, thin, long-fingered hand was clasped around another's, the palm unpleasantly wet. He was speaking.

“...not to let anyone, no matter their rank or degree, kill any of them?”

The other man swallowed nervously. “I will,” he said shakily.

There was a wand against their hands. A bright line of fire issued from its tip and wound around the clasped hands, intertwining itself with the two already there.

“Excellent,” Harry said. His high-pitched voice echoed in the stone room, as though nothing else were present. “You are the third, Macnair. All of you are sworn. The only thing we must do now is wait. They will be moved eventually, and when they are moved, then you must strike. They should give you little trouble in and of themselves, but remember, if they know that anything is wrong, then help will come and this will all be in vain... and I do not care for having my plans set at naught...”

“Yes, Master,” said three voices together, one cultured, one a beastlike growl, the third the voice he had already heard. Harry felt a smile stretch his face as he looked at the three. As different as could be found, and yet they all served him...

He turned away from their bowed heads, their bent knees, and looked around the room. A gleam of mirror caught his eye, and his smile widened as red, slit-pupiled eyes met their counterparts –

Harry bolted awake, biting back on a yell just in time. His scar pounded in time with his frantically racing heart.

Not real. Not real. He closed his own suntanned hands around the sheets, then freed one to find his glasses. *Need to write that down...*

He scrambled out of bed, found parchment and quill, and began to scribble sentences, barely stopping to dip the pen (though he did take a second along the way to glance at his reflection in the glass over the framed photograph of the Pack on the desk). *Three men, one named Macnair, took Unbreakable Vow not to kill someone – more than one person, V. said them – I was V...*

Harry stopped, staring at that for a moment.

I was Voldemort. I was in his head.

That was an accident. But what if he could make me do that? What if he could make me watch some of the things he likes to do?

Suddenly the Dursleys didn't seem like so high a price to pay.

He went back to scribbling.

Something about moving, and striking when they move – if they know something is wrong, help will come – they aren't supposed to be much trouble themselves...

Finally, when he had everything down he could remember, he added a few lines of explanation at the bottom and folded the parchment. He'd give it to Moony when he saw his Pack-father tomorrow.

He glanced at the clock. *Make that today.*

Somehow that put the dream into perspective. It had been strange and horrible to be inside Voldemort's head, but he'd been warned it might happen, and although they were connected, he wasn't just part of some Dark wizard. He was himself, Harry James Potter, Marauder of the Pack and alpha Warrior of the Pride.

And damned proud of it, too.

Movement in the photograph caught his eye. His photographic self was down on one knee, letting Meghan use him as a human stepping stool to get to Draco's shoulders, with Hermione steadying her. They'd done something like it once in real life, Harry recalled, the day Snape –

Professor Snape.

Harry let his face rest on the desk. *Get out of my head, Moony.*

Be polite, then, admonished the memory voice.

Fine.

The day *Professor Grumpy* had come to the London Den, discovering the hiding place of the “criminal” Sirius Black and his family.

If I have to call him Professor, I'll do it my way.

The four cubs of the Pack had used the human tower to get down the key to the attic, where the trunks were stored, while the adults were still talking over what they should do. By the time the decision was officially reached that they would have to run for it, the cubs were three-quarters packed.

I had a weird childhood. Besides always being ready to run away from the Ministry, I told stories to snakes, I slept in the same bed as my sisters and brother, and my guardians told me I had to grow up and save the world.

Maybe I need therapy.

Harry burst out laughing, muffling the sound first with both hands, then getting himself under

control long enough to get to his bed and fall face-first onto his pillow.

I think I'd probably drive a therapist insane. Either that or give her enough material for a dissertation. And if I didn't, Neenie and Draco would!

The laughter bled off the last of the tension that had lingered from the dream. Yawning as he turned over, Harry imagined not a shield made of fire, but a mattress and sheets, and a soft pillow into which his head could sink. He barely had time to pull off his glasses and set them aside before sleep overwhelmed him again.

He dreamed of Wolf tearing a therapist's couch to pieces, ripping the leather off with his sharp teeth and worrying each chunk, while the doe Pearl grazed on the papers from the desk, Snow Fox gnawed at the legs of the chair, and a feline Neenie daintily batted books off the shelves.

xXxXx

Harry's alarm went off at seven. By seven-twenty, he was in the kitchen, chopping herbs for an omelet. If he closed his eyes and sniffed, he could almost believe he was home...

“BOY!”

All right, scratch that. “Yes, sir?” Harry called up the stairs.

“Where's my gray-striped tie, boy?”

Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing aloud. “You mean the one with gray stripes on dark gray, or the one with gray stripes on light gray, sir?”

“Gray on dark gray, boy, don't be rude. Where is it?”

“It should be in the airing cupboard, sir.”

A few moments of footsteps and scuffling, then satisfied mutters as Uncle Vernon retreated to his bedroom.

“Ever heard of thank you?” Harry mumbled. But after two weeks, he thought he understood. The Dursleys' memories of him couldn't be pleasant, although he had no intention of ever letting them know exactly why their lives had gone so sour. Still, they were letting him make his home with them for a month, and he was costing them money. Not much, he knew, and they were probably getting more than their worth out of him in housework, but he was still there on sufferance. If they wanted to be rude to him, he could handle it.

Besides, I'm getting material for years to come. The man with the most boring ties in the world...

At seven-thirty, the Dursleys were in the kitchen, and Harry was serving breakfast. The mail slot clicked, and letters fell onto the doormat with a flop.

“Get the mail, boy,” said Uncle Vernon from behind his newspaper. Harry set the frying pan back on the stove and went to the front door.

He grinned to himself. Mixed in with the regular post was a tiny letter with no stamp, addressed to him. He tucked it into his pocket and brought the rest back into the kitchen.

“Got my own, Potter,” said Dudley, setting down the empty frying pan. “Thanks for making it.”

“You’re welcome.” *And thank you, for eating it all. Pig.*

Harry told his stomach to be quiet. He’d make himself breakfast later.

“We’re going out,” said Aunt Petunia abruptly. “Dudley and I. We’ll be gone all day. I want the house clean by the time we’re back.”

“Yes, Aunt Petunia.” Harry retrieved the frying pan and set it to soak in the sink, then ducked around the corner to read his letter. It consisted of one sentence – *Hang a red sock out your window if you won’t be alone at noon* – and wasn’t signed, but Harry knew Moony’s handwriting.

Why he couldn’t just send it by owl...

But Moony had been as much a Marauder as Padfoot. Harry sometimes forgot that. And Marauders went out of their way to remind you that you were never safe.

Hmm. I wonder what would be a good prank to play on Voldemort...?

Thinking of that amused him for about a minute, until he remembered. Voldemort’s rules of engagement were different than the Pack’s. When he got back, he got back for keeps.

So... make him think someone else did it?

That idea had possibilities. Harry did the breakfast dishes in a fog, thinking about ways to make a Dork Lord look foolish and put the blame on somebody else. Preferably, somebody on the Dork Lord’s side.

I wonder if I could pin something on Dudley?

Of course, that was assuming Dudley was even involved with Voldemort. Harry sneaked a look at his cousin over his shoulder. Dudley was rude, self-interested, and had done some mean things to the Pride in past years at Hogwarts, but was he really evil? Or had evil just been using him, as a convenient means to an end?

I can’t read his mind, so I don’t know. I’ll just stay careful, hope for the best, and prepare for the worst. He chuckled under his breath. *Constant vigilance!*

Finally, Uncle Vernon was gone, off to shout and be shouted at. Dudley went out to the car first, and Aunt Petunia began to follow, then stopped and ducked back inside. “Harry.”

Harry jumped a little. As far as he could remember, this was the first time any of his relatives had addressed him by his first name. Uncle Vernon called him boy, Dudley favored his surname, and Aunt Petunia, up until now, hadn't called him anything at all. "Yes, Aunt Petunia."

"I just wanted to say." Her eyes roved around the kitchen, then fixed on his. "You've... not been a burden. I thought you should know."

And she was gone.

"Thank you," Harry said to the sound of car tires squealing on asphalt. "I think."

Yes, definitely a compliment.

He fixed himself breakfast and swiped Uncle Vernon's newspaper for a look at what was going on in the Muggle world. *No death and destruction... of course, Voldemort's going to take advantage that the Ministry doesn't believe he's back, build up a base before he has to come out and fight, maybe even steal things because there won't be any increased security on them...*

Harry wondered idly if he would have understood that, without the Pack to teach him. If he'd lived his whole life before Hogwarts here, or in another house just like this, would he now be shivering in anticipation, waiting anxiously each day to hear if the mass murders had started yet?

Ah, doesn't matter. I didn't, so I'm not. And I wanted to get some of the cleaning done before Moony shows up, and maybe some homework...

Two paragraphs of a Charms essay and the kitchen later, the doorbell rang. Harry checked his watch. 11:30. *He's early.*

He opened the door. "We don't want any," he began, then stared.

The stoop was empty.

Harry reached out a cautious hand and brushed a familiar, satiny fabric. "Har har," he said sarcastically.

"Glad you like it," said a voice.

Female.

Harry backed up three steps and felt for his wand.

"Don't bother, Harry, it's me," said the voice again, and a hand extended from under the Invisibility Cloak, turned hot pink, then deep brown, then back to its original pinkish-brown shade. "Besides, with these wards, I couldn't even have got on the property if I had bad intentions, right?"

"Anything can fail," Harry retorted. "Mind coming in before the neighbors wonder why I'm

standing here with the door open?”

“Ooh, touchy. They’re rubbing off on you.” Tonks stepped in through the door, shut it behind herself, and pulled the Cloak off her spiky blue head. “Wotcher, Harry.”

“Hi.” Harry tried to think of a polite way to ask his question and failed. “Er, Tonks, what are you—”

“Doing here?” Tonks finished, grinning at him. “Don’t worry, I’m not your official visitor. Just came by to tell you Remus’ll be a bit late. Ran into a little snag at Headquarters.”

“You’ve found a place, then?” Harry said eagerly.

Tonks grimaced. “I can’t tell you anything, you know that.”

“I don’t want to know anything about it, I just want to know yes or no, did you find one?”

Tonks raised her hands in surrender. “Yes, we found one. And no, I don’t know how long it’s going to take to get all the charms in place,” she added. “I may never get married at this rate.”

Harry frowned. “But... I thought the wedding was supposed to be this month.”

“Well, it was,” said Tonks, starting back towards the kitchen. “But a wedding with no bridesmaids or maid of honor and only one groomsman besides the best man is going to look a bit dodgy. Your Pride really sticks together, don’t you?”

Harry turned this over in his head for several seconds, then thought he saw what it meant. “Ron and Ginny, and Hermione and Meghan. They wouldn’t be in your wedding...”

“Unless you could come,” Tonks finished, sitting down at the kitchen table. “You and Sirius. I want you there too, of course, so does Charlie, but the walking-out bit clinched it for us. We’ve set 19 August as a very tentative date...”

Tonks was full of stories Harry hadn’t yet heard from any of his regular correspondents, and eager to hear stories about the Dursleys and the ones Padfoot had sent in his letters from ‘purebloodland,’ as Tonks put it. “Mum always told me I was better off out of it,” she said. “She said it was like something out of a romance novel, except more cutthroat than romantic.”

“That sounds about right,” Harry admitted, and smiled to himself. He and Tonks, between them, might just have cracked some of the reasons behind Padfoot’s unusual hobby.

He offered to make her lunch around noon, but Tonks looked at her watch and jumped to her feet in dismay. “I didn’t realize... damn, I have to get back... sorry, Harry, another time. See you in August if not sooner...”

“Bye,” Harry said as Tonks flung the Invisibility Cloak over herself. He opened the door for her and stepped out onto the lawn, looking up at the cloudless sky and basking in the sunlight.

Beautiful day, he thought distantly, as a crack sounded at the end of the street. *Too beautiful to spend it all indoors.*

He sped through the cleaning in the rest of the house – luckily, there wasn't much that needed doing, as the Dursleys were almost obsessively tidy – made himself a small picnic, and took it out into the back yard. He was just licking the last drips of juice from a peach off his fingers when he heard the doorbell ring. Getting to his feet, he trotted around the house.

“Looking for someone?” he said.

Moony must have heard him coming, as he didn't jump at all, only turned his head and smiled. “I think I am. How are you, Harry?”

“I'm all right. Come around back?”

“Of course.”

“Follow me, then...” Harry blinked. Had he just seen something small and brown streak around the other corner of the house?

Nah. It's just the heat. I'm seeing things.

“I remember the first time I ever saw this house,” said Moony reminiscently. “It was my twenty-third birthday...”

“And I was a baby who couldn't say the letter N, I know,” Harry cut him off. “Just do me a favor and don't tell me what rooms you and Danger had fun in when you were first married. I'd never get the images out of my head.”

“Harry, I couldn't possibly remember them all. There were so many, you see.”

“Oh, God.” Harry clutched his head. “That's exactly what I didn't want to hear.”

They teased each other for a little while longer, then Harry recalled his dream and the letter he'd written. “Wait here, I have something to show you,” he said. “I dreamed I was Voldemort last night...”

“You dreamed you *were* Voldemort?”

“I wrote everything down, I'll get it.” Harry ran into the house and was back almost as fast as Wolf could have done it, parchment in his hand.

Moony scanned the account of the dream, then looked up. “We should find out if Voldemort was aware of your presence,” he said. “If he was, then he might try to replicate it.”

“And if he tries after I leave here, he might do it.” Harry twisted the fringe on the small blanket he'd brought outside to sit on. “I'm not having a lot of success with Occlumency. I did

something last night that helped a little with the memory, but it was right after I did it that I had the dream. Maybe I'm just not Occlumency material."

"That's possible..." Moony seemed to be debating something with himself, and for once, only with himself. His eyes were almost entirely blue. "Harry, I'm going to tell you something that Albus wasn't sure we should tell you yet. I think you're old enough to weigh the pros and cons of this, really weigh them, and make your own decision."

Harry straightened his shoulders. "I'm listening."

"There might be a way to block Voldemort's direct access to your mind permanently. However, it does come with consequences. One of them is to your health. You would become mildly ill if you decided to go through with this... procedure. The illness is treatable, and almost never goes beyond the stage of a nuisance, but you would have it."

"What is the procedure, exactly?" Harry asked.

"I suppose you could call it beating Voldemort at his own game," Moony said with a smile. "He took your blood forcibly, which created the connection between you."

"But I already had a connection with him," Harry argued. "My scar hurt way back in first year, and he didn't have my blood then."

"True enough." Moony frowned. "But this new connection, this wide-open thing, that came as a result of the blood link between you. This procedure that I'm telling you about might return the link to what it used to be, just a way for you to know if Voldemort is nearby."

"But what is it?"

"I'm coming to that. So Voldemort took your blood. But he gave you nothing in return. You don't have any part of him in you. That makes your link necessarily weaker than a link made with parts of both the people involved."

"Like Draco and Hermione," said Harry, nodding. "Malfoy blended their bloods, both of them, so they're full twins."

"Almost exactly like Draco and Hermione. They were the next point I was going to bring up." Moony looked unaccountably nervous. "The spell that Malfoy used is not a Dark spell, Harry. It was only Dark because he used it without their permission. Back when there were more wizards in the world, when it was possible that you might not know all the purebloods around, young wizards used to get their Muggleborn sweethearts adopted by wizarding clans with that spell, with the permission of both people involved. The Muggleborns tested as blood relatives of the clan, and the parents were satisfied."

"So... you want me to get adopted by somebody?"

"In a way." Moony seemed very interested in his fingernails. "We hope that, if you forge a full

blood bond with someone else, that bond will supersede the one you have with Voldemort, and block his access to your mind.”

“But how would a blood bond make me...” Harry trailed off. “It has to be with a wizard, doesn’t it?” he said. “The blood bond. It has to be with a grown-up wizard, to make it as much like Voldemort as you can.”

“Yes.”

“And you want it to be with someone you trust.”

Moony met his eyes. “Harry, if you do this, whoever you make this bond with would have access to your mind with a simple touch.” He reached across and laid his hand on Harry’s wrist. “Yes, I’d say trust is fairly essential. And since the bond is adoptive, the trust should be at a familial level.”

“And Voldemort could trace it back through me, to whoever I bond with, right?” Harry felt like Wolf, following a game trail in the forest. “So the fewer relatives he has, the better.”

“We think – we hope – that he can only work through ties of blood, the same way he is tied to you. But yes, he could theoretically attack any blood relatives of the man you bond with.”

“So I’d need to make a blood bond with a grown-up wizard, somebody I trust like a father, and somebody without any blood relatives around.” Harry numbered off the points on his fingers, then grinned. “Why didn’t you just say it was you to begin with?”

Moony looked terribly earnest. “Harry, I don’t want you to take this lightly. If you went through with this, you’d have lupus, as Danger does. Your case would not be nearly as severe, and you certainly wouldn’t die if we were separated for three days, but you would have lupus, so you’d need to have it treated regularly.”

“But Voldemort couldn’t get into my head.”

“So we think.” Moony sighed. “So we hope.” He stood up. “Don’t give me an answer now. Think about it until you come to Headquarters. Then we’ll make a final decision.”

“OK.” Harry started picking up the dishes and handing them to Moony. “Want to see my room?”

Moony stayed most of the rest of the afternoon, telling Harry only a little more about Headquarters than Tonks had, but giving him a more definite estimate of the time needed to make the place secure – two weeks or less. “I won’t promise, but there’s a very good possibility you could have your birthday there instead of here,” he said. “Mind you, that’s only if everything goes well. I wish Sirius were with us, but he’s needed where he is. The more purebloods we can convince to be on our side, or at least stay neutral...”

“Yeah, and what about the werewolves?” Harry asked. “Are you going to have to go talk to them?”

“At this point, Harry, I doubt if they’d listen.” Moony sat down on Harry’s bed. “I was obscure during the first war. Now I’m a celebrity, a famous ‘passer.’ I’ve done things in mainstream wizarding society most werewolves only dream about. I’d be lucky to get anything but growls and rocks. But we have found a replacement, a young man who’s just as obscure as I once was.”

“Tell him to run for his life,” Harry advised.

“Do it yourself. His name’s Brian Li, and he’ll be moving into Headquarters as soon as it’s habitable, so you’ll get to know him before you go back to school. About the same age as Tonks, and very personable, very nice young man...”

Finally, Moony had to go. Harry hugged his Pack-father for a long moment in the front hall, noticing that he could see more over the man’s shoulder than he used to. Then Moony smiled at him, turned, and walked out the front door.

Just in time for Aunt Petunia to pull into the drive.

Moony nodded to her politely and kept walking.

Aunt Petunia stared after him, her mouth a perfect O. Dudley said something to her, but she didn’t seem to hear. Instead, she got out of the car and kept staring, watching Moony until he turned the corner. Her face seemed to say she was trying to remember something that had happened a long time ago.

Harry slipped back inside and up to his room, where he took the photo of the Pack off his desk and hid it under the socks in his cauldron. If his aunt found it, it was even odds she’d recognize either Danger or Hermione, and he wasn’t up to explaining.

Yes, your neighbor whom you used to call a slut stole me out of your house, along with her werewolf husband, and together they put a mysterious curse on you that ruined your lives...

Though the expressions on the Dursleys’ faces would be rather funny.

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Harry awoke muzzily in the middle of the night, aware that he’d kicked off the covers.

My hands are cold. My feet are cold.

Why is the back of my neck warm?

He reached behind him and felt.

Oh. Fur. Right.

His eyes drifted shut again. Then snapped open.

Fur?

He switched on the light and sat up.

The small brown fox curled up on his pillow opened one eye and gave a protesting whine.

“What the bloody hell?”

The fox yawned, then opened its other eye and stared at him.

Harry blinked blearily and squinted. The fox’s eyes were gray.

“Oh,” he said as the truth dawned on him. “Summer coat, right?”

The fox nodded, then yawned again, ostentatiously.

“All right, already.” Harry shut off the light, snagged the sheet from its place on the floor, and lay back down.

A paw scraped along the back of his neck, making him shudder with a sensation halfway between scratching an itch and being tickled. Before he could say anything, someone else did.

Move your big hairy head, you’re hogging the whole pillow.

“It’s my pillow, I can hog it if I want to.” But Harry scooted over a little. “Better?”

Much. Thank you ever so.

Harry yawned himself. “Don’t be so sarcastic,” he muttered as sleep crept back up on him. “You’ll stick like that.”

“Haven’t yet.”

Harry turned around. Draco grinned at him and took off running. “Come on, slowpoke,” he shouted over his shoulder. “This way to the den-night!”

Harry transformed into Wolf, howled with glee, and gave chase.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 2: Challenging (Year 5)

Chapter 2: Challenging

Wolf-Danger lifted her nose to the dream moon, like its real counterpart two days past full. Her song echoed into the night, calling the Pack's wanderers towards the Den, for night was short and merriment long.

I wish I could call Sirius this way, but without a direct link, it would take more magic than I have to spare. And he's a grown man. He'll survive another two weeks without us.

An answering howl and a yipping bark brought her back to the present. She changed forms and rose to her feet. "They're coming!" she called.

"I hear that," Remus answered, laughing. "I was starting to wonder if they'd ever make it."

"Draco had to wait until Dursley was asleep," Meghan said as Danger slid down from the outcropping of rock where she'd been perched. "He didn't want Dursley deciding this was a good night to do something nasty to Harry and finding him there."

"That makes sense." Remus straightened the tablecloth on the long picnic table holding an array of the Pack's favorite foods. "Do you know when they'll get here?"

"When they want to," Danger said, swiping a finger through the roasted eggplant dip.

Hermione made a face. "Yuck."

"No germs in dreams, sweetheart." Danger picked up a crisp with her other hand and transferred the dip.

"I know, but it's still disgusting."

"Be grateful Sirius isn't here," Aletha said. "He'd have taken that as a challenge to see just how many ways he could be disgusting."

"Why do you think I don't say things like that in front of him?"

"Faster, slave!" roared an imperious voice from within the forest that surrounded the Pack's gathering place. "Hurry!"

"Yes, master," came a whining reply. "Of course, master. Would master like some onion dip?"

"Don't be a fool, slave. You know I hate onions."

"Yes, master. Of course, master."

The bowl of onion dip on the table lifted from its place, then shot outwards. A splat, a yelp, and a loud thud later, Draco darted into the clearing, looking pleased with himself.

“You two,” Danger said, shaking her head. “Honestly.”

“Yes, us two honestly. Who were you expecting?” Draco grabbed a piece of toasted pita bread and scooped up a generous supply of hummus on it.

“Maybe someone with sense, or manners.” Danger ladled out a cup of punch for Draco and held it out to him. “Excuse me.”

Wolf was about a hundred yards from the clearing, dunking his head in a small stream. Danger stroked him twice from forehead to tail, and every trace of the dip was gone, even the smell.

“Don’t kill him,” she said. “That’s all we ask.”

Wolf bounded a few paces away and shook, then changed back into Harry and returned for his hug. “I won’t,” he said. “I might dunk him a few times, though.”

“Maybe.” Danger pinched her fingers shut in front of her eyes, then her ears, indicating that she was officially blind and deaf on this matter. “Come on, everyone’s waiting for you.”

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“It started as a double piggyback game,” Draco said after all the fighting was over. “I rode Wolf part of the way here, and then I carried Harry for part of the way. Except he decided to be a prat about it.”

Harry raked his hand through his hair. “Just letting words reflect the truth,” he said.

“Do you need a haircut?” Letha inquired blandly.

Harry detected a hint of censure in her tone. “No, I’m fine.” He leaned back against the rock. “So what’s been going on at home that you can’t tell me about in letters?”

Everyone tried to answer at once. The babble finally got sorted into individual voices, and Harry listened to accounts of the strange smells the twins made in the corner of the basement they’d claimed for their own, of the silencing charms placed on the music room so that those inclined to practice could do so without driving the rest of the house mad, of the exercise sessions that were growing steadily harder as the summer went on.

“I was so sore the other day I could barely move,” Draco said, stretching as if expecting to find the same aches in his dream body. “But I felt a little better this morning. And I know the best way to get rid of stiffness is to keep going.”

“What have you been doing, Harry?” Meghan asked.

“Going out for runs, a few calisthenics in my room. I’ll have to step it up if I’m going to keep up

with you lot.”

“When do you run?” Moony asked. “I thought they kept you busy.”

“They do, but they’re usually out during the day.”

“You had better be wearing sunscreen, and drinking plenty of water,” Letha said with warning in her tone. “Before, after, and during if you can manage it. Running in the middle of the day, in the middle of the summer, is just stupid otherwise.”

Harry nodded. “I am and I do, and I know. I’d run at night, but Professor Dumbledore said stay on the property after dark. So that’s when I do press-ups and crunches and such, up in my room. That and the housework, I’m tired when I go to bed.”

“It’s just as well you’ve never been one to claim what I do all day is easy,” Danger said, smiling. “Otherwise, you’d be eating your words by now.”

“With everything you always made us do?” Harry retorted. “I knew it wasn’t easy, from the time I was a baby.”

“We all did,” said Hermione absently.

Harry looked over at his sister. “You’re being quiet,” he said. “Is something wrong?”

“Are you saying that when I’m quiet, there’s something wrong?”

“No.” Harry held up his hands in surrender. “You’re just not talking much. I wondered if something’s bothering you.”

“Not really. Though I am worried about Luna. We told you about her.”

“Yeah, you told me. Is it any better now?”

“Since Danger put a stop on it, it is. I just hope there’s some way she can control it herself.”

“And that she finds it out soon,” Draco added. “So she doesn’t scratch me again.”

“But there is something I wanted to tell you about.” Hermione sat up straighter and settled her shoulders. “Harry, I’m the Pride’s liaison with the Order.”

“Okay...” Harry let this filter into place in his mind. “So what does that mean, exactly?”

“It means I go to some of the Order meetings, and bring the news back to the Pride about what’s going on.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“It’s only just started. I found out today.”

“All right. So you report to us what’s going on with the Order.”

“Everything I’m allowed to tell.” Hermione looked nervous. “There might be some things I can’t pass on.”

“I thought that was why you weren’t allowed to go to some of the meetings.”

“It is, but there might be things, even in the meetings I do attend, that I can’t tell you.”

Harry felt a deep rumble of disquiet within him. “So you’re keeping secrets from us now?”

“Because I have to! You’d do the same, if it was you!”

“And why isn’t it me?” Harry stood up, his restlessness transforming into movement. “It has to be you for the next two weeks, while I’m gone, but is it going to be me when I get back?”

“It can’t be, Harry, you know that.”

“But what if my mind was safe?” Harry glanced at Moony, but the man’s eyes were fixed on Hermione. “What if Voldemort couldn’t get in? Would it still be you then?”

“Why shouldn’t it be?”

“Because I’m the alpha of the Pride!”

“And so am I!”

Harry laughed sharply. “You’re only alpha because I am, and you know it, *Neenie*. Tell me the last time you led in anything – go on, tell me.” He grinned triumphantly at the look of shock on her face. “See? You’re not a real alpha. Just a placeholder.”

Shock on Hermione’s face transmuted into anger, and her dagger appeared in her hand –

And flashed through the air to bury its point in the earth at Harry’s feet.

“Challenge,” Hermione snapped, indicating the quivering dagger. “Three rounds. Staffs, wands, and forms. Best two out of three.”

Harry drew his own dagger and flung it downwards, burying it so close beside Hermione’s that the pommel stones brushed. “Done,” he said.

“Done,” Hermione echoed. “You choose the first round.”

“Wands,” Harry said without hesitation. “And no cheating.”

Hermione’s lips pulled back from her teeth for a moment. “The same to you, *alpha*.”

Danger's expansive gesture widened the clearing, moving everything breakable out of range. Draco and Meghan scrambled up onto the rocks to watch. Letha stood below them, her arms folded.

"Face each other and bow," Moony instructed.

Harry bowed as he might on the dance floor. Hermione's bow was stiffly formal.

"Turn away and walk seven paces."

Harry let his anger fill every step. How dare Hermione try to take his place, the place that should be his by right? How dare she claim to be alpha alongside him, when she hadn't faced half the dangers he had? He was the only fit alpha for the Pride – he needed no one's help...

"On the count of three, face your opponent and cast. One – two – three!"

Harry spun. "*Expelliarmus!*"

"*Oppilius!*" Hermione cried, and Harry's spell bounced off at an angle. Danger leapt out of its way –

"*Petrificus!*"

Harry dodged, but not quite enough, and the Partial Body-Bind caught his left arm, stiffening it and throwing off his reactions. He cursed, and turned it into a spell. "*Fluctusempra!*"

Hermione yelped as her arms began to wave about uncontrollably. Harry took a moment to get the curse off his left side, then straightened up. "*Stupefy!*" he shouted, ready to finish this.

But Hermione dodged the spell by throwing herself to the ground, and in the moment of impact, while her wand was pointing at him, let the breath driven out of her body carry a spell with it.

"*Nescio!*"

"*Oppilorbis!*" Harry yelled, and the spell hit his Disk Block just in time –

Or had it?

Had what?

Where was he?

What was going on?

His senses clamored at him, insisting something important was going on – the girl now sitting on her hand, with a wooden stick pointed towards him, she was important somehow –

Something red flew from the stick towards him. Part of his mind insisted ducking was a good idea

—
Or maybe I should try and throw one back at her. What did she say to make it come out again?

“*Stupefy*,” Harry murmured lazily, just as the red light struck him.

When he blinked awake, he did so fully aware of his surroundings and of what had happened to him, and sat up instantly, making Letha curse as she leapt backwards. “Sorry,” he said automatically, looking around for Hermione and finding her sitting against a rock on the other side of the clearing, looking as sulky as he felt. “So, if I lost, do I get to pick the next round?”

“You didn’t lose,” Danger said.

“But Hermione knocked me out.”

“Yes, but you knocked her out as well,” said Moony. “You got off an invisible Stunner, and she couldn’t duck what she couldn’t see. It’s not as powerful as the full-force kind, but it works. Should we call this round a tie by reason of mutual knock-out, or try to judge it on points?”

“Points,” Harry and Hermione said at the same moment, fiercely.

“All right.” Moony’s smile indicated he’d expected no less. “Hermione had one fully successful block, two solid hits with the Not-Knowing Spell and the Stunner, and a grazing hit with the Partial Body-Bind. Harry had one partly successful block, two solid hits with the Arm-Waving Charm and the invisible Stunner – extra points for that, it’s hard to manage – a Disarmer blocked and a Stunner dodged, but both produced properly.” He looked back and forth between them.

“You’re sure you wouldn’t care to call it a tie?”

“Just go on and say she won,” Harry said bitterly.

“Very well. Hermione wins.”

From their rock, Draco and Meghan cheered. Harry glared at them.

“You do have the right to pick the next round, Harry,” said Danger. “Staffs or forms?”

Time to shake things up a little. “Staffs,” Harry said.

“You’re sure?” said Hermione in surprise.

“Positive.” Harry caught the pole Danger tossed to him. “On guard.”

They tapped tops and bottoms as they did before a bout on den-night, then took up guard positions.

Harry forced anger away, concentrating on the fire. Fire burned where it had fuel and air, and moved to wherever there was more of those. He would be like fire, striking fast, moving past

defenses –

Crack-crack. He blocked Hermione's first two strikes without thinking.

They had trained together in staff work to begin with. Though she might know some new tricks from her time alone with Krum, she'd likely revert to her old ways under stress, like now.

Crack-whack. Another block, and this time he struck back at her. Hermione blocked him, but her eyes were narrowed, watching him.

Harry aimed three more strikes, and had the answer he was looking for. *She's weaker low, and on her right. If I can catch her there...*

He feinted left, darted right, hooked the end of his staff into Hermione's knee, and jerked. She fell with a little cry, cut off as her back hit the ground hard, and Harry blocked her reflex blow at him with no trouble. Another hook and pull sent her staff flying, and he laid the end of his staff across her neck. "Yield?" he asked.

Hermione nodded jerkily, and Harry took the staff away.

"Go Harry!" shouted Meghan as Draco whistled through his fingers.

"Whose side are you on?" Harry asked.

"Do we have to be on a side?" Draco asked innocently. "I thought this was just for fun."

"Last round," announced Letha in a carrying tone before Harry could formulate a proper reply. "Animagus forms. When you're ready, Hermione."

"Just a second." Hermione was on her feet, rubbing her back. "Let me catch my breath."

Harry grounded his staff and watched it disappear in the way of dream-things no longer needed. The daggers had moved as well, he noticed, or the clearing had. The space where he and Hermione battled was empty of anything but dirt and grass.

And us.

"I'm ready," Hermione announced. "Harry?"

"Ready." Harry crouched, Wolf's shape already in his mind.

"Wait for it," Moony admonished. "Ready, steady, change!"

Harry threw himself forward, his arms already altering, legs and body shifting, head – *ah, much better* – now he could smell properly, and hear –

There was no cat in front of him.

Where –

Before he could do more than register that the cat-scent had moved, eighteen points of pain erupted on his back. Wolf arched and howled, then flung himself to one side to try to dislodge his rider.

His howl moved up several notes. Before he'd flung her off, Neenie must have fastened her teeth into one of his ears – it was torn and bleeding, and it *hurt* –

No time for that! Find the prey!

He spun. The calico cat danced backward, tail lashing, fur bushed. She swiped at the air with her claws fully extended, and Wolf balked at the thought of closing with those claws –

Never mind the claws! Get in and use your teeth, it'll be over before you know it!

He charged across the clearing, and when Neenie leapt straight up, instead of halting or slowing, he moved faster.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice...

An angry yowl from behind him showed he'd calculated correctly. Paw pads skidded as Wolf turned on a Knut and charged again. His left forepaw reached out and slapped Neenie, it should have sent her reeling, knocked almost senseless –

Except that she must have seen it coming, as she jumped *towards* it, and latched on with all eighteen claws and her teeth, digging in. Wolf howled and shook his paw frantically, trying to dislodge her, until he realized he had an opportunity here – *if I step on her, I'll squash her, drive her breath out, break things – she can't possibly keep fighting, I'm eight times her size –*

He made to stamp his paw down onto the earth, but somehow Neenie recognized the movement and swarmed farther up his leg, meaning that his torn and bleeding paw struck the ground with more than usual force. Wolf yelped, and his left front leg buckled, dropping him on his face.

Faster than thought Neenie was on him, fastened to his throat, teeth and claws digging in just deeply enough to let him know where they were, hissing every time she exhaled.

Wolf whined and let himself slump in defeat.

Shit. Double shit. How could I lose?

Neenie backed away and Hermione stood up, breathing fast and looking down at him. “Now,” she said deliberately. “Am I alpha because you *let* me be, or am I alpha because I *deserve* to be?”

Harry changed back, but didn't bother standing up. “You deserve it,” he admitted. “It was fair. You beat me.”

And if I can't even beat my own sister, how well will I do against Death Eaters?

Hermione sat down, cross-legged. "That was hard," she said, tilting her head to peer into Harry's face. "I don't know if I could do it again."

"I'm sure you could." Harry rolled over and sat up facing away from Hermione.

Away from everyone. Everyone had to see me make an idiot of myself.

Well, not quite everyone. But I know everyone will hear about it.

"Harry," Hermione said quietly behind him.

"What?" Harry spun back, suddenly furious. "You want me to surrender? Fine. Here." He tipped his head back and gritted his teeth.

And the worst part is, she'll probably do a better job as alpha than I do...

Two cool fingers touched Harry's throat, then withdrew. "But I don't want to be the only one in charge," Hermione murmured. "I just want my fair share. We're both alphas. Partners."

Harry lowered his head to look at her. "Partners?"

Hermione smiled. "Until you find someone who can do the job better." She tilted her head back in her turn.

Harry laid his fingers on her throat, feeling her breath move within. "Or until you do," he said, letting the words speak the apologies he couldn't voice.

How many times do I have to learn? I'm not alpha because God leaned down from heaven and made me that way. I can lose my place, I will lose it if I do it wrong, and I always need help with it. And I'm too young for a mate, so Hermione's my best help right now.

A vague thought teased the corner of his mind. I wonder how Cho would do as an alpha female...

Rather than pursue that line of thought too far, Harry stood up, walked over to the daggers, and pulled them free of the ground. He handed Hermione's back to her, then laid his own on his right palm. She did the same, and they both placed left hands on top of the bare blades.

Loyalty, to the Pride and to each other. Sworn and sealed.

"Alphas together," Hermione said.

"Alphas for... well, not forever," Harry returned.

Hermione met his eyes. "Until it's time to change."

“Yes. Until it’s time to change.”

They sheathed their daggers together, then turned back to the rest of their Pack. “So,” said Harry. “Any tips?”

“Know where your opponent is at all times,” Moony said immediately.

“And don’t bother with finesse if you’re fighting something little and fast,” Draco added from above. “Just kill it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if I’m ever fighting you,” Harry shot back.

“Hermione, you’ll need to practice some moves to guard against being pulled down,” said Letha. “That would be a very effective disable for your opponent to use, though in a real fight I’m sure you’d change and land on your feet...”

xXxXx

Sirius Black lay on a beautifully kept lawn and stared at the stars.

Half my family up there, he thought idly. Not all out tonight, but they’re there.

A light footstep alerted him that he was no longer alone. He sat up, then hastily stood. “Mam’selle Gamp,” he said, bowing slightly.

“M’sieur Black.” Elladora Gamp’s curtsy was just as shallow. “Could you not sleep?”

“Not well. I find it unseasonably warm.”

“And thus you come outdoors, where the heat is unmitigated, rather than remaining within, where our host’s Climate Charms regulate the temperature.”

Is she laughing at me? I think she’s laughing at me. “I find the open air stimulating,” Sirius said. “And walls often confining.”

Elladora seated herself beside him, but her voice lost none of its slightly poisonous edge. “And what of the company? Do you find that alternately confining and stimulating as well?”

Yes. And “stimulating” not always in a good way... “I have grown unused to such gatherings as I now attend,” Sirius said cautiously. “If I have acted rudely, I humbly beg your pardon.”

Elladora sniffed. “Fine words,” she said coolly. “Fine words, from one who has betrayed his people over and over. Why do they all accept you now, when you spurned them and turned from them for so long? Why have you been welcomed back? Do you know that, M’sieur Black?”

“I take it you do not credit it to my charming personality and dashing good looks.”

“No.” Another sniff, but this one, to Sirius’ surprise, had a different quality.

Is she crying?

“No, your looks, your personality have nothing to do with that,” Elladora went on. “Nothing to do with Grandmother and the others, why they have allowed you to return. But... to some people... they matter a great deal.” Yet another sniff, this one unmistakably watery.

Oh no. Sirius felt sure that neither of the techniques he usually used to comfort crying women would be looked upon favorably by Elladora. *Not that I’d want to use the one for her that I use for Letha. And I just know she’d take the one I use for Danger all wrong...*

“So why have your grandmother, and the other pillars of pureblood society, allowed me to return?” he asked, opting for the safe route and merely conjuring Elladora a handkerchief.

“Because.” Sirius winced at one of the more unromantic sounds related to crying. “Because they hope to perpetuate themselves a little farther. One more generation. Perhaps two. It’s all they can hope for, and they know it, but they want those generations, so much...”

“And they hope that because I seem to want to come back,” Sirius said slowly, “I’d be willing to join their little breeding program.”

Elladora dabbed at her eyes. “Yes. And...” Another, rather prolonged, snuffle. “Grandmother told me last night that my cause was all but lost. *Give it up!* she said. *Let Corona take our blood into the future!* And Corona smiled, and said she would, and...” She began to sob.

“Elladora,” Sirius began uncertainly.

“It isn’t *fair!*” Elladora cried out. “She has always been the favorite, the perfect one, everything she’s ever wanted she’s had! *She* was the Slytherin, *I* was the traitor in Ravenclaw... *she* has the looks, while all I have are *brains.*” She spat the word.

“Brains aren’t so bad,” said Sirius. *Of course, I’m not speaking from experience, since I’m so often told I don’t have any.*

“Spoken like a man,” Elladora said bitterly. “Tell me...” Sirius felt his arm clutched. “Tell me that men sometimes seek a woman with a mind. Lie to me if you must, but tell me.”

“Well, I certainly did.”

A long pause.

“Do you mean that?” Elladora breathed. “Do you really?”

Oh damn. “Elladora – look, it’s not what you think...”

“You do.” She wasn’t listening. “You do – you really do – oh, *Sirius!*” His fingers were starting

to lose sensation from her grip on his arm. “You really want me!”

“Er... no.” Sirius gently began to loosen her fingers. “Elladora, look, you’re a good person, smart, strong...” *Very strong.* “But I’m just not interested in you that way.”

“Corona,” Elladora hissed, clutching him harder. “I should have known... I’ll fight her, I’ll kill her for this, she can’t have you...”

“No! Will you listen to me for a second? Dammit, I’m *married!* ”

This pause went on longer than the last, and was distinctly more awkward.

“Married?” Elladora repeated finally. “But – but – I’d heard... I’d thought... but you wear no ring, and no contract was ever registered in your name...”

“It was a Muggle wedding,” Sirius said, pulling himself free. “But it’s still valid.”

“A Muggle wedding?” Elladora laughed harshly. “With a Muggle – yes, I remember now...”

“A witch,” Sirius said firmly. “Muggleborn, but as much a witch as you.”

“Ha.” Elladora seemed to be standing up – or crouching down – what was she doing? “She couldn’t possibly be...”

She threw herself at Sirius and kissed him with all the force of desperation.

Oh God... can’t... breathe...

Sirius reached around Elladora’s back and tweaked a lock of her hair. He might have used too much force, but the result was satisfactory. The woman jerked away from him, an unladylike curse escaping from her lips.

Sirius stood up quickly. “Thank you for the offer,” he said unsteadily, resisting the urge to wipe his lips. *Wait until she can’t see you.* “But I’m afraid I’m not interested. Good night, Mam’selle.”

He hurried toward the house, pretending he didn’t hear, behind him, disbelieving laughter slipping into tears.

xXxXx

In the kitchen of Number Seventeen the next morning, Harry donned a voluminous apron. “Quit laughing,” he said irritably as Snow Fox sniggered. “I’m doing this for you, I’ll have you know.”

The fox pointed a paw at himself, the picture of innocence.

“There’s a nice big pocket, here in the front.” Harry held it open. “Inside with you.”

The fox leaped from the chair where he'd been sitting and disappeared into the pocket just as thumping feet on the stairs announced the arrival of Dudley on the ground floor.

"Good morning, Dudley," Harry said cheerfully, turning back to the stove.

"Morning, Potter," said Dudley in a suspicious tone. "What's with the apron?"

"I don't want to mess up my clothes. It'd be a shame to get them all stained with food."

It was, of course, sheer coincidence that Harry's hand slipped as he was delivering Dudley's plate to the table. Or it could have been the small brown paw that poked him hard in the stomach.

Dudley leapt up with a yell, brushing eggs from his shirt.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly, kneeling down to pick up what could be picked up. "Sorry, let me get it... don't *do* that," he hissed downwards.

The fox licked his chops and looked hopeful.

Harry rolled his eyes and dropped several pieces of bacon into the apron pocket.

Dudley changed his clothes after breakfast, and made a mess of his room while doing it, so Harry had that to clean up as well as his usual chores. Still, the work went faster with someone to talk to, and occasionally be answered by as Snow Fox found a perch where he could share Harry's pendant chain.

And wouldn't Aunt Petunia just have a fit if she saw a filthy animal sitting on her kitchen table and eating lunch off her good china?

Luna helped me finish the spells, before she went quite so weird, and we took the potion a few days ago. Snow Fox nibbled a piece of leftover pot roast. She's much quicker at doing the change than I am, though. Lucky I don't have to change while I'm here.

"Yeah, lucky." Harry mashed peas with his fork. "How has she been weird? I know she's got her Seeing back, but I never thought she was a Seer like Trelawney."

Well, she's Seen like that occasionally, but never this way, like she can't stop it. Danger said bottling her power up for a year made it go ways it shouldn't. We'll probably find out more at the birthday party. An image accompanying the words made the reference clear.

Harry pushed his plate away and let his elbows rest on the table. "Do you ever feel like we're in too deep?" he asked.

Constantly.

"No, I'm – I mean it. We can do loads of weird stuff, we know people and talk to people who've been dead for a thousand years... maybe this isn't the way things were supposed to happen. Maybe

we were just supposed to fight the war without all this.”

Snow Fox shrugged one shoulder. **Maybe. But think about it this way, Harry. If the weird stuff saves somebody’s life, somebody who would have died otherwise...**

“Well, that wouldn’t be so bad.”

The fox’s head tilted to one side. **Second year? You, Quidditch, fall, Meghan?**

“What is this, speak in only one word day? Yes, I remember.”

What about first year, when we knew Hermione was in trouble with the troll? Or when the Pack-parents showed up just in time to save us in the Forest? Or second year again, when Neville shielded us to keep Norbert a secret? And when you and Ginny beat Riddle’s diary with your dagger and speaking Parseltongue? Do I really have to go on?

Harry sighed. “No. You’re right.” He pulled his plate closer to him again and doodled in the mashed peas with a fingertip. “I suppose what matters is that we got through all of that, not that we did loads of weird stuff to get through it.”

In other words, it is not our abilities that make us who we are, but our choices.

“All right, that’s it.” Harry grabbed Snow Fox by the scruff of the neck. “I’ll take that from Dumbledore, I’ll take that from Moony, but I bloody well won’t take it from you.”

Ow! That hurts!

“Not nearly as much as this will.” Harry dumped his brother into the sink and turned on the cold water, full force.

Gackblthtatpht –

Harry reclaimed his chain and watched the fox flounder under the stream. “No more than you deserve,” he said aloud. “Besides, you stink.”

Snow Fox located the faucet and pawed it off, then leapt onto the counter and posed. Harry realized his danger just in time and dropped to the floor as the fox shook hard.

And now I have to clean in here again. I’m just full of brains, aren’t I?

“That wasn’t very nice,” said Letha from the other side of the room. “Either of you.”

Snow Fox yipped happily and leapt from the counter to the table, which he pattered across, leaving small wet footprints behind. Letha stroked him with one hand, then dried it on her cloak.

“You and I, sir, are going to the end of the street,” she said levelly. “You will transform back into a human, you will return here with me, and you and Harry will clean this kitchen together.”

Understood?”

Harry grinned and came around the table. “I knew there was a reason I liked you best, Letha,” he said.

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Letha said, hugging him with her free arm. “And no, it’s no use whining about it,” she said to Snow Fox, who had rolled onto his back and was doing exactly that, looking up at her pitifully. “You’d best get used to it, in fact. Our new Headquarters is quite dirty, and every spare pair of hands will be needed to help clean it out.”

“You’ve been there too,” said Harry interestedly. “What’s it like?”

Letha shook her head. “I can’t tell you much, Harry, not without breaking secrecy, and what I can tell you I’d better tell you after I get back with Draco. Wait here, we won’t be long.”

Snow Fox grumbled under his breath, but sprang into Letha’s arms and let himself be carried out the front door.

xXxXx

An old house, abandoned or as good as, but it belongs to someone in the Order. Harry waved to Letha and Draco, his mind busily working over the problem of Headquarters. And somewhere I’ve been – she didn’t say as much, but she hinted at it.

I suppose it could be Malfoy Manor...

Harry had to laugh. Wouldn’t that be funny? A place that was probably a headquarters for one side during the last war, turning into headquarters for the other side during this one...

But no. It’s too big, too obvious, too easy to find. It’d have to be something else. Somewhere else.

Deep in the back of his mind, he had a suspicion, but he was content to let it stay there for the moment.

It won’t matter until I’m there. He took the stairs two at a time, headed for his bedroom. And when I’m there, it’ll be safe for me to know.

Thinking of safety brought him back to his conversation with Moony the day before. He’d asked Letha about it while Draco finished the kitchen, “since you’re a Healer for real now,” and after enduring a mild shaking for cheek, had listened to what she had to say.

xXxXx

“I want you to understand, Harry, that Remus would never deliberately mislead you,” Letha began, her hands still in her lap. “But part of him wants this link between you very much indeed, and I think he’s listening to that part too much to give you a truly fair look at your options.”

Harry nodded. “He was acting awfully weird about it,” he said.

“I suspect he’s trying to reconcile the facts about the case and what he feels about it. Shall I see if I can do a better job of laying out the facts, since I have a bit more distance?”

Harry assumed a listening attitude.

“If you blood-bonded to Remus, with the form of the ritual that would make you the equivalent of father and son, you would be taking his blood into your body, which means you would almost certainly become a carrier for lycanthropy,” Letha began. “And as we’ve already established, that manifests itself as the disease lupus. What did Remus tell you about it?”

“He said it probably wouldn’t be anything worse than a nuisance.”

“And properly controlled, it likely wouldn’t be. But the trick is finding out what properly controls it. The truth is, Harry, we don’t have any previous information on this. We know the symptoms of lupus, and there are certainly potions and spells to treat those symptoms, but how strong would you need them? In what proportions to each other? Would any of them have bad reactions to one another, or would you have bad reactions to them?” Letha shrugged. “You see what I deal with every day.”

“How bad would I be, without potions?” Harry asked. “Moony said I wouldn’t be as bad as Danger, and I wouldn’t have the bit about dying if I’m away for three days.”

“No, you certainly wouldn’t have that.” Letha laughed. “As far as I’ve been able to tell – but don’t tell Remus and Danger I’ve been watching them – the escalation of symptoms they both went through is due not to any normal manifestation of lupus or lycanthropy, but to the soul-bond between them.”

“It holds the diseases back, until Moony and Danger are apart,” Harry said. “Almost like Luna’s power. Because she held it back and didn’t use it, now it’s stronger than it was, and hurting her.”

“Yes, very like that. If I had to guess, I would think that your symptoms would normally be no worse than Danger’s around the first day that Remus was gone. Pain and swelling in your joints, a possibility of fever, maybe some tingling or numbness in your hands and feet. But still, that’s a significant amount to be carrying around with you all the time. And lupus flares up sometimes, gets much worse all of a sudden. Stress seems to bring it on.”

“So I’d be studying for a test, or getting ready for a Quidditch match, and all of a sudden I’d be sick,” said Harry. “Or sicker.”

“Yes.” Letha sighed. “Harry, I don’t want to see you ill,” she said softly. “I always used to hate it, even when you’d get a cough or a cold, even when I knew a potion would make it better. And no potion can make this better. If you do this, you’ll have lupus for good.”

“I could get the symptoms treated,” Harry argued.

“Yes, but it will take time, possibly weeks, maybe even months, to find the right treatments. And even once we’d found them, you’d have to take them every day. No skipping, no missing, unless you want a bad flare-up. What’s more, this would be a weakness that could be exploited. What if a Death Eater learned about it, and found a spell to break the treatments?”

“You don’t want me to do this, do you?” Harry challenged. “You think it’s a bad idea.”

Letha lifted her hands helplessly. “What can I say to the truth?”

“How about looking at the other side of it? If I did this, Voldemort couldn’t get into my head.” Harry frowned a little. “How would that work, anyway?”

“Danger researched this, not me,” said Letha, “but she told me about it. Let me see if I can remember... the idea behind it is twofold. First, the bond you have with Voldemort is dependent on blood. If your blood changes, his link to you will be weakened. Second, this new bond with Remus would be very like what you have with Voldemort, except that it would be formed with the full consent of both parties, and that it would hold love.”

“And he doesn’t like love.”

Letha chuckled. “Judging by his reaction to touching you in your first year, I would say he can’t handle it at all.” Her hand rested on Harry’s for a moment. “Because of that consent and that love, the new bond would be stronger than the old, more potent. It would... the best word I can think of is *outshine* the other bond. It’s as if that bond is a thing of darkness, and the brighter a light you shine on it, the weaker it becomes.”

“This would make a very bright light, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes. A very bright light indeed.” Letha squeezed Harry’s hand lightly. “So those are the facts. Is there anything you want to ask?”

There were a lot of things, but most of them Harry thought he could probably work out for himself. He chose something he couldn’t. “Is there a time limit to this? Do I have to do it now, or within a month, or within a year, to make sure it works?”

“No. It might have been marginally easier to block your bond with Voldemort before it was fully formed, but I think it’s too late for that. So no, no time limit. Think about it all you want –and please, Harry, do think about it. It’s a very big decision.”

Harry nodded. “I don’t want to sound rude,” he said hesitantly, “but isn’t there anyone else I could do this with? I know I shouldn’t with Padfoot, because then Voldemort might be able to get at Meghan – but couldn’t he get at Danger just as easily, if I did it with Moony?”

Letha shook her head. “There’s no blood between those two,” she said. “They are bonded, but it’s a love-bond. I don’t think Voldemort could use that without doing himself serious damage.”

“Okay. But what I asked – maybe, is there someone else?”

“I asked the same thing, when I realized what this would mean,” Letha said. “The only person we could come up with was Albus himself, and he vetoed it when we brought it up. He thanked us for the idea, but said that he’s old and feeble...”

Harry snorted.

“Agreed. But he also has a brother, and possibly other relatives.”

“Like he couldn’t protect them,” Harry said. “He’d know how to do it if anyone would.”

“Quite true.” Letha’s eyebrows lowered. “Now that I think of it, he never did give us a truly solid reason why he wouldn’t be a good choice. But he seemed very fond of the idea of you and Remus bonding.”

“Did he say why?” Harry asked, then raised a hand to forestall an answer. “Never mind, I know he didn’t. He never does.”

“No, he never does,” Letha agreed. “But by the same token, he’s very often right.”

Harry slumped in his chair. “I wish I had some answers,” he grumbled. “All I ever get is more questions.”

“Welcome to real life,” Letha said lightly. “Home of the unanswered question, the unsolvable puzzle, and the unopenable lock.” Her lips quirked. “There is one other adult male member of the Order without relatives, you know. And he might be willing to do this, though I wouldn’t swear to it.”

“Who?”

“Severus.”

Harry bolted upright in his chair. “*Snape?* You want me to – to – ew! No!”

“Just checking,” said Letha, her smile now open. “Making sure you’re still sane, after all the gobbledygook I’ve poured into your head.”

“It is not. Even if I think I forgot half of it already.”

“Oh, is that how you manage to achieve the grades you do?”

“Hey, I’m proud of my grades.”

“Yes, well, we’ll see how proud you are of your O.W.L. results. You’re getting your summer work done, I hope.”

xXxXx

The conversation from there had taken a more motherly turn, and when Draco joined them it had become just another Pack-talk, like so many others Harry could remember. It had lasted nearly two hours, until someone looked at the clock and discovered the Dursleys were due back any minute, and Harry had quickly hugged Letha goodbye and shaken Draco's hand in the pattern they'd invented when they were small...

Standing up, he crossed his room and dug through his trunk until he found what he was looking for. Captured forever within their frame, the Pack smiled and waved at him.

"I think I'm jealous," Harry muttered to his photographic self. "At least you get to stay with them."

"Who?"

Harry didn't jump as high as he might have, since his nose had warned him a split second ahead of the voice that someone was at his door. However, he did jump, and came down facing the opposite way. "Aunt Petunia," he acknowledged, forcing his breathing back to a more usual pattern.

"May I... come in?" the woman asked, peering around the door.

"Um, yes. Sure. Come on in." Harry whisked a random sock off the seat of the desk chair and pulled it out for her. "Sit down." He set the picture carefully on the nightstand, facing away from her.

Aunt Petunia's eyes flicked over it, but she declined comment. "Someone was here," she said. "From your... family."

"Yes," Harry said, sitting down on the bed. "Most of the day."

"I can always tell, you know. Not by the house, you keep that clean, but by the way you act." Aunt Petunia's eyes were boring into him. "You're happy when they've been here. You smile and hum and do anything we ask without even looking like you want to complain."

Harry shrugged. "I like seeing my family."

"Who are they?" Aunt Petunia asked bluntly. "Who was it that took you away from us, all those years ago? I know there are other children involved, Dudley's mentioned a brother and at least one sister, possibly two..."

"One brother, two sisters," Harry said, deciding to keep things factual. "One of the girls is younger by about three years, the others are my age. We're not actually related, or not very closely, but we all grew up together."

"And your parents? The man I saw leaving here yesterday..."

"Yes."

“I’ve seen him somewhere before, I’m sure of it, but I can’t place it,” Aunt Petunia said in frustration. “Somewhere with you..”

Harry recognized the scent starting to pervade the room as understanding. *She’ll figure it out eventually. Might as well be now.* “Here,” he said, picking up the photograph and offering it to her. “This might help.”

Aunt Petunia accepted the frame cautiously.

“It moves,” Harry added quickly. “Not the frame, but the people in the picture. They move around.”

Aunt Petunia looked skeptically at him, but turned the frame so that she could see, and stared. “So they do,” she said absently. “So...”

The understanding smell suddenly increased by a factor of a thousand, and a rank odor Harry didn’t like at all joined it. His aunt’s face distorted. “*Granger,*” she hissed.

“Um... yeah.” Harry edged slightly farther from her.

Aunt Petunia stared at the photograph for another moment, then abruptly thrust it back to Harry. “If I didn’t know she was out of my reach, I’d have her prosecuted,” she said. “Breaking and entering, theft, kidnapping...”

“You didn’t want me,” Harry said, anger overcoming reticence. “You wanted to forget about me. She just made that possible. She didn’t touch anything in your house except me and what was around me, and she didn’t take anything away except me. *Nothing.*” A thread of pride invaded his manner. “Besides, she didn’t break anything. She had a key. You gave her one.”

Aunt Petunia was on her feet. “Enough,” she said sharply. “That’s enough. No more.” She started for the door, then, almost there, stopped.

“Did you need something else?” Harry asked, not certain even in his own mind if he meant it or was being sarcastic.

“Were you... happy?” He could barely hear his aunt’s voice. “With her. Were you? Are you?”

Harry shoved his sarcasm to the back of his mind. *You’ve done enough damage for one day, thank you. Just answer the question, Harry, answer the question...*

“Yes.”

Aunt Petunia nodded once, then she was gone. Harry lay back on his bed and sighed.

Well, there’s that secret out.

He inhaled deeply, and the different scents his aunt had left behind drifted over to him. Anger, of

course, and resentment... a thread of hatred, a shred of envy... and hiding in the mix, almost impossible to discern...

Harry sat up to get a better scent. *No way. I have to be making it up.*

But his second and third samples of the air told him only what the first had. Somewhere deep within her, Petunia Dursley had some tiny vestige of guilt for what she'd done, and an even tinier scrap of gladness that Harry had known a happier life after leaving her house.

“And the verdict is...” Harry said aloud. “The subject is human, and therefore more complicated than anyone has a real right to be.”

Besides, he didn't have to like her. He just had to put up with her for two more weeks.

Imagine what she'd have said if I'd told her about the Curse...

xXxXx

Far away, Ginny Weasley sang quietly in time with the rhythmic thumping as she wedged a lump of clay on the kitchen table of the Marauders' Den. The song spoke of a maiden who lived alone on the seashore and of the sea-captain who had captured her to bring her to his ship, and how the maiden again won her freedom.

“And that's forty,” she said aloud, rolling the clay into a rough ball. “That should be enough.” Wedging made sure the clay had no air pockets in it, since air pockets would explode when the clay was fired. Ginny wondered if anyone had ever experimented with small air pockets, sealed with only the lightest possible layer of clay, which were *meant* to explode...

Never mind. I can get into experimentation after I try some basic things.

Her father had suggested modeling when Ginny had told him how frustrated she felt, trapped in the Den. “Everyone else has something to stay busy,” she'd said. “We never see Luna, so I can't talk to her. The twins are always in the basement with whatever they're making, Ron plays with his models all the time, Draco has his music, Neville and Meghan have the garden... maybe Hermione can read all day, but I can't. I have to have something to *do!* ”

The clay had arrived the next day. Throwing it repeatedly against the table was remarkably stress-relieving, and she had fun seeing how close she could come to the shapes she saw around her. But today, she wanted to try something different.

She started with a broad base. *I'd like to think I'm not easy to upset. Get mad, yes, I do that, but I don't want to be a damsel in distress who can't take care of herself.* She fingered her wand. *Of course, as long as I keep outscoring half the Pride on the spell-throwing tests, I don't think I'll fall into that category.*

The base took an ovoid shape under her hands. *Not round, but not square or triangular with hard corners. I try not to catch people wrong, or ram into them and hurt them, but I'm not perfect.*

From that broad base, the sculpture tapered upwards, growing thinner. *I have weak spots. Like my temper. When I get mad, I say things I don't mean. And I can go too far – even when I'm not mad, I sometimes have trouble figuring out when to stop teasing, or talking.*

Ginny closed her eyes, sighing as the clay succumbed to her hands. Above the thin part, she began to sculpt pleasing curves and twists, ridges and valleys, where fingers or eyes might trace out pictures. *Music, stories, acting, cooking, hunting, Quidditch, and now sculpting. Charms and Care of Magical Creatures. Mum and Dad, and all my crazy brothers from Bill to Ron... Neville, Meghan, Luna, Hermione, Draco...*

Her fingers trailed off. She opened her eyes. The clay figure stood nearly a foot tall, adorned everywhere with sculpted patterns. Everywhere, except in one place. One area, about as big as her palm, was bare, plain clay.

She pressed her palm to it, and knew its name. Long-ago advice given by Hermione drifted back to her.

“Just be yourself.”

She looked over her sculpture, and smiled. *I don't think I'll have too much trouble.*

Carefully, she groomed the area into tiny spikes with rounded tips.

“Hey, Gin-Gin,” said Fred, coming up from the basement. “You’ve been busy.”

“That looks neat,” said George, on his twin’s heels. “What’s it supposed to be?”

Ginny smiled.

“It’s me,” she said.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 3: Seeing is Believing (Year 5)

Chapter 3: Seeing is Believing

With a small pop, a woman and a fox appeared in the front room of a capacious home in Devon. “All right?” Letha asked, looking down.

Snow Fox nodded, yawning widely to get rid of the feeling Apparating always produced in his ears, then nosed at his Pack-mum’s supporting arm.

“Down you get,” Letha said, angling him so that he could leap from her arm to the floor. “Let’s see it.”

Reditio ipsi, Draco thought, and rose to his hind legs as the stretching feeling of retransforming swept over him. “How’s that?” he asked when he had a mouth that could speak again.

“Very nice,” said Letha, brushing a bit of dirt off his robes. “You’re still a bit slow, but that will come with time. I’m proud of you, that you stuck with this for so long and finished.”

Draco grinned. “Still beat the Marauders, didn’t I?”

“The Marauders never had expert help, and a lot of their delay was due to potion trouble... but yes, you did beat the Marauders. So be proud of that.” Letha turned to look towards the kitchen, though she couldn’t see it from where she stood in the living room. “I wonder what’s going on in there?”

Draco shrugged, but he was curious himself. From the babble of voices, almost everyone who currently stayed in the Den was there. “Easy way to find out,” he said.

“Then let us take it.” Letha started for the front hall. Draco opted to dart through the den room and into the kitchen from that side.

“Draco!” Meghan called, seeing him. “Look what Ginny made!”

“Wow,” Draco said, hugging Meghan with one arm as he took in the complexities of the clay figure. “That’s fancy.”

“Thank you,” Ginny said with only a trace of a blush coloring her smile.

The foot-tall figure was shaped superficially like a human being, though its “feet” were very broad and the rest of the features were only hinted at. Abstract patterns in swirled ridges and valleys covered most of it, though some places were smoothed out, or dotted with small raised mounds, or indented with punctures.

“If you wait for Moony and Danger to get home, they can fire it for you,” Hermione said. “And

I'm sure we can find some glaze for it, or get some. What color do you think you want?"

Meghan left Draco's side to join this discussion, which quickly drew in Neville and the other Weasleys as well, Fred and George insisting the only proper color was red while Ron held out for adding some gold to it. Ginny listened to them all quietly, her arms folded. Letha tossed her a hand-signed compliment, then opened the basement door and went downstairs.

Draco was about to join the discussion as well, when he noticed the one other person in the kitchen who hadn't.

"Hi, Luna," he said noncommittally.

"Hi, Draco." Luna's gaze dropped to the floor, where it must have bounced, since it was back on him the next second. "Do you have a minute or two?"

"All the time you want, m'lady."

Luna shuddered as if he'd called her Voldemort. "Thank you," she said, forcing a smile. "In private, please?"

"Upstairs, then, or in the living room." Draco stepped back, deciding not to offer her his arm as he might have a week or two weeks earlier.

What did I do?

Luna hurried for the stairs, mounted them quickly, and slipped through the door into Moony and Danger's bedroom. With so many guests at the Den, the Pack-parents had placed their bedrooms at the public's disposal during the day, asking only that bureaus, armoires, closets, and cabinets remain off limits. Draco followed her in and sat down on the edge of the bed, watching Luna curl up in the big burnt-orange armchair.

"Was it something I said?" he asked tentatively.

"No." Luna's voice was rough. "It's not anything about you... but it is!" The last three words hinted at a heartbroken wail. "Draco, I saw something terrible, something awful, and I can't stop thinking about it – I can't see any way it could be good, or any way I could be thinking about it wrong, but it *can't* be true, it just *can't*..."

"Something about me?"

"Yes – I think – but I don't want it to be!" The wail was more than hinted at now. "You can't... not like that... not so soon..."

Draco felt a chill down his back, and forced it away. "Luna, you know I want to help you," he said with a calm he didn't feel. "But you have to make sense, at least a little."

Luna sniffed once, then sat up. "I don't want to tell you about it," she said, reaching into her

robes. “But you can watch, if you want. You can see what I saw.” Her hand came out, cradling her pendants. “Just don’t make me come too.”

Draco stood up to accept the pendants and chain from her. “Can I do that?” he asked. “Go into your memories without you along?”

Luna nodded. “I’ll send you there,” she said, returning to her tight fetal curl. “You’ll see.”

Draco slid the chain on and lay down on Moony’s side of the bed. “Ready,” he said.

A fall through darkness, then through white, with a crackly ozone feel-smell to it – Luna’s magic, Luna’s mind, Luna’s memory of her future-Seeing...

xXxXx

Draco stood in the hallway of the Den, watching Luna wash her face in the cubs’ bathroom. She was singing quietly to herself. “And from his heart grew a red, red rose, and from her heart a briar...”

As she looked up and met her own eyes in the mirror, the vision hit. She, and Draco with her, were suddenly somewhere else, somewhere outdoors, at twilight, with blocky things about knee-height all around –

A graveyard?

Draco felt another chill; he didn’t bother denying this one. *Okay, I’m starting to see why she doesn’t like this.*

Luna was walking as if in a dream towards one particular gravestone, which had sharply defined edges and looked clean and unweathered, where it could be seen for the climbing branches of a plant which had covered it.

But how can it be new, if the plant’s had time to grow all over it like that?

A girl knelt in front of the stone and the bush, in grass whose vibrant green showed even in the dim light. Her hand reached out to touch the bush, to caress a leaf here, a flowerbud there.

Rosebud. It’s a rosebush.

“And from his heart,” the kneeling girl sang quietly, “grew a red, red rose...” Her hand hesitated just before touching the one fully open flower on the bush, a rich crimson as though it had grown from her song, and suddenly she was weeping, racking sobs doubling her over where she knelt.

Draco had to stop himself racing forward to comfort her. *I can’t touch her*, he reminded himself. *I’m not real to her.*

But it was doubly hard. For with her singing, he had recognized her, though he still hadn’t seen

her face.

The girl who knelt by this grave was Luna herself.

She looks older. Draco rounded the gravestone to get a look at what he could see of her face, what wasn't hidden by fingers and tears. *Definitely older.*

The watching Luna now stood beside her counterpart, looking more frightened by the second, and this gave Draco a chance to compare them. *A couple of years,* he decided, *but no more than that.* *She's certainly not in her twenties. Mid-to-late teens, I'd guess.*

Movement in the distance caught his eye. Someone else had entered the graveyard, hooded and cloaked, though the evening was warm.

Whoever you are, better not come over here. She's not likely to be friendly if you intrude on her.

Draco watched as the figure ignored his thought and closed in on Luna. *A man. Not a young man, either, but not old by a long shot, even if he does limp... maybe Mr. Weasley or Mr. Longbottom's age. I can't see his face too well...*

The man stopped beside Luna and pulled back the hood of his cloak slightly, not taking it down but exposing his face.

Well, that would explain it.

The man wore a half-mask, like someone going to a masquerade ball.

Or like the Phantom of the Opera.

Draco looked past the mask, to the features of the face that he could see, and gasped in horrified recognition. "Get away from her!" he shouted aloud, running around the side of the gravestone. "Luna, run!"

Both figures ignored him – *of course, I'm not even as much here as Luna. My Luna.* The younger girl stood several feet away, and from the horror on her own face, she had recognized the man as readily as Draco.

The kneeling Luna, sunk in her own grief, hadn't even noticed the man was beside her. He smiled, a familiar triumphant look, before beginning not to speak, but to sing.

Wandering child, so lost, so helpless,

Yearning for my guidance.

Draco gritted his teeth. "Phantom" was one of his and Luna's favorite shows to sing from. *You bastard, how dare you...*

Luna's head had snapped up on the first note. She stared at the man as he finished the phrase, her hand coming up to her cheek to brush away the tears lingering there. When he stopped, she took up the song, singing Christine's part in a halting thread of a voice, though it grew stronger as the phrases went on.

Angel or father, friend or Phantom?

Who is it there, staring?

The man sang over her.

Have you forgotten your Angel?

Luna picked up the line.

Angel, oh, speak... what endless longings

Echo in this whisper?

Luna, get away from him. Draco gripped the edge of the gravestone, breathing hard between his teeth. *Get up, run, go... this is beautiful, but he could kill you...*

The man took the line again, his voice caressing.

Too long you've wandered in winter,

Far from my far-reaching gaze...

Luna's hand was to her chest.

Wildly my mind beats against you...

You resist, the man mocked her.

Maybe this Luna wants to die, suggested a small voice in the back of Draco's mind. *Maybe whoever's buried here has made her want to die.*

The two sang together.

Yet the soul obeys!

Their eyes were locked on each other.

Angel of Music! I denied you,

Turning from true beauty!

Angel of Music! Do not shun me,

Come to me, strange Angel!

Draco held his breath. *This is the part where Raoul should come charging in... come on, Raoul, where are you?*

The man's song taunted and tantalized.

I am your Angel of Music...

Come to me, Angel of Music...

Maybe he can't come, the voice said. Or maybe he's already here...

"Such a lovely voice," the man said after a few moments of silence. "A pity to choke it with weeping. Did you love him so much, the one who lies buried here?"

Luna slipped her hand between the thorns of the rosebush to caress the writing beneath. "No, I suppose I didn't," she said, turning her head to smile up at the man. "Silly of me, to cry for him."

"Indeed. For when did he ever give either of us reason to love him?" The man regarded the grave dispassionately. "I regret what I was forced to do, but I had no choice. You know that."

"I do."

The man closed his fingers around the stem of the one blooming rose, deftly broke it off, and offered it to Luna. "Come away with me, Starwing, silent huntress of the night," he said quietly. "Come and be my eyes and ears and hands, and my swift-winged messenger until messages are needed no more. It cannot last much longer, and I believe I know how it will end."

"So do I." Luna rose and accepted the flower. "And I will go with you. I will do what you cannot, and fly to carry your words to far-off ears, until your side – our side – reaps our well-deserved victory."

The man smiled fully this time. "My lady, your way with words delights me."

Luna dropped a brief curtsey, then bent and laid the rose on the grave where she had been kneeling. "We should go," she said, straightening. "I've wasted enough time here."

The man undid his mask and laid it on the grave over the stem of the rose. Draco tightened his hands around the gravestone again, barely noticing when a thorn pierced his palm and left a bright splotch of blood on the gray stone. "No," he breathed. "No, no, no..."

Luna's form rippled, and the white owl Starwing fluttered upwards to land on the man's outstretched wrist. She leaned inward and preened a long strand of silver hair which had escaped the hood of the cloak.

Cradling the owl close to his chest, Lucius Malfoy pulled his hood forward again and walked

away.

The watching figure of the Luna Draco knew stood irresolute for a long moment, then darted forward and fell to her knees, just missing mask and rose. She stared through the thorny stems at the inscription on the gravestone, and her face crumpled. “No,” she moaned, as though she had heard Draco. “No, no, please no...”

Draco stepped carefully around her. His feet seemed to mark out the beat of a funeral dirge.

I have to see... I have to know...

He pushed the rose stems gently aside to read what lay beneath.

Draco Regulus Black

Beloved Son and Brother

26 July 1980 – 5 June 1997

He took an involuntary step back. His heel snagged against Luna’s calf, and he fell, and fell, and kept falling, through white and black and the sound of hopeless grief and pain...

xXxXx

Draco’s eyes snapped open. Both his fists were clenched, his body rigid, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

I’m going to die.

Before I turn seventeen, I’m going to die.

And Luna’s going to say she never loved me, and go away with my father.

He snatched at the anger this last thought carried, preferring it to the panic evoked by the other two. “How could you do that?” he demanded, sitting up and wishing his voice hadn’t cracked on the second-to-last word. “How could you?”

“I don’t *know!*” Luna cried, her own voice breaking. “It’s not true, I do love you! You *know* I do! I wouldn’t ever do that – but I *did!*”

The barely concealed panic in her voice struck a chord within Draco. *She’s as scared about this as I am. Maybe even more. She never wanted to see it, and she doesn’t want it to happen.*

He stood up and crossed to Luna’s chair. “I’m sorry,” he said, sitting down on the arm. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s no more than what I’ve been saying to myself.” Luna cast a quick glance at him before her

face went back down against her arms. “Draco, I’m so sorry... I don’t want it to happen, I swear I don’t... if there’s anything I can do, anything, to make it not come true, I will, you know I will...”

“I do know.” Draco reached down and tapped Luna’s leg, asking her silently to move over. “And I think there’s one thing we can do, and keep doing, to make sure it doesn’t come true.”

“What?” Luna pulled herself in more tightly and sat up a bit, giving Draco room to slide onto the chair with her.

“We can prove that what you said wasn’t true.” Draco laid a hand on Luna’s thigh, palm up, and after a moment Luna slipped her own into it. “We can love each other. And keep on loving...”

He stopped to swallow against a suddenly tight throat. “As long as we can,” he finished.

“Mrs. Danger said the future wasn’t set in stone,” Luna said, lowering her other arm to look at him again. “She said I was just seeing a possibility, and now that I’ve seen it, it might not happen that way. Or at all.”

“Or it could be one of those inescapable things,” Draco countered. “Every move you make to try to get away from it is actually a move towards making it happen.”

Wait – why am I arguing this side?

The realization that he was trying to convince himself that his death was less than two years away brought a smile to his face for a moment. Then it died as he realized why.

Hope hurts. It’s hard work, and it’s never comfortable. If you just give up, accept your fate, don’t fight any more, that’s easier.

He pressed his free hand to his chest. *But since when have Pack and Pride ever done anything the easy way?*

I am a Marauder, and a Warrior. Maybe I have to die on 5 June 1997 – maybe – but I’m sure as hell not going down without a fight!

He turned and struck his first blow for life and a future beyond the age of rising seventeen.

xXxXx

“Whoops, we can’t go in there,” Meghan said, shutting the door of Moony and Danger’s bedroom quickly. “Draco and Luna are in there.”

“Did they make up?” Neville asked.

“I think so.” Meghan pursed her lips, making smooching sounds.

Neville leaned down and took advantage.

xXxXx

By silent consent, Draco and Luna kept what they'd seen to themselves, and the rest of the Pride let it be. "I just need to know that you're going to be all right," Hermione said to Draco the next day. "I won't ask what happened unless something comes up and I really have to know."

"I'll be all right," Draco promised. "So will Luna. We've worked it out."

Ron shot him a dubious look but declined comment.

Fred and George were a little more persistent in their inquiries. "Luna the ever-gentle hurt her beloved boyfriend," Fred said. "That has to mean something."

"Even if it's just a lovers' quarrel, we can help," George added. "We're developing a new line of sweets, mood-altering and completely legal..."

After Snow Fox and Starwing invaded the basement and carried off an important-looking notebook, though, the twins promised to behave.

The Pack-parents were equally discreet, though each of them found time over the next few days to be alone with Draco for a few minutes. Moony listened to his latest composition, made a few comments and suggestions, and borrowed a copy of the corrected sheet music with an eye to working out a counterpoint line for violin. Danger found him alone in the boys' bedroom staring out the window, and simply stood beside him for several minutes without saying anything, before she hugged him, kissed his forehead, and left.

Letha had her own methods. "The laundry needs hanging out," she announced one day, letting a large basket drop onto the kitchen floor.

"Doesn't Winky do that?" Ron asked, looking up from his homework.

"I asked her to leave it to me this week," Letha said, putting her wand away. "I find it soothing sometimes. Draco, give me a hand with it?"

Draco nodded and got up from his place at the table, squatting down to pick up the basket. The Pack-parents were understanding about underage magic, but it wouldn't hurt him to haul the basket by hand.

Not to mention, I can use the upper body strength. I still can't do more than nine press-ups at a time. Wonder how Harry's managing?

Once outside, Letha conjured a basket of clothespins for them to use. "They'll disappear in about a day," she said in response to Draco's questioning look. "But we don't need them for any longer than that, and it's easier than having them hanging around and getting lost."

They started with the small laundry, socks and shirts and the like. Draco noticed that the more embarrassing items had been left out, and wondered if Letha had dried them with magic in the

basement.

Probably. No need to advertise that someone lives here who wears lacy pink knickers, or green and yellow smiley face boxers.

He grinned at a sudden stray thought. *And no, it's not the same person.*

“How are you, Draco?” Letha asked quietly after several minutes of silence.

“I’m all right.”

“Really and truly?”

Draco shrugged. “A little scared, I guess,” he said, sure that Letha would know what he was talking about. The Pack-parents had never been good at keeping secrets one from another.

“As well you should be. I’d be petrified, in that situation.” Letha shook out one of Neville’s shirts and pinned it on the line. “But do bear in mind the probability factor.”

“Sorry?”

Letha looked around the shirt at him. “How likely is it that we would simply let you die, Draco? Why would we even let you be in a situation where you’d be in that kind of danger, if we didn’t think you were capable of protecting yourself?”

“Things happen,” Draco said. “And even people who are strong can die.”

“Certainly true. But you know that we would fight – yes, and we would die – to keep you, or any or all of your siblings, alive.”

“Just as long as that doesn’t mean the vision still comes true, but you’re all buried there too.”

A sad half-smile touched Letha’s face. “Point,” she said. “But think about it this way, Draco. We’re eight determined people – twelve if you count the Pride – and we have a way of getting what we want. And what I want, and I’m sure everyone will agree with me on this, is to get through this war without losing any of us. We might not get what we want, but it won’t be for lack of trying.”

“I know.” Draco caught the sheet Letha tossed over the clothesline to him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Clothespin, please.”

xXxXx

“No, and that’s final,” Molly Weasley said firmly. “You may be of age, but you still live under my roof, and I will not have any more of my children risking their lives than necessary!”

“Fine, we’ll move out,” George said easily. “We could get a place in London easy.”

“We won’t need to until next year, if we stay at Hogwarts over holidays,” Fred pointed out. “Not that we’ll be doing much there besides research, of course. Still, why waste hundreds of perfectly good testers?”

Molly stared at them both quellingly. “Now you listen to me,” she said. “If I hear of one child, *one*, being made ill by these foul messes you’ve been brewing up...”

“They’re not foul, Mum,” George protested. “You should try one, you’d like it.”

“Yes, and what would it do to me? Turn me into a canary, or give me a nosebleed that won’t go away?” Molly planted her hands on her hips. “Test them on yourselves if you must, but you will not endanger any of your fellow students with them.”

“But Mum,” Fred started.

“But me no buts, Frederick. Every word out of your mouths is telling me that I was right. You’re far too young to join the Order, and in enough danger as it is, with your father and myself and three of your brothers involved.”

“Ron and Ginny get to be part of things,” Fred protested.

“Ron and Ginny will not be attending meetings, nor will they be going on missions. I trust Dumbledore, and Remus and the rest of the Pack, to help Hermione know what to pass along and what not to. And if you’ve been polite and kind while you’ve been staying here, the Pride might even share what they are allowed to know with you.”

Judging by the looks on the twins’ faces, that hadn’t occurred to them, and they didn’t think their chances were good.

“Should have thought of that a bit earlier, shouldn’t you?” Molly said with a certain amount of satisfaction. She’d tried all her life to teach these boys that other people were not necessarily quite the fools the twins seemed to think, but the lessons had never sunk in.

After Percy, they were my biggest concerns as possible Slytherins...

“I don’t think it’s too late to be mending fences,” she allowed. “But you had best start as soon as possible. And I don’t want to hear another word about the Order, from either of you. To borrow an idea from your hosts, when you act like responsible adults, perhaps I’ll consider treating you that way.”

The glance the twins exchanged was fraught with emotion – disappointment, obviously, and resentment, but also some speculation.

Dear heaven. Could they finally be starting to grow up?

Molly liked the idea. She loved the twins, of course, and never wanted them to lose the raffish charm that made them so adorable, but she didn't think that was necessarily inconsistent with a bit more maturity and responsibility on their parts.

And I do wish it hadn't taken a war to bring it about.

xXxXx

Moony came home early the day before Draco's birthday. "Hermione, there's a meeting this afternoon," he said. "Can you be ready in an hour?"

"I... think so. Yes. I'll be back." Hermione ran upstairs, her heart pounding with more than just the motion.

A meeting... my first Order meeting...

The other girls followed her. "What do you want to wear?" Ginny asked, opening the closet.

"Black robes, but not school ones," Hermione said, picking up her comb.

"Give me that," said Meghan, holding out her hand.

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to have to use my fingers. Luna, would you grab mine? It's the ivory-colored one on the desk... yes, that."

"You don't have to do this," Hermione protested as Meghan's fingers began to separate the tangled masses.

"Maybe not, but I want to."

"I'll be right back," said Ginny, ducking out of the room. "Have to give these to Winky to get them ironed."

Hermione sighed and let it happen.

"You're not just you when you go to the Order meetings," said Luna, setting aside the comb to tease apart a tangle with her fingers. "You're all of us, the whole Pride. We want you to look like it."

"What, like eight people? Maybe if I ate as much as Harry's cousin."

The girls laughed.

"No, but Luna's right," said Meghan. "We want you to look good. Grown-up. A lot of the Order will probably think we shouldn't be involved, that we're just kids. You're the right person to

show them we're not, but they'll count on what they see before what they hear."

"Who, the Order?" Ginny asked, coming back in.

"Yes," said Luna. "Hermione has to look good so that they don't dismiss her."

"That's what Mum always says," said Ginny. "You can have the most important message in the world, you can say it in the most convincing way, but if you look too young or too old or too strange, no one will listen to you."

"People listen to Dumbledore," Meghan objected.

"He's been proving he's right for more than a hundred years." Ginny sat down on the next bed over. "Hermione has to make a good first impression."

"Are you quite finished making me nervous?" Hermione inquired.

xXxXx

I don't know whether this feels more like the Yule Ball again or being a sacrificial maiden on her way to the altar.

Hermione descended the stairs nervously. Her black robes were free of wrinkles and smelled lightly of cleanliness. She wore a necklace of red and blue beads Letha had given her for her last birthday but one and the matching earrings that had come from Padfoot. Meghan had deftly pulled back the most unruly strands of her hair into a large clip, keeping it out of her face, and Ginny had applied the few touches of makeup Hermione would permit.

As long as I live up to my appearance, I should do fine.

A few jazzy notes trickled through the house, played on the piano. A guitar picked up the same theme and added to it. The piano took up the challenge and elaborated on the theme still more, and in a moment both instruments were playing together, backed by a complex beat.

Hermione smiled. *Well, that answers the question of where the boys got to while we were off doing girl things.*

She walked quickly towards the music room, thankful that she'd got her own way about shoes. Walking in high heels tended to make her wobble, and that was the opposite of the impression she needed to make tonight.

Ron noticed her first, and broke off drumming on the coffee table with his hands to stare. Draco and Neville turned to see what he was looking at, and both sets of hands went still.

After a long moment, Draco pushed back the piano bench and stood up. "Neenie, you look wonderful," he said, coming to touching range but holding back, as if he didn't dare.

Hermione scowled. "If you say 'what happened,' I'll hit you."

"But I know what happened. Girl magic." Draco grinned. "Boys can't ever understand it. It's one of the rules of life."

"I think the Order will be impressed," said Neville. "You look smart, and a little older than you are, but not like you're trying to look older."

"I'm sure they'll know how old I am," said Hermione. "Considering they know I'm the same age as Harry, and most of them knew Harry when he was a baby."

"But people don't always make sense like that," Neville pointed out. "Their heads will say 'she's only rising fifteen,' but if their eyes and their ears are telling them that you're old enough to be taken seriously, then they will."

"You look almost as good as you did for the Yule Ball," said Ron, finally recovering his power of speech. "And you didn't take nearly as long."

"Oh, well, if that's your standard of measurement – how long it takes—"

"I don't think they'll take you seriously if you talk like that," said Draco.

Hermione glared at him.

"And I didn't mean it like that, either," said Ron crossly. "Do you always have to take everything I say the wrong way?"

Hermione sighed. "Ron, I'm sorry. Thank you for the compliment... it was a compliment, wasn't it?"

"No, it was an insult. Yes, it was a ruddy compliment! I think you look good, all right?"

"Now who's taking things the wrong way?"

"I really wish Harry would come home," Draco muttered under his breath.

xXxXx

The Order of the Phoenix convened its first meeting of the Second War in a carefully secured room at Longbottom House. Augusta Longbottom had accepted an 'at-large' membership in the Order, meaning that she would not usually attend meetings but would be available to help if needed. "A meeting place is the least I can give you," she had told Dumbledore. "If there's anything else, don't hesitate to ask."

Dumbledore and McGonagall broke off their conversation with Frank Longbottom to greet Hermione, Moony, Danger, and Letha. "You look well, Hermione," said Dumbledore, bowing to her slightly.

“Thank you, sir.”

“You have your points ready, I assume?”

“Yes, sir.” Hermione had spent some time with Moony going over what would and wouldn't be a good idea to bring up in the meeting. Part of the point of having a liaison was to make sure the Pride could have their opinions heard, but there wasn't much room between “useless doormat” and “young upstart” for her to work with.

Most of these people probably still think children should be seen and not heard.

She had just one point to bring up today, the Pride's polite request that they be told how they would be moving from the Den to Headquarters. Moony had okayed it, and even been willing to allow a second point, but Hermione had backed off that on her own. “Fewer is better to start with,” she'd said. “Once they get used to hearing me talk, and they know I'm not going to waste their time, then maybe I can do a little more.”

The door opened. Kingsley Shacklebolt entered, followed closely by Alastor Moody. The grizzled Auror turned to shut the door again and grunted with his back still turned. “Didn't know this was a kiddie party, Dumbledore.”

Hermione clenched her teeth briefly.

“Hermione is here as representative of her Pride, Alastor, as I think I told you,” Dumbledore said. “She is as trustworthy as any of you, and as likely to have important information or good insights on that which is provided.”

Moody looked doubtful, but nodded to Hermione anyway.

“How's Sirius doing?” Kingsley asked Letha.

“He's homesick, and glad it's almost over. Apparently the main reason the purebloods welcomed him back was because they thought he was ready to leave me and settle down with a nice pureblood girl.” Letha gave Dumbledore a suspicious look. “I wonder what could have given them that idea.”

Dumbledore seemed not to notice. “I know Alice is working tonight, and Arthur Weasley as well,” he said, looking at his pocket watch. “Molly should be here soon. Kingsley, have you heard from Tonks?”

“She had to leave early today,” Kingsley said. “Planning, I think. But she'll be here soon.”

“Planning for what?” Moody asked, then shook his head. “Never mind, don't know where my brain was. Her wedding.” He snorted. “Long as it doesn't take her mind off her duties...”

“It should not,” said Dumbledore. “And if it does, we can gently remind her.”

Charlie Weasley opened the door for his mother and fiancée. As soon as they were seated and greetings finished, Dumbledore called the meeting to order.

Headquarters was the first order of business. Hermione listened carefully, and at one point (after checking with Moony via a quick hand signal) raised her hand.

“Yes, Hermione?” Dumbledore said.

“Sir, I’ve been noting what people are saying they’ve yet to do, and I think I see a duplication.” She blushed, but continued. “Is it Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom, or Charlie and Tonks, who are responsible for the in-the-wall wards?”

The mentioned people, those who were there, looked at one another in surprise. “I wondered why they looked higher when we hadn’t been working on them,” said Charlie.

“That explains the section we had to tear out,” said Mr. Longbottom. “We must have overlapped incompatible warding spells. I thought Alice and I wouldn’t make a mistake like that.”

“What spells are you using?” Tonks asked.

Danger reached over and pressed Hermione’s hand as the discussion got technical. **Well done you,** she said silently.

I can understand why Harry gets the way he does sometimes, Hermione answered. **It’s heady to have people listen to you.**

It is, but you’re wise enough not to let it get to you. And Harry will get there.

I hope. Hermione squeezed her sister’s hand, then released it and went back to listening.

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“So, how was it?” Ron asked as soon as Hermione was out of the fire.

“Were there a lot of people there?” Fred said over him.

“Were there spells on the room?” George wanted to know.

“Who was there?”

“What did you talk about?”

“What did you find out?”

The room disintegrated into a noisy babble. Hermione grimaced and caught Ginny’s eye. Ginny nodded. “OI!” she shouted over the noise. “QUIET!”

Seven people fell magically silent.

“Thank you,” Hermione said, nodding to Ginny. “There were twelve people there, not so many. There were spells, but I didn’t see them. I’ll tell you who later. There’s something more important.” She grinned. “We’re leaving for Headquarters the day before Neville’s birthday.”

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Remus, Apparating in, thought for a moment he’d missed his destination.

Something wrong? Danger asked.

No, just noisy cubs. Remus smiled at the impromptu war dance being done by the Weasleys, to the chant of “*Headquarters, Headquarters, Headquarters...*”

xXxXx

The peace of Number Seventeen, Privet Drive, was rudely broken the next morning as a yell emerged from the smallest bedroom. Its occupant was highly apologetic later, and explained that his favorite sports team had won a decisive victory the night before.

“Liar,” Dudley said when Uncle Vernon had gone to work and Aunt Petunia out shopping. “You don’t even have a Quidditch team.”

“Do so. Ballycastle Bats.”

“Why d’you root for an *Irish* team?”

“Because I do.” Harry turned back to the dishes, humming a little. Nothing could puncture his mood today. He was going home.

Well, not home home. But away from here, and back to the Pack. And the Den is where the Pack is, so I am going home.

He had just enough warning to start ducking before Dudley’s first punch hit him, on the shoulder instead in the back where Dudley’d obviously been aiming for.

“Come on, fight back,” Dudley taunted, bringing his fists up. “Fight me, Potter. You can do it – why should you be afraid of me? You beat the Dark Lord, didn’t you?”

Better part of valor time. Harry ducked a second punch and took off running. Dudley gave chase, but his heart wasn’t in it, and he gave up around the second block. “Wait till tonight!” he shouted after Harry. “You won’t be running so fast tonight!”

Harry swore under his breath. *He noticed. He noticed I never leave the yard after dark. I wonder if I can lock myself in my room...?*

He'd fallen automatically into the easy, sustainable pace he used for his exercise runs. It was close kin to the untiring lope Wolf used to cover distances, and had been inspired by it. *Might as well get some out of the way now.*

He swung into his four-mile loop, two miles out and the same back. It was one of his favorite paths to take, because on the way back to the Dursleys' he always stopped to cool down at a little park, a park he knew he'd seen before, when he was very small.

I was so proud the day I figured out what it was, what it had to be. Benches here and here, swingset there, sandbox over there...

He'd danced on the bench where Moony had sat, and the one Danger had used, and run around the swingset as he had that day, wishing Hermione was with him so that they could reenact it.

Maybe sometime she will be.

He gave himself over to thoughts of Pack and Pride, what they had been and what they could be, and let his body do the running.

A bit over half an hour later, Harry jogged into the park and started his cooldown walk. He'd stretch here, then finish with a brisk walk back to the Dursleys', where he'd start packing.

I know it's early, but why wait? I'll just leave out what I need.

"Prrrrrt?"

Harry spun, his hand on his wand.

Slit-pupiled hazel eyes blinked at him from Danger's bench, where a slim calico cat was sitting, tail coiled neatly around her legs.

"Don't do that," Harry said, relaxing. "I was just thinking of you."

Neenie purred.

"Thinking of when we were little here," Harry went on. "You know this is the same park, right?"

Neenie nodded, then looked carefully around. No one was in sight. Leaping off the bench, she trotted into some nearby bushes, and a moment later Hermione stood up. "You got the letter, didn't you?" she said.

"Of course." Harry hugged his sister tightly. "I can't wait. Are you here for just a little while, or staying the night?"

"Staying the night, if I can. If not, I'll call and someone will come to get me."

"If I could smuggle Snow Fox around, I don't think I'll have trouble with you. You're a little

better behaved.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Don’t I know it. So this is the same park where it all started...” Her mischievous smile dawned. “But Danger isn’t here to save you this time, pushover boy.”

Harry dodged her shove, laughing. “Fool me twice, shame on me!” he called. “You won’t beat me again!”

“Not unless I need to, I won’t,” Hermione shot back, before words were lost in the fun of two-person tag.

It was almost afternoon when Harry returned to Number Seventeen, a small calico cat darting from bush to shrub behind him. A car in the drive made him swear. “Aunt Petunia’s home, you can’t come in with me...”

“Mrrrt?” questioned the front hedge.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” Harry said after a moment of thought. “I’ll open the front window for you. Hide behind the big armchair in the corner, then listen for my voice. I’ll get her talking in the kitchen. Run upstairs and find the room that smells like me. If you want anything to eat, it’s under the loose floorboard under the bed.”

“Mrow, maow,” said the hedge. Harry nodded. One for no, two for yes was standard Marauder code, adopted by the Pride.

He opened the front door. “I’m back!” he called.

“About time, too,” said Aunt Petunia snippily, appearing in the kitchen doorway. “Where have you been all morning? You never finished the dishes, the floor is filthy, and the kitchen window needs to be washed again...”

“I’ll be right there, Aunt Petunia.” Harry detoured into the living room. “I was a bit hot, so I went for a run.” He pulled the window open and started for the kitchen.

“You were hot, so you went running?” His aunt’s voice rose shrilly. “Are you stupid or ignorant? Running makes you hotter, with all that sweat and that nasty smell coming off you... you go and get a shower before you get near my good dishes.”

“Why don’t I do the floor first?”

“Absolutely not, you’ll get that stink all over my tiles and I’ll never get it out, perhaps you’ve not been a burden but you’re certainly no pleasure to have around...”

“Then you’ll be glad to know I’m leaving on the 29th,” Harry said, his ears open for the small sounds of paws on carpet. Ah-ha, there... and another...

“Are – are you?” Aunt Petunia seemed taken aback. “Well, then. The 29th. Vernon will be glad

to hear it.” She went over to the calendar hanging on the wall and added a notation. “What time, do you know?”

“Late, I think,” Harry said. “Probably after dark.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know. The letter just said they might be coming late, and mentioned sunset.”

“And who’ll be coming for you?” This in a poisonous tone. “Your... adoptive mother, perhaps?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Part of Harry hoped Danger would know better than to show up, but another part of him wanted to see her have a fresh face-off with his aunt.

I know who’d win, for sure...

“But you’ll certainly be gone by the morning of the 30th? Completely gone, not coming back?”

“As far as I know.”

“Good.” Aunt Petunia made another notation. “We’ll have to go out to dinner.”

To celebrate, hung unsaid in the air.

“Have a good time,” Harry said politely, and started for the stairs, grinning to himself.

Yes, my leaving will be a cause for celebration on several different levels...

xXxXx

They discussed how to move us a lot, Neenie said, lying on the bed beside Harry. Because of that dream you had that you wrote us about. Dumbledore thinks Voldemort knows how the pendants work, and he’s hoping to get around them by swearing some of the Death Eaters not to kill us.

“How would he know how the pendants work?”

Dumbledore told the fake Moody about them. Neenie sounded embarrassed. Back in the fall, when you disappeared after the Goblet of Fire happened. Fake Moody wanted to know how the Pack-parents knew to come, and Dumbledore told him.

Harry blew out his breath. “Oh well,” he said on the tail end of the exhale. “Spilled milk.”

Yes. So Dumbledore wants to be very sure that nothing happens to us while we’re moving from the Den to Headquarters.

“Is there a reason we can’t just Apparate there?”

Wards again. You can Apparate around inside the house, but you can't Apparate in or out. Besides, Dumbledore brought something up that we hadn't thought of. Neenie's voice was grim. Voldemort knows some way to disrupt Apparition.

“He does?”

You found out about it. You and Padfoot, back when you were three. Lucius Malfoy did something to Padfoot to change where Padfoot Apparated to. Where do you think he learned that spell?

“He could have made it up himself.”

But even if he had, don't you think he would have shown it to his Dark Master? The cat snorted at the title. We have to assume Voldemort knows it.

“But he'd have to get close enough to cast a spell, or one of the Death Eaters would.”

They could get close to the adults. We don't know who all the Death Eaters are yet, and I'm sure they're recruiting just like we are. And we know the spell doesn't leave any visible or tangible traces, or Padfoot would have noticed it. So we can't all go by Apparition. It's too dangerous.

“All right, so what else is there?” Harry considered wizarding travel. “Floo is easy, but easy to interfere with too.”

And the Ministry's watching the Network.

“Scratch that. Ditto the Knight Bus.”

Thou shalt not use the Floo Network, nor shalt thou use the Knight Bus, save when going away from Headquarters, Neenie said in a silly voice. Portkeys are right out.

Harry chuckled. “One, two, Portkey.”

Three, sire.

“Whatever. So what can we use?”

Well, some of us are Apparating there. The twins went to the Ministry two days ago and passed their tests – did we remember to tell you that? – so they can get there themselves. And Mr. Lovegood volunteered to Side-Along two of us, one at a time, since he knows he doesn't have any spells on him.

“How does he know?”

He hasn't been out of his house for two weeks, except to putter in the garden. Danger's been buying his groceries.

“Oh. So who will he take?”

Luna, of course, and probably Draco. The rest of us are being driven. Mr. Weasley said we could repaint his car, so it's going to be purple now, and Danger's going to drive while Moony and Letha and Tonks guard us.

“What about Charlie?”

Neenie giggled. **Charlie can't come. He's having problems at work. Apparently one of the dragons in the preserve doesn't get on with the others, and Charlie's been asked to head a team to take it back to Romania. And guess what kind of dragon it is?**

“Norwegian Ridgeback?”

That's it.

“Baby Norbert.” Harry thought back to the floppy dragonet, all black scales and orange eyes, that had hatched on Hagrid's kitchen table two and a half years ago. “I wonder how big he is now.”

Big, Charlie says. Not quite full grown yet, but getting close.

“Still. A dragon can do a lot of damage, especially if it doesn't get on with other dragons.”

I'd imagine.

“Hey, what about me?” Harry said, realizing the one person who hadn't been mentioned. “How do I get to Headquarters?”

You get to go a special way. Neenie purred again, and kneaded the bedspread with her claws. You get to fly there.

“I do?”

Well, you're the one they're most worried about. Not that they're not worried about us, but if the Death Eaters get you...

“Yeah, I know. But why brooms?”

Dumbledore said the more in control of your own travel you were, the fewer things could go wrong. You can't Apparate yet, and anyone who showed up here to Apparate with you might be a Death Eater in disguise, or under Imperius, or have the disruption spell on them. You can't make your own Portkeys, and you definitely can't set up your own Floo Network.

“So brooms are best.” Harry nodded. “I get it. But does that mean Dumbledore doesn't trust the Order, then?”

No, he trusts them. But didn't you tell me yourself there was a spy?

“Yes. But why would he send a spy to get me?”

Does he know who it is?

Harry sucked in a breath. “That’s right, he doesn’t know. He said he suspected, but he didn’t know for sure. And if he kept on not giving the bloke assignments, he’d – the spy would – start suspecting that Dumbledore suspected...” He stopped. “My head hurts.”

I know the feeling. But just think, Harry. Three more days, and we’ll all be together again. Neenie’s purring grew louder. **I think that’s wonderful.**

“I think so too.” Harry began to stroke the cat. “Except we won’t all be there. Padfoot’s still gone, until August something... the fifth, I think.”

Yes, the fifth. You’re right. Neenie sighed. **All right, on the fifth of August we’ll all be together again. Happy now?**

“Not yet, but I will be on the fifth of August.”

Neenie hissed mildly through her teeth.

xXxXx

Another night, another dance. I haven’t been this bored since History of Magic.

Sirius was starting to consider giving up his mission as a bad job. He’d done his best to spread the word about Voldemort, hinting here, asking delicately pointed questions there, but his hosts seemed convinced that he was still the naïve sixteen-year-old boy who’d run away from home, rather than a man of thirty-six with experience of life and living, with a job and a family.

Which is more than most of them have. They live on their family money, they strut out their trophy wives and trophy children, but what do they have at the end of the day? Empty rooms filled with expensive things. No wonder so many of them are alcoholics or abusive.

The more he saw of pureblood society, the more he wondered how he’d ever escaped at all, let alone with his mind and soul relatively intact.

And what about someone like Corona? How do you explain her? She was even a Slytherin in school, and she still managed to turn out decent, unless she’s scamming me...

He shrugged. *You get freaks in every society. But this one’s inbreeding and stultifying itself to death. It’s like Elladora said – within a couple of generations, there won’t be any more pureblood society, at least not as we know it...*

Wonder what’ll take its place?

He filed the thought away for future reference and returned to self-pity. *Missed Draco’s birthday*

this year – couldn't even be there in Animagus form. Sent him a card, and a nice long letter, but it's not the same. And I'll miss Harry's too... I can't believe my baby boy's going to be fifteen in just two more days. Where did all that time go?

His mind drifted. *So, I'm going back to the old home, twenty years later.* Dumbledore had found him in the garden the evening before and murmured the secret into his ear before disappearing again. *Not counting that little stop after Snivellus invaded us in London, back when the cubs were little. Wonder if Kreacher's gone any madder? Or Mum's portrait?*

“Not dancing?” asked Corona’s voice from beside him.

“No, I don’t feel like dancing tonight.” Sirius smiled half-heartedly at her. “A private pity party suits my mood better.”

“May I join you?”

“Certainly, if you don’t mind listening to my whining.”

“Better your whining than Ulysses Crabbe’s groping,” Corona said bluntly, sitting down. “He’s a widower and looking to marry again, for a mother for his son, he claims...”

“What do you know about his past?” Sirius asked delicately, looking for a good way to tell Corona what he knew about Crabbe.

“Oh, don’t worry, I know where his sympathies lie.” Corona stared out onto the dance floor. “I know where all their sympathies lie. They babble platitudes about kindness and generosity, and then they support men, and women too, who...” She shut her mouth with a snap. “What makes us so different?” she demanded, turning to him. “What freaks of nature are we?”

“We are the normal ones,” Sirius said firmly. “Not them. Normal people don’t backstab others every chance they get. Sometimes they do, but not every single time. And normal people have at least one person they trust. Like their spouse.”

“Yet another reason I have never married.” Corona’s laugh was bitter. “If you only knew how many times I have wished there were some way out of here...”

Sirius’ reply was cut off by one of the least welcome sensations in his life.

The pendant chain around his neck was growing cold.

“What is it?” Corona asked in concern. “You look distraught...”

Sirius wasn’t listening. The pendants were in his hand, fanned out, he’d see it in a second...

He stopped in surprise. “Hagrid?” he said, staring.

“What?”

“It’s not important,” Sirius said, regaining some sense of where he was. “It’s just... a message from home. I have to go.”

“Go?” Corona was on her feet. “Go where?”

“Home.” Sirius was on his way, weaving carefully through dancers, already concocting his story.

His host listened tolerantly to a tale of a just-received owl, an emergency at home, a friend in trouble, and smiled and nodded. “Of course we’ll miss your company through the rest of the season, but there’s always next year,” he said, bowing. “I hope your trouble sorts itself out well, M’sieur Black. *Au revoir.*”

“*Au revoir,*” Sirius answered in kind, returning the bow.

Make that Adieu. I am never coming back here, I don’t care what Albus needs.

He was halfway to his room when he heard running feet behind him.

xXxXx

“Sirius, wait!” Corona dashed up to him, wincing with every step. *Curse these shoes.* She kicked them off and scooped them up, pattering beside him as he started off again. “You’re going home.”

“Yes. A friend of mine is in trouble, I wasn’t lying about that. I just didn’t want to have to explain this.” Sirius reached into his robes without breaking stride and pulled out a gold chain with four carved medallions hanging from it. One of the carvings glowed with an inner light. “They’re magical, they tell us if someone needs help. And Hagrid needs help.”

“Hagrid? The gamekeeper at Hogwarts?” Corona kept pace with him, her shoes in one hand. “What kind of trouble would he be in that he couldn’t get out of himself?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m going home. If I can’t do anything else, I can watch the children while someone else goes to help him.”

Am I hearing things, or did he just hesitate over the word children?

“And to be perfectly honest,” Sirius went on, “I can’t stand another minute here. Thank you for your company, it’s been the one bright spot in a very unpleasant experience...”

“Wait.” Corona put her hand over Sirius’ on the doorknob to his room and gathered her courage in both hands. “Take me with you.”

Sirius looked as if he would have liked to groan. “Corona, I thought you understood,” he said with audibly fraying patience. “I’m married, I have children...”

“Not like that! I don’t mean it that way!” Corona shook her head, trying to find the words to express what she did mean. “Sirius, you’ve been a friend to me, you’ve talked to me like a friend.

Be my friend one more time. Give me a way out of here. Just take me to wherever you're going. You talk about fighting, about opposing He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. I want to help. Take me with you."

Sirius looked into her eyes for the space of two breaths. Corona prayed he could see how much she meant this. *This is all I've ever wanted... a way out, a way to fight for what I believe in...*

Finally Sirius broke the silence. "How fast can you pack?"

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Facing Danger

Chapter 4: Ideas and Escapes (Year 5)

Chapter 4: Ideas and Escapes

Elladora Gamp crept quietly along the corridor, her nerves keyed high. Any minute, she'd see them... they had to come this way if they were leaving the house, unless they were going to be melodramatic and go out a window...

“You're sure you have everything?” a man's voice asked. “I doubt they'll let you come back.”

Sirius. Elladora bit down on her hiss. *He'll pay*, she promised herself. *He'll pay for deceiving me.*

“I don't have much that I care about,” a woman answered. “And it's all with me. I'll go to Gringotts in the morning and withdraw my part of the family money – they might be able to bar me from that, if they think of it in time, but I hope to get to it before they even know I'm gone.”

Elladora's lip curled. *Not likely now, Corona. The goblins will have the order from the family tonight, and they don't deny good customers' requests, especially not old ones like ourselves...*

“If need be, we can help you out for a month or two, until you find work,” Sirius promised. His voice was getting closer. “And if you really want to help with the war, there's a small stipend for that, and room and board where we're going. We have someone taking advantage of that already, a liaison to some of the more historically Dark-oriented creatures...”

Elladora raised her wand high as her traitorous sister and the seemingly-turned prodigal rounded the corner. *Lumos!* she thought viciously, and searing white light flooded the corridor. Both the others cried out, stumbling back, throwing up hands to protect themselves. Elladora stood as she was, knowing she must appear the very spirit of vengeance to them.

“So,” she said venomously. “To me, you have a Muggle wife, a daughter, a family. But to her, promises of help, money, a home...”

“Elladora, this isn't what it looks like,” Sirius said, raising his head and squinting against her wandlight. “Could you turn that down? It's very bright.”

“Turn down the light, is that what you want?” Elladora lowered her wand to shine the light directly into Sirius' face. He winced and shaded his eyes. “You want to run away to the shadows, to hide on the outskirts, the way you have the entire time you've been here. I've watched you. Even before we were introduced, I watched you. You never put yourself forward, never tried to gain favor or place...” She heard the note of questioning, of surprise and wonder, in her voice, and hardened it. “Why did you come back, Sirius Black? Why did you come back, truly?”

A hand shot out and grasped her wrist, bending it downwards without hurting her. “I came back to

find out what purebloods are thinking,” Sirius said, meeting her eyes. “I came back to see what the old world is like. And it hasn’t changed a bit since I left twenty years ago.”

“An unchanging bastion of hope,” Elladora countered. “Stability in a fast-changing world.”

“Absolutely no change over twenty years? That’s not stability, that’s stagnation. This place is dying, Elladora. If you have any intelligence at all, you’ll get out now, while you still can. You’re young, you’re smart, you’re strong. You can work, support yourself. I could help you, if you wanted it. The way I’m helping Corona…”

Elladora turned to glare at her sister. “Is he too much man for you?” she hissed. “Do you need me to help you tame him?”

“It’s *not like that*, ” Sirius said with the sound of rapidly thinning patience in his voice. “I am *married* , and I am *not* planning to change that any time soon. Corona is going with me as a friend, nothing more. If you can accept that, Elladora, you could come too. We always need more hands in what we’re doing.”

“And what are you doing?” Elladora asked sneeringly. “Pleasuring yourself?”

“Fighting,” Corona said, speaking for the first time. She set down her bag, one of the matching set Grandmother had bought for the sisters at the beginning of the season, and looked into Elladora’s eyes. “Fighting He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Elladora. Or do you not remember why Grandmother has had our raising since we were children? I was only five, and even I recall how it happened. You were ten, nearly old enough for schooling. You would know it better than I.”

“You lie,” Elladora snapped. “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is long dead, he has nothing to do with this. As he had nothing to do with our parents’ deaths. It was accident, Corona, an accident in the mountains, it could have happened to anyone…”

“To a fully trained wizard and witch?” Corona countered. “Who were found with looks of fear on their faces, as though they had seen their fate approaching, and been unable to do anything about it? And not buried under avalanching snow, but in shallow graves, dug by human hands. Could *that* have been accident?”

“Enough!” Elladora twisted herself free from Sirius’ grasp. “Go your ways, if that is what you want, but stop telling these ridiculous lies!”

“Who is the liar here, Elladora?” Corona asked softly. “I remember the truth. You try to deceive even yourself. Who lies?”

“*Go!* ” Elladora shrieked, and pushed blindly between them. But not so blindly that she could not see the expressions on their faces.

They pity me. The outcasts, the fugitives, they who have chosen to leave civilization and become barbaric – they pity me!

She could not decide if their pity added more to her anger or to her feeling that the world had come adrift around her feet, and nothing would ever be the same again.

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“None so blind as those who will not see,” Sirius murmured.

“You have a way with words,” Corona said admiringly.

Sirius snickered briefly. “You could say that. We’d better hurry. I don’t know if she’s still coherent enough to talk to anyone, but if she is, they might try to stop us leaving. Not that I think they could stop us, in the long run, but we’d certainly be delayed, and with Hagrid in trouble, I don’t want to delay any more than I have to.”

“Nor I.” Corona lifted her bag again and followed Sirius down the hall. She had always liked Hagrid, with his cheerful openness, so different from what she was used to at home, and his great-hearted love for anything that crawled or swam or flew. Once or twice, he’d shown her a path that would take her through the fringes of the Forbidden Forest, where she could walk without undue danger and see some of the creatures that lived within the Forest’s bounds.

I wonder... and Sirius would know, if anyone would...

“You taught at Hogwarts for a year,” she said, speeding up a little to keep up with Sirius’ longer legs. “And you know the Headmaster.”

“Yes, I do.”

“I’ve always wondered...” Corona tried to find a tactful way to say it, and couldn’t. “Do werewolves really live in the Forest there? I mean, I know there are dangerous creatures, but everyone always said specifically werewolves, and I just never knew...”

To her relief, Sirius chuckled. “No, I don’t think any werewolves live at Hogwarts. Not anymore, at any rate. There used to be one there, but he had to leave.”

“Your friend,” Corona recalled aloud, thinking of the stories in the *Daily Prophet*, and her grandmother’s loud declamations that such a thing never would have happened in *her* day. “And I’ll... I mean, will I... will we...”

Sirius slowed down to turn and look at her. “Are you trying to ask if you’ll meet him?”

Corona nodded, hoping the relative darkness in the hall concealed her blush.

“You’d have a hard time not meeting him,” Sirius said neutrally. “He and I go back a very long way. And I can promise that he won’t bite you, or snarl at you, or anything else you might be thinking of. In fact, of the two of us, he’s the one our friends consider more socially presentable.”

“Then he must be highly presentable indeed,” Corona said, earning a laugh from Sirius. “I will be

glad to meet him.”

I will be glad to meet anyone whom you like.

Had she still been eighteen, Corona knew, she might have mistaken the feelings blossoming within her for true love, but she had been twenty-one since May, and she knew a crush when she felt it.

He is married, and happily so, if I may judge by the light in his eyes when he mentions his wife. He obviously dotes on his daughter, and on the other children he has helped to raise. And he has good friends, with whom he shares his life. I can hope to become one of those, and nothing more.

But oh, how it hurt to end the sweet dream of the tall, dark, romantic man who would come into her life, sweep her off her feet, and declare her his true love everlasting...

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Sirius caught his breath after Apparating, tapped Corona’s knuckles to tell her she could let go, and had a look around. Grimmauld Place looked just as dreary and unpleasant now as it had twenty years ago, and perhaps a bit more run-down.

He summoned up Albus’ voice from his memory. *The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix...*

“Ahh,” he breathed in satisfaction as the house revealed itself, shouldering into place between numbers eleven and thirteen. *Ugly as ever... but Letha’s in there, and Pearl, and everyone else... except Harry, but he’ll be here soon...*

“What is it?” Corona was still clinging to his arm, though no longer as hard as she’d needed to for the Side-Along. “Where are we?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you. Security.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“It’s not trust, it’s magic. I *can’t* say the name. But I can take you in, on two conditions. First, I need your wand. You’ll get it back, it’s just because Moody would have my hide if I let you come into Headquarters armed.”

Corona produced her slender maple wand from within her robes and handed it over. “I doubt I’ll need to defend myself from any terrible monsters in the next three minutes,” she said with a smile. “Especially considering my sister didn’t choose to come along.”

Sirius chuckled. “True. Now, to get by the spells, you can’t see or know where we’re going. So I need you to close your eyes and let me guide you. I’ll muddle you about a bit, but we’ll get there.”

Corona tilted her head back and squeezed her eyes shut, as though expecting to be doused with

cold water. Suppressing a laugh, Sirius led her around in a few circles, then across the street and up the walk to the grimy, black-painted door.

He debated knocking, but decided against it. *Mum's portrait's in the front hall, and she'll have got worse, not better, for a few years being alone.* Instead, he drew his wand and rapped it against the door, thinking carefully of undoing the locks and bolts he knew were on the other side, concentrating on his right to do so.

Seems like you always come back to where you started, no matter how hard you try to get away...

Locks turned, bolts slid back, and the door opened with a tiny creak of hinges. Corona flinched but didn't open her eyes. Sirius drew her quickly inside and shut the door behind them. The hall, dimly lit by gaslights, looked no different than it had eight years ago, or twenty for that matter.

"You can look now," he murmured, setting down his own bag. "We're here."

"Sirius!" cried a voice from the top of the stairs, and Danger hurtled down, nearly tripping over the loose carpet on the third step but recovering enough balance to fling herself at him. "What are you doing here, you shouldn't have come, I've never been so glad to see you, did your pendants go off?"

Sirius caught Danger in mid-leap and spun her around to take a little momentum off her so they didn't go flying into the door. "In opposite order, yes, good to see you too, I don't care, and you already know." He set her on her feet again without letting go. "How have you been?"

"Working hard," Danger said, kissing him on the cheek. "But it's been worth it – Hogwarts' wards are stronger than ever, and we were even able to weave a little mind protection in, we hope – speaking of which, Remus has something he wants to ask you about, but not here, not now – wait, who's this?" She had obviously just noticed Corona.

Sirius had to repress another laugh as he turned to look at Corona. She was staring at Danger, obviously trying to equate Sirius' stories about Aletha with the chattering, fast-moving, pale-skinned woman in Sirius' arms. "Corona Gamp, meet Gertrude Granger-Lupin, almost always called Danger," he said, letting Danger go. "Danger, this is Corona, a new friend of mine. She wants to help us."

"Wonderful." Danger held out her hand to Corona, who took it after only a moment's hesitation. "We can use all the help we can get. I'll get you settled in just a moment, I'm sorry to make you wait, but we have a pair of situations developing—"

"Sirius told me something's the matter with Hagrid," Corona volunteered. "Is that one of them?"

Danger nodded. "And it's created the other one," she said. "Because people are having to go over to the Continent to look for Hagrid and... his partner, and help them get out of whatever they've got into, we're short on people for here, for a certain retrieval..." A tweak of her pendant chain told Sirius who she meant. "And we did promise it would be tonight."

“Is that a hint?”

“Well, you’re nearly as good as an army all by yourself, Sirius – and the list of who was going was getting to small army size, let me tell you. It was ridiculous. But Hagrid’s in trouble now, and...” Danger hesitated. *Is she safe?* her hands asked, indicating Corona.

“And Harry’s not,” finished Sirius, answering Danger’s question obliquely. “No physical trouble, that is. I’m sure he’s blistering mad that we haven’t shown up yet. Is there anyone free to go with me, though? I don’t want to risk it completely alone.”

So grown-up of you, Danger signed, her eyes twinkling almost like Albus’, and with some of his color in them as well –

No, that’s Moony I’m seeing. Sirius gave a little wave. *Hi, Moony.*

“Molly Weasley’s free, since I’m staying here,” Danger answered aloud, her eyes cycling back to mostly brown. “She’s on her way up. And Moody says he’d be more of a liability on the Continent, since he can’t move fast with that leg. So that’s two.”

“Molly and Mad-Eye and me.” Sirius grinned. “Sounds like a song.”

“Gilbert and Sullivan, maybe. I’ll get your broom, it’s upstairs...”

Corona gasped as a shaggy tan wolf bounded up the stairs and vanished into the gloom.

“She’s an Animagus, you’ll get used to it,” Sirius said nonchalantly. “How do you like my sister?”

“Your *what?* But you don’t – you didn’t–”

“No, not by blood. Not even half.” Sirius considered the time period. “Well, I suppose it’s possible, but not unless there’s something she doesn’t know. And I sincerely doubt it. So no, we’re not actually related, but fourteen-odd years of living in the same house have to count for something.”

Corona stared at him. “I thought I knew what I was getting into,” she said faintly.

“Don’t worry. This happens a lot to people when they first meet us.” Sirius resisted the urge to chuckle. “Be grateful it was just Danger. All of us together can be a bit overwhelming.”

“A bit,” Corona said, moving to the banister to lean on it. “Just a bit.”

“Sirius!” called Molly Weasley, emerging from the basement stairs. “How are you – it’s good to see you again – and who’s this?”

Sirius introduced Corona again, and to Mad-Eye Moody as he followed Molly upstairs. Both of the Order members were dressed for flying, and Moody had two brooms under his arm. Danger

descended the stairs again, Sirius' Nimbus over her shoulder. "I haven't told the Pride yet," she said, handing the broom over the banister. "I didn't want to deal with the stampede, and this way they can go crazy over you and Harry at the same time when you get back. Watch out for low-flying planes."

"Oh, we'll take care of him," Molly promised as she accepted her broom from Moody. "Don't worry about a thing."

"I never do. I worry about several things at once."

Moody snorted. "There are days I envy you and Lupin, Black," he said. "And then there are days I don't."

Danger pretended she hadn't heard this.

"Before I leave, I have to ask," Sirius said, pointing to the curtains which he had thought masked his mother's portrait. "What happened to her?"

Danger grinned. "She insulted me and Aletha," she said blithely. "Remus took offense."

Sirius pulled the curtains back and laughed aloud – they covered nothing but an enormous scorch mark on the wall.

"We'll get that off eventually as well," Molly said. "Or the house-elves will. Winky is here now, since the children are, and Dobby's coming from Hogwarts tomorrow... and why we're standing here chattering, when Harry's still with his awful relatives, I have no idea."

"You heard the boss," Moody grunted, following Molly toward the door. "Let's move."

"Back in a while," Sirius said, waving at Danger and Corona. *Be nice to her*, he signed to Danger. *She's scared*.

Danger waved back, tossing the finger-sign for *Understood* into the middle of it. "See you when we see you," she said casually. "Have a nice time."

Sirius shut the door behind himself and sighed. "In and out, up and down, here and there," he said reflectively.

"Welcome to real life," Molly said. "We'll need coordinates for Apparating, Alastor..."

xXxXx

Figures. I spend all day working, exercising, packing, staying out of Dudley's way, waiting for sunset, and nothing. Nobody. Not even an owl.

Harry scowled at his window, reflecting his face clearly from the darkness beyond. *It's probably something to do with Hagrid, I hope he can get out of whatever it is... if they had to put off getting*

me because of that, it's... no, it's not all right, but I could live with it... but couldn't they at least have told me?

The house was empty of everyone except him and Hedwig. The Dursleys had left as the sun was setting, Aunt Petunia nodding a brusque goodbye to Harry, Uncle Vernon and Dudley not bothering even with that much.

I think not liking me is the only thing they agree on.

Harry lay down on his bed and let his mind drift back over the month. *Dudley stays out of his dad's way a lot. When he wants something, he asks his mum, and she almost always gives it him. He never mentions magic, or Hogwarts, or anything unusual. And he doesn't have any magical banners or posters on his walls, and his trunk and his schoolbooks are under his bed where nobody will see them...*

It's almost like he's ashamed of being magic. Absently, Harry chewed on his lip. Or – he is a Slytherin, after all – like he wants to make someone think he's ashamed of being magic. Someone like his parents. They were less than thrilled when their perfect little Muggle turned out abnormal, I know.

But he seems to like it well enough at school. He's even in with the "purebloods good, Mudbloods bad" crowd. Wonder how he puts the two together?

A thump from the kitchen brought him upright immediately. *Someone's here.* He flipped the light off, drew his wand, and eased the door open, twitching his nose. More than one person, and none of them Dursleys. All familiar scents, though...

"Anybody home?" called a man's voice.

Harry took a firmer grip on his wand. "Who's asking?" he called warily.

"Don't you... oh. I came home early because of Hagrid, Harry. I'm for real."

"Prove it," said Harry promptly.

A gravelly chuckle. "Good boy, Potter," said Moody's voice.

"Really, Alastor, must you be so suspicious?" asked Mrs. Weasley testily.

"Ah-ha," Padfoot said, apparently having thought of something. "The first thing Molly did when she found out who I really was, Harry. You remember?"

"No, not at all," Harry retorted. "It only traumatized me for life."

Padfoot laughed. "Thought so. You walked in with my DictaQuill, and she was kissing me."

"And then she slapped you across the face," Harry finished, listening to Mrs. Weasley chuckle as

she remembered. “And you said something like ‘That’s more like it.’”

“Yes, I did. Convinced now?”

Harry dashed down the stairs, swung round the end of the banister, and demonstrated how convinced he was.

“Hi Mrs. Weasley, hi Professor Moody,” he said breathlessly when Padfoot let him go.

“Good instincts, Potter,” Moody said in lieu of a greeting. “Or should I say, good training.” He shot an approving look at Padfoot.

“Oh, Harry, you’ve grown,” Mrs. Weasley said, giving him a quick hug of her own. “I suppose I should have expected that, the other boys are all shooting up, Ron’s worse than ever...”

“Great Merlin, you have,” said Padfoot, looking him over. “You’re taller than Danger now.”

“I am?”

“I just hugged her a minute ago, and I don’t think she’s shrunk. You’re definitely taller.”

Harry’s mind detoured for a second on the possibilities this opened up before returning to the main event of the night. “Time to go?” he said.

“Yes, time to go,” Padfoot agreed, looking around at the Dursleys’ super-clean hall and wrinkling his nose. “Let’s get your trunk, and Hedwig.”

xXxXx

Ron waved his wand again to bring another load of chipped paint off the walls. Paint-stripping wasn’t his favorite way to spend an evening, but it beat sitting around doing nothing, which was the other option.

And at least this way I don’t have loads of time to be worried about Hagrid.

This particular room was on the second floor, next to the boys’ bedroom, and had been assigned to the entire Pride, to clean and refurbish as they pleased in their spare time. Mum had hinted darkly that there wouldn’t be much of this, as the whole house was in terrible condition.

But that’s what house-elves are for. Winky was almost crying with joy when she saw all there is to do here. Of course, then she met Kreacher, and she was just crying...

The Blacks’ old house-elf had recognized Winky as the Crouches’ house-elf – how, Ron didn’t want to know – and had asked her rudely why she’d been dismissed and what she was doing bound to unnatural blood traitors like the Weasleys. Meghan had stepped in and told Kreacher to shut up, and Kreacher had had to obey, but the damage was done. Winky had retreated into the basket in which she’d made the journey from the Den and was refusing to come out, and none of the

Weasleys were hard-hearted enough to order her.

Note to self: don't get on Meghan's bad side. "Now get in the basement and stay there, Kreacher, and be polite or don't say anything at all!" Ron grinned to himself. Little sod might never talk again.

He swept his paint chips into a pile, then levitated them into the rubbish bin in the center of the room. Hermione turned to do the same, and their eyes met over the masks they were wearing for the dust. She pulled hers down and smiled at him, before the expression was replaced by the same worry Ron could feel working inside his head. He nodded to her in acknowledgement and returned to his work.

What could get Hagrid into this much trouble? That was the question no one had been able to answer satisfactorily. Hagrid and Madame Maxime both, no one's bothering to deny they're together. They're big enough to deal with most things even without magic, and Hagrid may not be as good with his wand as he could be, but Madame Maxime's the bloody headmistress of Beauxbatons – I'll eat every speck of paint off these walls if she's no good.

But they were looking for giants. That was the point Hermione'd had confirmed at the Order meeting, the suspicion the Pride had been harboring since the end of last year. Hagrid and Madame Maxime, both half-giant themselves, had been sent to try to convince the giants either to fight on the side of the Light or to stay neutral.

Giants are so big, some spells just don't work, because there's so much of them. And they're resistant to others, like Stunners and Memory Charms. Makes them great to have on your side, but I wouldn't want to fight one. Unless the same trick works on them as on trolls... He snickered.

And one other thing no one wants to say. They might be getting chased, or they might have been caught, by Death Eaters. Because as much as we don't want You-Know...

Ron stopped, looking over his shoulder at Hermione, systematically stripping her section of wall. He could almost hear her voice: *"Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself."*

He grumbled under his breath. *Oh, all right. Voldemort. As much as we don't want Voldemort to have the giants, he wants them just that much.*

Ron flicked his wand at the wall again, and a cascade of paint showered off it, rattling onto the floor and nearly coating him. *There, I thought it,* he thought sarcastically toward Hermione, brushing off his shoulder. *Happy now?*

As if she'd heard him, she turned to look at his section of the room. He could see her eyes dancing above her mask, and she threw him a thumbs up.

Suddenly a bit more cheerful, he returned it. *You too,* he signed with his left hand. *Looks good.*

Thanks, she signed back, one hand tapping her chin.

Smiling under his mask, Ron returned to work. *Hagrid will be fine, he told himself. It's not as if he hasn't been in trouble before. What about the time he almost got busted for having Norbert in his house? But he got away with that, with a little help from us and the Pack's parents...*

He stopped, one hand on the wall. He'd said, or thought, something important in there, but he couldn't figure out where.

All right, go back over it and don't panic, Ron. Keep working. It might come back to you.

He stepped back to get the strip of paint next to the ceiling. *I was thinking about Mr. Moony and Mrs. Danger, and Mrs. Letha and Mr. Padfoot... no, it's not them. Something before that. The night we took Norbert out of Hagrid's house, maybe?*

The tingle of an idea was stronger. *Norbert. Little Baby Norbert, except he isn't such a baby anymore. And Charlie has to deal with him. I know it was a two-day deal, getting Norbert back to the preserve in Romania... wonder how he's getting on...*

The connections closed. Ron spun around, ripping paint from the walls all the way around the room. The Pride jumped back as one, the girls squealing, the boys shouting.

“Sorry,” Ron said breathlessly, shoving his mask back. “Just thought of something. About Hagrid. There might be a way we could help him. Or not us, but someone we can get a hold of...”

“What?” Hermione demanded. “Tell us!”

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Aletha jumped as her pocket emitted a musical chime. Two curses came from the darkness around her, along with Kingsley's quiet, urgent, “Shut that thing off!”

“Sorry,” Aletha said quickly, pulling the Zippophone from her pocket and flicking it open. “Freeman-Black, and this had better be good,” she said into it.

“We think we know how to help Hagrid,” said Hermione's voice without preamble. “Do you know where Tonks is?”

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Charlie Weasley's eyes popped open. Someone was bending over him in the darkness, hand over his mouth. He grabbed onto the hand and yanked, bringing the person down on top of himself, then swung his legs into a clutch and rolled over to pin –

A hand slapped at his ear. “Stop it, it's me!” hissed Tonks' voice.

Charlie relaxed. “Could have told me,” he muttered, letting her up. “Instead of scaring me half to

death. Something wrong, or did you just think it would be romantic to drop in at midnight?”

“Hagrid’s in some sort of trouble. We don’t know what, and we can’t find him – he’s not where Dumbledore thought he’d be.”

“Well, if he’s in trouble, that makes sense. What am I supposed to do about it?”

Tonks lit her wand, holding it below their faces. “This is official,” she said, in a tone of someone making sure her listener believes her. “*Orders*, if you understand me.”

“I understand. What about it?”

Tonks bent down and picked up a bundle of fabric, which she handed to Charlie. Unbundled, it proved to be a very large shirt, coarse flannel such as he had often seen Hagrid wear. “Give this to Norbert,” she said. “And then let him go.”

Charlie gaped at her. “Let him *what*? Are you mad? We can’t just let a dragon go! This is wild country, but there might still be people here, hikers or backpackers or something – Muggles! They wouldn’t stand a chance against a dragon!”

“He’s not going to be interested in them,” Tonks countered. “Not with that smell in his nose. He’s going to want to go and find his mummy.”

“He might not even remember his mummy. It’s been years.”

One of the other dragon-keepers groaned and turned over. Charlie and Tonks both froze, but the man only muttered something unintelligible before falling back asleep. Charlie sighed in relief, then pulled his own wand out and lit it, leading Tonks out of their camp.

“This is a bad idea,” he said firmly when they were a safe distance away. “Even if he does remember his mummy, his mummy’s going to look like food to him now.”

“Hagrid was the first thing he saw when he hatched, right?” Tonks had her hands on her hips, and Charlie was struck for an instant by how much she looked like his mother. “Animals imprint on what they see when they’re first born. And you’re always telling me how odd Norbert acts, how he doesn’t seem to know he’s a dragon, how he fights with the other dragons, and how attached to you and some of the other keepers he is.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“It might be our only chance, Charlie – it might be *Hagrid’s* only chance. Something’s masking his and Madame Maxime’s trail, and Kingsley thinks it might be Dark magic. But dragons have their own magic. Norbert might be able to find Hagrid where we can’t. Isn’t it at least worth a try?”

Charlie stared past his fiancée’s shoulder at the pen he and the other dragon-keepers had conjured before night fell. Norbert was asleep, of course – asleep was the safest way to move dragons – but

magical creatures had been known to shake off spells unexpectedly, and the pen (covered, as was the entire area of the camp and their flight course each day, with Muggle-repelling spells) was a standard caution.

And if they can throw off spells, what else can they do?

“I’m out of my mind,” he mumbled to himself. “I am out of my bloody mind.”

“Out of it, in it, I don’t care,” Tonks snapped. “Make it up already.”

“Fine.” Shirt over his arm, Charlie nudged Tonks aside and started for the pen. “Just stay back, all right?” he said over his shoulder. “I know you’re good with your wand, but dragons are tricky.”

Tonks nodded and backed up a few more paces.

Charlie swarmed up the ladder on the outside of the pen, pausing for a moment at the top. *I really am out of my mind. Hell, if this goes wrong, I might be out of a job. Or in Azkaban.*

But my friend’s in trouble, and I have my orders.

He dropped to the ground inside the pen and started the spell which would wake the Norwegian Ridgeback.

Besides, what good is life without a little excitement?

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Harry peeled his left hand off his Firebolt and flexed his fingers, then did the same with his right. Padfoot noticed and swooped in closer. “Cold?” he shouted over the rushing wind.

“Not too bad,” Harry shouted back.

Padfoot gave Harry a skeptical look, moved right alongside him, and drew his wand. “Hands,” he said.

Harry grinned, locked his legs around his broom, and took his hands away from it, holding them both out to Padfoot. Padfoot glared at him, then quickly conjured thin leather gloves around them. “You *know* I meant one at a time,” he grumbled, putting his wand away. “Show-off.”

Harry nodded cheerily and signed thanks. His fingers were already starting to warm up.

Now if my pendants just would...

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Rubeus Hagrid had been in a lot of tight spots in his life, but seldom as tight as this. He and

Olympe Maxime had spent the last hour dodging Death Eaters, and the job was getting no easier.

Trouble is, there's more o' them than there is of us. And I'm ruddy useless with me wand.

He sighed quietly, rubbing at his aching side. They'd found a place to rest, but at any moment one of their four pursuers might catch sight of their tiny fire, and the chase would be on again.

"I'm sorry abou' this, Olympe," he said quietly.

"Sorry?" Olympe cocked her head inquiringly. "Why should you be sorry, 'Agrid?"

"Well." Hagrid absently pressed a rock into the wall of the cave where they sat. "It's just... I'm not a full wizard, y'know. Never made it through school."

"*Oui*, you 'ave told me. And also 'ow eet was not your fault." Olympe moved closer to him. "Are you thinking, perhaps, zat we might not be in zis trouble if you were a better wizard?"

Hagrid looked away. He could feel his face reddening. "That's it," he mumbled. "Jus' about."

Olympe chuckled slightly. "'Agrid, you are too funny," she said, moving closer again, so that she could rest her hand on his shoulder. "I knew zat you 'ad been expelled from school when Dumbly-dorr asked me to do zis, and still I said yes. Would you 'ave 'ad me sit at 'ome, safe and sound, while you went out to do zis alone?"

Hagrid turned to face her. "No, o' course not. But..."

"No buts," Olympe said firmly, pressing two fingers against his mouth. "We 'ave done our best, and wishing will not change zat. We will continue to do our best, and fussing will not 'elp us. Now we must rest, rest our minds and our bodies both, so zat we can fight again when zey come..."

Her fingers lifted from his lips, but her face was very close to his. "Just one," she whispered. "Since we might not 'ave anoizzer chance."

Hagrid's throat tightened at the thought, but his arms and his lips seemed to have taken Olympe's point to heart.

Only trouble is, who stops at just one?

Some six or seven kisses later, they broke away. "*Merci*," Olympe murmured, smiling. "*Merci beaucoup*."

"Y'welcome," Hagrid said automatically, his mind still recovering.

Suddenly, sounds like firecrackers exploded across the small valley.

"Apparation," Olympe hissed, dousing the fire with her wand.

Hagrid nodded and edged to the front of the cave. A flicker of white across the valley, then another in a different spot. He held up two fingers behind him, added a third, then a fourth. “They’re all here,” he breathed. “They mus’ know we are.”

“At least one of zem will never leave ‘ere,” Olympe growled, her wand ready in her hand. “Show me where, ‘Agrid...”

Hagrid was about to point out where he’d seen movement when a screech from above froze them both.

“What is eet?” Olympe whispered, her eyes wide.

“Dunno.” Hagrid’s mind raced. He wished he dared look out of the cave – he knew what it had sounded like, but that was impossible...

Flames roared across the sky.

“*Dragon!*” screamed a Death Eater, breaking cover.

Olympe’s Stunner hit him dead-center, knocking him backwards down the slope.

Wings flapped, and the dragon flamed again, this time where Hagrid could see it, setting some of the shrubbery on the mountainside afire. Scales glinted a lustrous black in the firelight.

Black... and two little horns, and orange eyes, and that nice little ridge down his back...

Snapping branches and crashing sounds brought Hagrid out of his astounded trance – two of the remaining three Death Eaters were charging their position, wands out, spells firing – he snatched up his umbrella and threw an Engorgement Charm at one of them, but it was blocked – Olympe was having similar trouble with hers, and he had scored on her with a partial Paralysis Charm –

A huge black claw descended in front of the cave. Then another, and another, and the great black scaled body settled into place. Hagrid was by Olympe’s side in a moment, using her wand to take the charm off her, then holding her, holding his hands over her ears, and she caught on instantly and snatched up her wand, casting a partial Deafener on both of them –

The dragon roared, the sound filling and shaking the mountain valley. Both half-giants winced, despite their protection. Hagrid could only imagine what it must be like to be out in front of that kind of anger.

Serve them right, scaring decent people like that.

Then the great coils of dragon were unwinding, turning, working their way around –

“’Agrid...” Olympe began, her eyes widening as she backed away.

The dragon’s head came into view.

“Norbert!” Hagrid shouted happily. Then he noticed the look in the orange eyes and swallowed hard.

“Now, Norbert,” he said in the voice he used to command respect from the larger creatures, “yeh don’ want ter do that. Settle down, now.”

Norbert eyed him carefully, seeming to consider.

“Who’s a grand dragon, then?” Hagrid coaxed, switching tones. “Who’s his mummy’s best poppet? Lie down an’ let me get at yer eyebrows, yeh silly beast – I know yeh like a scratch up there, but you’re too big fer me ter reach all the way up there now.”

Norbert lowered his head dubiously, then lifted it back up.

“Lie down, I said,” Hagrid repeated, bringing his hand down to the cave floor to demonstrate. “Come on, Norbert, down.”

Norbert sighed gustily, filling the cave with smoke, then dropped his great head to the ground and lay down. Olympe coughed and quickly cleared the air with a spell.

Hardly daring to believe it, Hagrid approached his baby and began gently to rub at the ridges above Norbert’s eyes, where eyebrows would be on a person. Norbert rumbled in his throat, as he had when he was a tiny dragonet.

“So, ‘Agrid,” said Olympe in a carefully calm voice after a few moments. “You... know zis dragon.”

“Yeh could say that,” said Hagrid, letting his smile spill out onto his face.

“I did say eet.” Olympe approached them tentatively, then, when Norbert didn’t move, sat down beside Hagrid and gently stroked one of Norbert’s shining scales. “And I would very much like to know ‘ow eet came about.”

“Well...” Hagrid considered where to begin. “It’s a long story, y’know.”

Olympe chuckled. “And what do we ‘ave but time? Somehow I think ze Death Eaters will not be back so soon.”

“Think you’re right,” Hagrid agreed, grinning as he scratched Norbert’s brow ridges harder. “Well, then, I s’pose it starts in the Hog’s Head, one o’ the pubs down in Hogsmeade...”

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Ginny let out her breath and hugged her brother tightly. “Ron, you’re a genius,” she said.

“Nice work, Redwing,” Draco agreed, knocking fists with Ron over Ginny’s head.

Ron shrugged. “Someone else would have come up with it eventually,” he said.

“But eventually might have been too late,” said Meghan. “You came up with it in time to save Hagrid’s life.”

“Maybe you should go to the Order meetings, Ron,” said Hermione. “Different ones than I get to go to. They could use you to help them plan what they need to protect, and who.”

“Maybe... what do you mean, different ones?”

“I’m sure they have meetings I don’t come to,” Hermione said. “Meetings where they discuss really secret things, things that we can’t know about yet. They can’t let me hear everything – it’s too dangerous.”

“But they know it’s also dangerous to keep us from knowing anything,” Neville put in. “Because then we’ll sneak and try to find things out, and we might hear things we’re not supposed to. If they tell us some things, we likely won’t snoop around and listen at doors.”

“We won’t,” said Ron. “The twins will.”

“Not if we keep them informed,” said Ginny. “And we can trade, you know. Information is valuable. We could get lots of free samples of whatever they’re working on these days if we just promise to tell them what we know...”

Speculative looks were traded.

Draco drew a tissue from his pocket and handed it to Luna without comment.

Halfway through the discussion of what the twins were making and what the Pride might reasonably demand for their information, a door slammed downstairs. Seven heads came up.

“Harry?” said Meghan, her eyes widening as her smile began to grow.

“I’m home!” shouted the voice they’d all been waiting for.

“Harry!” Meghan dashed out the door, Hermione and Draco only a second behind her. Luna blotted her eyes once more, then put the tissue in her pocket and followed Ron to the stairs.

“Aren’t you going to go down and say hello?” Neville asked Ginny, letting the scroll on which he’d been taking notes roll up again.

Ginny shrugged nonchalantly. “Maybe in a minute.”

“All right.” Neville picked up the scroll and capped his ink bottle, putting his quill in his pocket. On his way out of the room, he paused and turned back. “I don’t think he’ll always be stupid,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Ginny hissed under her breath. “Why can’t he be more like you?” she asked, certain that Neville knew what and who she meant. “Nice, and smart, and not as dense as a rock about everything except what’s in front of his nose, and not always thinking he’s the most important thing in the world?”

“Because then he’d be me, not him.” Neville might have been talking about anything. “And you don’t like me that way. You like him.”

“But *why?*” Ginny demanded. “It doesn’t make sense! He barely even knows I exist, except as just another part of the Pride!”

Neville shifted from foot to foot, fiddling with the edge of the scroll.

Ginny slumped. She knew the symptoms of “I know the answer but you won’t like it” as well as any child in a big family. “Go on,” she said dully. “Just say it.”

“A lot of the time, you don’t act like anything but ‘just another part of the Pride,’” Neville said. “And the Pride is really great, but we all need to have ourselves too. If that made any sense.”

“No, it does,” said Ginny. “It’s like a family. We have to be people before we can be a group, or the group turns into all there is of us. So you think I need to be more me?”

Neville nodded. “I like you,” he said. “And I think there’s a lot of you there.” He colored slightly. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. I meant...” He looked flustered for a moment, then relaxed as he hit on the words he needed. “It’s like your statue, the one you made the other day. You said it was you, and it’s very complicated and not easy to figure out. There’s a lot to you, Ginny. You just have to let it shine out.” He smiled. “I think once you do, nobody will be able to ignore you anymore.”

“Thanks, Neville.” Ginny smiled back at him, and crossed the room to give him a quick hug. “Maybe you should be the official Pride cheerer-upper.”

“I’d like that,” Neville said thoughtfully. “Making people feel better is always good. Are you ready to go say hello to Harry, then?”

“Ready when you are.”

They left the room side by side, Neville leaning back in to shut off the lights.

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Harry couldn’t keep himself from grinning like an idiot as he went down the stairs to the basement kitchen, the noisy, jubilant Pride all around him. Hagrid was going to be all right – everything was going to be all right –

His scar burned, and he felt a wave of cold, indignant anger. Couldn’t they get *anything* right? Even the simplest, most basic of tasks seemed beyond them – bungling fools! But they would

learn. They would learn, if he had to beat it into them with his own two hands –

“Harry!”

Harry’s eyes shot open. Meghan was kneeling beside him, her hand on the back of his head. “You tripped and fell,” she said, her eyes wide. “And then... then...”

“Get off,” Harry said, pulling away. “Don’t touch me.”

Meghan stared at him in astonishment. “But you were hurt. I can’t just leave you...”

“You’ll have to.” Harry found a wall behind him and used it to pull himself up to sitting. “I don’t want you anywhere near me if I fall down like that again, you understand? It isn’t safe. Don’t you remember what happened to you when Draco had that curse on him? You can get *hurt* with this kind of thing. Promise me, Meghan. Promise you won’t touch me if this happens again.”

Meghan’s mouth formed a soft O of understanding. “Is that what I was feeling?” she whispered. “I mean... is that who?”

Harry explored the back of his head with his fingers and winced as he found the lump, but it was nowhere near as large or as painful as it should have been – Meghan must have done some healing on him before he woke up. “Yeah,” he said aloud. “It must have been.”

“Well, that didn’t take long,” Padfoot muttered. “What was it, Harry?”

“He was mad,” Harry said, letting his godfather help him up. He could hear footsteps on the stairs, someone else was coming in, but he didn’t particularly care who. His good mood had vanished, and all he could feel was tired. “He thinks they can’t do anything right.”

“Who thinks who can do nothing right?” inquired Snape, appearing in the stairway.

“Voldemort,” Harry said, leaning on the wall. A smile half-surfaced on his face as he watched Snape start. “And the Death Eaters, I guess. They must have bollixed something up.”

Snape gave Harry a hard look. “You know so much, Potter,” he said skeptically.

Harry met Snape’s eyes. “I was him for a second,” he said. “I don’t think I’m wrong.”

An expression Harry couldn’t quite identify flitted across Snape’s face. Harry inhaled deeply and coughed in surprise.

“You need to sit down, Harry,” Padfoot said, stepping between Harry and Snape and shooting Snape a glare over his shoulder. “Do you want something to drink? Or any of you others, while we’re waiting for the rest to get back?” He shepherded Harry towards a chair, then started for the pantry. “Danger’s probably upstairs somewhere, I don’t know why she hasn’t come down yet, she’s the one who knows where everything is...”

“I’m coming, I’m coming, you helpless man, you,” said Danger, dodging by Snape as he turned and hurried back up the stairs. “Honestly, anyone would think you’d never been in a kitchen before. Shoo. Go introduce your friend, I don’t think anyone else has met her...”

A young woman in finely cut robes stepped into the kitchen hesitantly, her fair hair spilling over her shoulders. Sirius hurried to her side. “Everyone, this is Corona Gamp,” he said, waving to them. “Corona, that’s Ron and Ginny Weasley there, Molly’s two youngest – I’m sure you’ll meet the other boys eventually, they’ll all be here at some point – Neville Longbottom there, Luna Lovegood...”

Harry tuned out in favor of thinking over what Snape’s scent had revealed.

He figured something out, or had an idea. And he thought it was a pretty damn good one.

I just hope we think so too...

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Meghan fell asleep at the table during the Pride’s catching-up, missing her plate of goulash by an inch. “Wore herself out,” Sirius said, coming around the table to scoop her up. “I’ll get her to bed, just don’t let Harry eat my dinner.”

“I don’t want your dinner. It’s full of dog germs.”

“Ouch,” Sirius said, shifting Meghan in his arms. “How long have you been waiting to use that one? Since you were five?”

Harry threw him a hand-signed insult.

“There, that’s better.” Sirius mounted the basement stairs with his daughter in his arms, chuckling to himself as he passed the empty place where his mother’s portrait had hung. “Sorry, Mum, but it had to be done,” he said aloud, and amused himself imagining her shrill, indignant replies as he started up the second flight.

Meghan didn’t even move when Sirius laid her down in her bed, pulled her shoes off, and tucked the sheet over her. “Sleep well, sweetheart,” he whispered, and leaned down to kiss her forehead. “I’m so glad to be home.”

The light in the room suddenly dimmed. Sirius looked up at the wall, where the lighted rectangle which was the open door had been diminished by the shadowy shape of a human being standing in the doorway. A woman, it was a woman watching him, and not Danger or Corona either...

He inhaled, and her scent flowed over him, clean and fresh and sharp. It was one of the things he’d missed most for the last month.

But something’s wrong...

He rose from his knees and turned to face her. “What did I do?” he asked.

Aletha’s lips twitched. “You know, some men would try to dissemble in this situation,” she said coolly. “I admire your candor.”

“What situation?”

“There’s a blonde woman in the kitchen. I’ve never met her before. She claims she came with you.” Aletha looked him up and down. “Is there anything you want to tell me, Sirius? Or ask me, perchance?”

“Well, yes, there is something I want to ask you. Something I’ve been wanting to ask you ever since I met Corona – that’s her name, by the way, Corona Gamp. Lovely girl.”

“Yes,” Aletha said, still with the small half-smile on her lips. “A lovely girl indeed.”

“Not nearly as lovely as a lot of others I saw. A lot of the ones who wanted to dance with me, and talk with me, and maybe get their hooks into me.” Sirius hoped he wasn’t taking this too far. “I wish you could have seen some of them.”

“Do you? Why?”

“Oh, just so you could see how much more beautiful you are than all of them put together.”

Aletha was in his arms within a second. “I knew it had to be something like that, you horrid man,” she whispered into his ear after their first long kiss. “But I didn’t want to spoil my compliment.”

Sirius chuckled. “Good, then you’ll know not to spoil this.” He disengaged and went to one knee in front of her. “Aletha, will you marry me? Magically, this time? I don’t ever want to go through this again. I’m yours, and I want the world to know it. Will you?”

“Why, Sirius,” Aletha murmured, smiling although her eyes were very bright. “I thought you’d never ask.”

In her sleep, Meghan smiled.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 5: Newcomers and Negotiations (Year 5)

Chapter 5: Newcomers and Negotiations

“I am very disappointed.” Harry looked down at the back of a black-hooded head and noted the slight quiver of the shoulders, the little wheeze in the breathing, the myriad signs that showed this follower fully understood the meaning of his master’s disappointment. “How was it that this plan went so awry?”

“My lord, the Headquarters was finished early. I had thought it would take at least another week to find and repair the trouble with the wards in the walls. And I was not present when Dumbledore and the rest decided when and how to conduct the move.” The man’s speech was careful, precise, but with a hint of desperation in its cadences. “It would have done us little good in any case. Any covert strike would have been traced to me easily, and attacking openly would mean attracting the sort of attention you have instructed us to avoid.”

“You rationalize your defeat well,” Harry said coolly. “But I am not accustomed to defeat, and yet it faces me at every turn. Two plans destroyed by the Order, a Death Eater killed and another two wounded by dragon fire...”

“My lord, the first plan is not yet destroyed.” The desperation was mounting in the usually controlled tones. “It must simply be delayed, put off for a time. They will grow careless, tired of the place they have chosen...”

“Of which you can tell me nothing more, I understand.” Harry seated himself, tapping his long forefingers together. “And I can send new envoys to the giants, though they will have less success in that area than those from the Order, since giants will surely be impressed by the strength displayed in the control of a dragon. So, in a sense, neither of my plans is destroyed. Still, even you will not deny that they have been gravely set back. Especially with Liebenburg’s death.”

“Liebenburg was new.” Sulkiness crept into the kneeling man’s voice. “He had joined us barely a week before he went out. I have been faithful from the beginning.”

“Have you?” Harry allowed himself a brief laugh. “But your faithfulness is not in question here. You had little or nothing to do with my ambassadors to the giants, though you did thoughtfully provide us with the path Dumbledore’s lackeys were taking. And you are correct that Liebenburg was new, and a loss easily afforded. Yaxley and Greco will recover in time. But if I now wish the mission to the giants to succeed, I must send one of my sworn ones, leaving me with only two to provide what I need even more. What do you advise me to do?”

“My lord, you will not like my advice,” the man said frankly. “Yet it is the best that I can give you, and I owe it to you to give you the best and the truth.”

“Speak, then. I am listening.”

“My advice is to wait. Make them wear themselves out with watching. Every defense flags in time, if no enemy attacks it. Time is on your side. They will become careless, they will make a mistake, and in that moment you will have them.”

“A good answer.” Harry drew his wand from his pocket and caressed it. “I like it.”

“Then... my punishment?” The whisper would have been inaudible if any other sound had intruded upon the room.

“Will be reduced. But not removed.” Harry let the wand’s tip drift lazily back and forth before him. “Failure is still failure, after all.”

The man tensed in place. The scent/taste/feel of fearful anticipation began to mount.

Harry smiled, licked his lips, and let it.

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One second Moony-the-lion was chasing down a wild deer, anticipating the rush of the kill and the hot blood in his mouth –

The next he was lying awake in bed, one word resonating between his ears.

Harry.

Danger was already out of bed, pulling on her dressing gown. Remus followed suit quickly. An image of Sirius and Aletha passed between them, followed by wordless agreement. All of them would be best for this.

Harry lay in the second floor hallway, sucking air between his teeth, one hand pressed to his forehead. Remus made no attempt to disguise his approach, kneeling beside his Pack-son when he reached him. “Bad dream?” he asked quietly, shutting the door of the boys’ bedroom with his wand.

“Yeah.” The assent was barely audible, exhaled with the pain. “The spy... I saw him...”

“The spy in the Order?” The father in Remus wanted to tell Harry not to talk about it, but the warrior knew this was important. “You saw him?”

“Just his body. He was... you know.” Harry’s free hand waved up and down his prone body. “Covered up. Robe and mask and all. I heard him talk, and I know him... but I don’t *know* him.”

“You recognized the voice, but you can’t put a name to it,” Remus translated.

“Yeah, that.” A trace of the humor in the situation slipped into Harry’s tone, and was just as quickly gone as the boy’s body stiffened. “Scar...” Harry breathed, a whimper slipping out between his words. “He’s enjoying this...”

“Enjoying what?” Remus asked, a little too sharply. “Hurting you?”

“No... I don’t think... no, not me. Hurting him. The spy. Because he failed. He likes it. Voldemort does.”

All right, enough of this. Remus laid his left hand on Harry’s back and sent gentle warmth into painfully knotted muscles. Harry leaned into it, and Remus added his other hand after scent-touching Harry’s cheek.

Three sets of quiet footsteps sounded on the stairs, and the other Pack-parents were there, Aletha kneeling instantly to caress Harry’s face herself, Danger ducking around Remus’ back to sit down near Harry’s feet, Sirius holding back a moment until Aletha finished what she was doing, then leaning in as Remus moved out and lifting Harry into a sitting position.

“He just won’t leave you alone, will he?” the older wizard said, helping his godson lean against the wall. “Want to talk about it?”

“Already did.” Harry turned his head slowly to indicate Remus with his eyes. “Not much else I remember. Secret plan... and the spy told him where Hagrid and Madame Maxime were going to be... was there anything wrong with the wards in the walls here?”

“There was a mix-up,” Danger said. “Two teams thought it was their job to put them up.”

“He did that. The spy. He was trying to delay Headquarters being ready until something else was. Something of Voldemort’s. And he said he wasn’t here when Dumbledore decided about a move.” Harry’s eyes were open now, and his hand was off his forehead. “Whatever got moved is valuable, isn’t it? You don’t want Voldemort to have it, so you’re keeping it here.”

“Yes,” Aletha said, reaching up to catch the vial of potion she’d summoned. “You’re perfectly correct.”

“And I’m not allowed to know what it is.” There was tired acceptance in the tone, but Remus couldn’t decide if that was a function of some new maturity of Harry’s or of the late hour and the headache.

“It’s no secret,” said Aletha, pouring a dose of the potion into the cup Sirius had conjured for her. “But there’s no point in talking about it just now, either. You don’t need anything else to think about, or worry about, tonight. If you’re still curious tomorrow, ask again.”

“But only you,” Sirius added. “Don’t go spreading this one around.”

Harry’s eyes were speculative over the lip of the cup, but he said nothing, finishing the potion and leaning back against the wall again. The lines of pain on his face began to smooth out as the potion went to work.

“All right for now?” Danger asked, stroking Harry’s hair and continuing down onto his shoulder.

“Mmm,” Harry agreed, closing his eyes.

“Up with you, then,” Remus said, getting a hand under Harry’s arm. “I don’t think you want to spend tomorrow morning with a stiff neck and a sore throat from sleeping in the hall.”

Harry opened one eye. “Sore throat?”

“From answering all the questions the Pride’s bound to ask,” Danger clarified.

Harry smiled tiredly and let Remus help him up. As Danger rose too, Remus eyed their respective heights. **Sirius was right**, he said silently. **Or if not right, then awfully close.**

You think I hadn’t noticed? Danger’s voice was simultaneously tender and annoyed, one of those combinations only mothers could pull off. **He’s the first, but I doubt he’ll be the last. Even Hermione might make my height in the end.**

Remus shrugged, letting Harry lean on him. **We’ll see. Meet you upstairs.**

Aletha and Danger hugged Harry once more, and Sirius ruffled his hair and rubbed Harry’s scar with his thumb. “That’s enough out of you for one night,” he told it sternly, making them all smile. “Sleep well, Greeneyes.”

In the bedroom, Harry lay down, took one deep breath, and slumped into the loose-limbed oblivion all parents knew. *Such an obedient cub*, Remus thought, drawing the sheet over Harry. *When he wants to be.*

He bent and kissed Harry’s forehead, directly over his scar. “I love you, Harry-kins,” he whispered. “Stay out of trouble in your dreams.”

Though if you stayed out of trouble anywhere, you just wouldn’t be you.

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Corona Gamp came awake all at once, her heartbeat sounding in her ears.

She was in a strange place, surrounded by strange people, about to be asked to take part in a war whose last battle had been fought when she was a child, a war that her only living relatives didn’t believe was beginning again.

But I am free.

The thought was heady. No more balls, no more endless days in the house, no more tedious etiquette and deportment. She didn’t expect barbarism, exactly, but she’d had a few Muggleborn acquaintances – despite Salazar Slytherin’s attitude towards Muggleborns, some of them still entered Hogwarts every year with enough ambition and drive to warrant their Sorting into his House – and she knew that the dry formality espoused by pureblood society had died out almost everywhere else.

Politeness is still expected, but the endless rituals are all but gone. And women are not expected to breed heirs. They marry and have children when it is right for them and for their spouses, not when their family requires it.

For that alone, she blessed the fate that had sent Sirius Black to her. She liked children, but at a distance, and had no desire to bear them herself. It was an attitude she had learned early to keep a secret.

But now she no longer needed secrets.

She had escaped.

She only wished that her sister could have come with her.

Maybe she will find her own courage someday.

And with that hope, Corona had to be content.

The guest bedroom she'd been given was on the first floor, and as she stepped into the hall, a burst of giggles told her she wasn't alone. A closed door near the stairs was easily identifiable as the source of the laughter. *At least two girls, probably more. I think there were four last night...*

She descended the stairs to the main floor, then again into the basement kitchen, where a house-elf was stirring a pot of porridge and a red-haired, motherly woman was frying eggs. Several people looked up from their food and nodded to her or tossed her "Good morning"s. Corona answered in kind and slid onto one of the benches, trying to match names with faces. There had been a lot of introductions the night before, and she wasn't sure she remembered everyone...

"Miss?" said a squeaky voice at her elbow.

Corona turned. The house-elf, dressed – *dressed?* – in a small pink blouse and skirt, was offering her a bowl of porridge. "Thank you," she said automatically, accepting the food. The house-elf bobbed a curtsy and returned to the stove.

Add it to the list of things that are not as they seem.

Corona returned to scanning the table. Sirius' wife, Aletha, sat next to Danger at the end of the other bench, their conversation laced with gestures using the hands not occupied by utensils. Beside the women sat a man whose remaining hair was as red as the cook's, finishing a piece of toast in between sips of coffee.

Weasleys. I have heard the name, but never met them. She smiled to herself, blowing on a spoonful of porridge. *Of course not. They are far too nice to be acceptable to my... former circle of acquaintances.*

On her own bench, Remus Lupin sat at the far end, across from his wife. A tiny frisson ran down Corona's spine at the sight of him. His ultimately successful bid for custody of a child had made

him notorious among purebloods. The only reason the young wizards had not organized a werewolf hunt, or the older ones protested in more civilized terms, was that the only child officially involved was Muggleborn. Had any pureblood child been included in the custody request, Corona doubted the family would have got off so easily.

And yet a pureblood child is intimately involved, and lives in the household...

She shrugged. *It is no longer my problem.*

And Sirius was quite right about his friend's deportment and social presence... when they are acting like themselves, that is.

Corona let her eyes travel to Sirius himself, sitting beside Lupin and wandlessly vanishing his plateful of cooked breakfast. Her suspicions from the season had been confirmed; the Sirius Black everyone had seen at the dances and parties was a veneer over the real man. She had been one of the only ones to see past the façade, to see what Sirius concealed.

And he's so much more than they demand of their young men... he can fight, but he can also love, and he loves life in general, and his own life in particular...

Sitting closest to her though still two or three seats away, a young man about her own age absently poked at a sausage with his fork. A few scars marked his pale gold skin, a few threads of white touched his black hair, but if he'd had a good story to explain that away – fighting a dragon single-wanded, perhaps, or acquiring phoenix feathers to sell – he would have been entirely acceptable to any girl in Corona's world.

Strange how we care about ancestry in one way and not in another. As long as his ancestors were magical, no one would ask from what country they came. Especially when the answer is so obviously China.

His face was familiar, too. Obviously, from his age, they'd been at Hogwarts together, though he hadn't been a Slytherin or she would have known him.

I even think I remember his house – Hufflepuff – but I cannot think of his name...

As if he had read her mind, the young man turned to look at her, met her eyes, and smiled. It was a welcoming smile, friendly and open.

No one would ever smile like that where I come from. It would look contrived if they tried.

The young man scooted closer to Corona and offered her his hand. "Brian Li," he said. "In case you don't remember."

Corona clasped the hand gratefully. "Corona Gamp, and thank you. I was wondering how to ask without appearing ridiculous."

"You met a lot of people last night. I was in the same situation a few weeks ago. It can be

overwhelming, and one friendly face makes a world of difference.”

“Yes.” Corona consciously relaxed her shoulders. “I think we went to school together,” she said. “Were you in my year?”

“I think I must have been, because I remember seeing you. Slytherins and Hufflepuffs didn’t have many classes together, though, so you likely wouldn’t remember me.”

Corona grimaced. “I was trained to regard anyone I hadn’t known from childhood as beneath my notice, Mr. Li,” she said. “I hope to escape my family’s grasp, but it will take time.”

“Call me Brian. And you’ll have company along the way. Not that my family has unrealistic and damaging expectations of me, but much of the rest of the world does.” Brian shifted nervously in his seat.

“Is there any particular reason?” Corona inquired, though a sudden suspicion came to her. A scarred man, graying prematurely, of whom the world had bad expectations...

Lupin is famous from the custody case, and a famous man cannot do undercover work. In fact, I could see how some werewolves – the ones who do act like the monsters in the bedtime stories I was told as a child – would resent and hate him for what he has done. But someone obscure, someone seemingly beneath notice, might be accepted more easily among them.

“I think that I understand,” said Corona, breaking into Brian’s half-coherent attempts to explain. “Are you... like Mr. Lupin?”

“Yes.” Brian gave a half-smile. “Or maybe I should say that I want to be like him someday. He gave me hope nearly a year ago when I saw no reason to hold onto it anymore. When he came to me himself and asked if I wanted to be a part of this...” The smile grew slightly. “I suppose I do hero-worship him, but there are worse people to do that with.”

“Yes,” Corona said surely. “Many worse.”

xXxXx

Don’t look now, said Aletha’s hands to Sirius, but something’s happening over there. A flickered finger indicated the other end of the table.

Sirius allowed time for two more swallows of tea before turning his head enough to see what Aletha meant.

At the end of the long bench, Corona was talking earnestly with Brian Li, both of their breakfasts forgotten.

Looks like good news, Sirius signed back. I like good news.

So do I. Aletha finished the sign by pressing two fingers to her lips and blowing the kiss towards

Sirius. “I need to go, or I’ll be late for work,” she said aloud, rising. “I think I’ve taken as much time off as a brand-new Healer can without incurring true anger among the powers that be.”

“But you’ll find other ways to annoy them,” Danger said. “I know you.”

Aletha sighed. “I never mean that to happen,” she said. “It just does.”

“Amazing how that works,” Remus said blandly, scraping up the last of his eggs. “Have a good day, Letha.”

“Thank you, Remus, you too. And may you have an interesting day,” Aletha added to Danger. “In the Chinese sense of the word.”

“Huh?” Danger said to Aletha’s retreating back.

Sirius swallowed a mouthful. “Chinese curse,” he said. “May you live in interesting times.”

“Oh.” Danger made a face. “How come I get the curse? Remus was just as rude.”

“I’ve learned to finesse it,” Remus said. “You, my love, are still the blunt instrument type, as often as I’ve tried to teach you a little tact.”

Danger snorted. “You? Tact?”

“Better than me,” Sirius said, standing up to clear his place. “I’m an all or nothing bloke. Either I’m full-on charming and socially graceful – which I hate – or I’m a slob.”

“Too easy,” said Danger, shaking her head. “Not taking it.”

Remus applauded lightly.

xXxXx

Walking the perimeter of Hogwarts grounds, Albus Dumbledore had to admit he was well satisfied with the new wards. No hostile magic would enter these grounds unless it was so overwhelmingly large that the castle itself would not be left standing.

I doubt even Voldemort has that much magic at his disposal.

Better still, they had been able to tie the wards directly to the magic of the castle. Unless someone drained all of Hogwarts’ magic, the castle would power its own wards.

Now as long as none of the “unless” clauses come to pass...

But they would not. He was determined about that.

Besides, only someone with a legitimate tie to the castle and the correct bloodline is able to tap

into the magic of Hogwarts, or indeed do anything directly with it at all. I am only allowed to do a few small things because I am Headmaster. And Hogwarts itself is the only place where Voldemort could likely find enough magic to breach the Hogwarts wards.

He smiled. I feel safe in saying that, as long as we maintain our vigilance, our students will be as safe this year as they permit us to make them.

xXxXx

Harry woke up with a slight feeling of potion-head, but it started dissipating as he got ready for the day and disappeared altogether over breakfast, which Winky was keeping hot for the Pride.

Not just me. The Pride.

And when I woke up last night, the Pack-parents were there.

I don't care where we are, we're together again.

But unlike Corona Gamp, he did know where they were, and his dim memories of the place were coming out of hiding. He didn't miss Kreacher (currently sulking in his den under the water tank), but he wished Moony had left the portrait of Padfoot's mum intact. It might have been fun to see her reactions to the people currently using her house.

Then again, bursting people's eardrums doesn't count as fun the last time I checked.

The Pride gave Harry the guided tour of the house after breakfast. There were three floors above the main one, not counting the attic, and many of the bedrooms were in use. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley slept on the third floor, along with both sets of Pack-parents and the Weasley twins. Harry and the male half of the Pride were on the second floor, with Brian Li a few doors down, and Bill and Charlie shared a room at the end of the hall, though that would change in the middle of August when Charlie married Tonks (the newlyweds would be swapping with the twins, and Bill would get his own room on the first floor).

“And you remember Fleur Delacour?” Ron said.

“How could I forget?” asked Harry. “What about her?”

“Gringotts is trying out having some humans as tellers, like they do in America,” Ginny said. “Fleur's got a job there to 'eemprove 'er Eenglish.”

Harry laughed at Ginny's spot-on impression of the French girl.

“You haven't even heard the best part yet,” Ron said. “Bill ran into her at work...”

“She probably saw the red hair and freckles and thought of you,” said Draco. “But an older, cooler, and much more available you.”

“No way!” Harry laughed again. “Fleur Delacour’s dating your brother?”

“Well, not dating exactly,” Hermione said. “At least he says not. Just private English lessons.” Her eyes turned naughty. “He’s probably teaching her how to say la foot.”

Draco grimaced. “That’s nasty.”

“What?” said Neville. “It’s just a word.”

“In French, it’s a nasty word.”

“Do we want to know what it means?”

“It means what you probably think it means.”

“But I don’t know what it means.”

“It starts with the same letter, does that help?”

“Enough,” Harry said loudly. “Let’s just keep going, please.”

The other room of interest on the second floor (besides the bathroom) was the Pride’s room, now with its walls bare and ready for repainting. Harry’s imagination furnished it with carpet and cushions, table and chairs, and he nodded in satisfaction. It would make a good den.

The first floor had the girls’ bedroom and the guest rooms, where Corona Gamp was staying. It also had a drawing room, which Harry avoided on principle. Anything that smelled like that had to be toxic.

“Mum was going to make us clean up in there,” Ron said as they returned to the main floor. “But she managed to talk Winky out of the basket once we told her Kreacher was under orders not to come out again, so we’re off the hook as long as we can find something else productive to do.” His manner suggested the last few words were a direct quote.

The front door rattled, and locks and bolts began undoing themselves. Harry dropped his hand unobtrusively to his wand, and noticed out of the corner of his eye the rest of the Pride doing the same, the Pack’s cubs checking their daggers as well, Meghan backing herself against the wall where she could see...

The door opened, and Professor McGonagall stepped in. Harry tried not to stare, but it was difficult. His mental concept of his Head of House included robes as a matter of course; she looked distinctly odd to him in a dress, and from the way she was moving, she felt odd as well. She had a large bag slung over one arm.

“Good morning, Professor,” Hermione said as McGonagall closed the door. The rest of the Pride picked up their cue and echoed her.

“Good morning.” McGonagall set down her bag carefully. “Are your parents downstairs?”

“Mostly,” Harry said. “Some of them left already.”

“Mostly will do. I’ll leave you eight to deal with this.” McGonagall nodded to the bag, a hint of a smile on her face. “I think you can handle it.”

Harry watched McGonagall to the stairs, then turned to look at the bag, feeling a trace of worry. “She wouldn’t bring in anything dangerous,” he said. “Would she?”

Meghan peered into the bag and giggled. “Depends on what you mean by dangerous,” she said, and pulled the flap open.

“Master Draco!” A blur of color impacted with Draco’s legs at high speed. Draco stumbled backward and would have fallen if Ron hadn’t steadied him. Hermione covered a smile.

“Hi, Dobby,” said Harry, grinning openly.

“Hello, Harry Potter sir!” said Dobby, letting go of Draco’s legs to show Harry his usual beaming smile. “And Miss Neenie, and Mistress Meghan...” He turned slowly. “...and Master Neville, and Miss Luna, and Mister and Miss Wheezy!”

“How come he gets my name wrong and not anyone else’s?” Ron asked.

“Why don’t you ask him?” Hermione snapped. “He can talk, you know.”

Ron sat down, putting himself almost at Dobby’s eye level. “Dobby, you can call me Ron,” he said. “I’d prefer it to Wheezy.”

“Dobby can do that, sir,” Dobby said cheerfully. “And what should Dobby call miss?” he asked, turning to Ginny.

“Ginny is fine, or Miss. That’s what Winky calls me. Speaking of which—” She raised her voice. “Winky! Come here, please!”

“Miss Ginny is too kind,” Dobby mumbled, staring at the floor, as Winky appeared with a loud crack.

“Miss is calling?” the female house-elf began, and then caught sight of Dobby. Her brown eyes widened even farther (which Harry hadn’t thought was possible), and she started to take a step forward before turning back to Ginny. “I is sorry, Miss,” she said, looking up at Ginny appealingly. “I is sorry for having troubles with Kreacher, but please, I is not needing help here, I is not complaining about the work...”

“No, of course you’re not,” Ginny said quickly, sitting down herself. The rest of the Pride did the same. “Dobby isn’t here because we don’t think you can do the work, Winky. He’s here because he wanted to come.” She waved to Dobby. “Ask him yourself.”

Winky looked at Ginny doubtfully. “Miss is wanting me to ask Dobby?”

“If you want to. It’s up to you.”

“Actually, why don’t you both take a little while off?” Harry said. Nine pairs of eyes centered on him. He swallowed inconspicuously and kept going. “Winky, you can show Dobby around the house, and you two can catch up. We can take care of whatever needs to get done this morning.”

Winky swelled with indignation. “Winky is not being such a bad house-elf as all that!” she said shrilly, glaring at Harry. “I is not going off with Dobby and leaving my little master and mistress to be doing my work!”

“Not even if they ask you to?” said Ginny.

“Master and Miss is being mixed-up,” Winky said with dignity. “I is thinking it is because they is never meeting a proper house-elf before they is getting me.” She sighed. “And I is hardly proper, with clothes and all...”

“Ah-ah,” Ron said quickly, holding up his hand. “You’re not allowed, remember? No more beating yourself up over that.”

Winky crossed her arms and looked down her nose at Ron. “And Master Ron is not allowed to be doing my work, when I is a perfectly healthy house-elf who is able to do it her own self,” she said firmly. “That is what it is meaning to be a master.”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Neville, drawing all eyes to him this time. “My family has a house-elf – his name’s Tapper – and that’s not how he acts. He cleans up the big messes in the house, but he expects me to keep my bedroom clean myself in between times. He’s never been free, and I think if Mum or Dad tried to free him he wouldn’t go.”

“And we’ve always done chores at our house, so we’re used to it,” Meghan added. “We never had a house-elf.”

“Nor did we,” said Luna. “House-elves like to do work, but that doesn’t mean they should work all the time. Just like human beings like to rest and relax, but they shouldn’t do that all the time. It’s bad for them. People shouldn’t always do what they like.”

Hermione signed something to Ron, who cleared his throat. “Winky, this is an order,” he said. “Take the rest of the morning off and do something you like. Something other than work,” he added quickly. “There has to be something else you like.”

Winky rocked back and forth on her feet, looking indecisively from Ron to Dobby, who was sitting between Meghan and Neville clutching his hands together. “Master Ron is truly not angry with me?” she asked in a tiny voice. “Nor any of my family?”

“You’re terrific, Winky,” Ron said. “We’re not mad at you.”

“We want you to be happy,” added Ginny. “Aren’t you and Dobby friends?”

“Yes, miss... but...”

“No buts,” Ginny said briskly. “Go have a nice morning with your friend, and we’ll see you at lunch. Not before.” She made shooing motions with both hands.

After one more disbelieving look, Winky crossed the circle to Dobby’s side. Dobby sprang to his feet and seized Winky’s hand, and with a loud crack, both house-elves disappeared.

One second of silence ensued, then Harry caught Ginny’s eye and they both started snickering. Ron lost control next, then Draco, then Hermione and Meghan, and Neville and Luna fell prey a moment later.

Mrs. Weasley, coming downstairs to see where Winky had disappeared to, found the Pride lying on the floor of the front hall, laughing helplessly.

xXxXx

Back in his office, Dumbledore returned to his thoughts about the proposal he’d received the night before, regarding Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort.

I must say, I would not likely have thought of it myself. But it is perfectly characteristic of Severus. The trouble is, it would also be perfectly characteristic of Voldemort.

But no. I trust Severus, and we stand to gain more from this move than Voldemort does. He sighed. Though if it backfires, Harry will be left holding the wand.

Then he smiled at himself. And you know what to do about it if things come to that, you old fool. Simply insist that Harry and Remus carry out their blood-bonding at once. Lupus is no light matter, but if Voldemort batters at Harry’s mind without protection, Harry will be destroyed just as surely as if a disease took his life. And with the proper potions, the symptoms can be controlled and kept from progressing.

What a pity we cannot extend magical healing to Muggles...

Dumbledore regarded the endless complexities and troubles of the world with a sigh.

I know that an offer may someday be extended to me by virtue of certain words that I have spoken, an offer that many would die for. He smiled wryly. But I think that I will likely refuse it.

One hundred fifty years, give or take, are long enough for me.

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As promised, the Pride took Winky’s place until lunch, disinfecting the drawing room Harry’d been so eager to avoid earlier that same morning. A few people slipped away for short periods,

but there was a general feeling that if they had to do this, they might as well do it together and have the stories to tell later. The twins got roped in as well, though they managed to get something out of the experience by sneaking a few of the doxies that had infested the curtains.

“Just one of these can produce almost half a cup of venom every week,” George told Harry. “You just have to know how to milk it.”

“Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know,” Harry said, looking warily at the tiny black thing in Fred’s hand. “And don’t tell me what you’re doing with it, either.”

“If you insist, oh wise financial backer,” said Fred, pocketing the doxy. “Probably better not to know what you’re eating, anyway.” He lowered his voice. “While we’re on the subject, there was some talk last night about a deal being cut...”

“Information for certain controlled substances,” said George, closing in on the other side.

Harry held up his hand. “We’ll talk terms after lunch,” he said. “Hold it until then.”

The Black family tapestry on the opposite wall occupied the Pride’s attention for a time when the curtains were de-doxified (Fred and George had vanished immediately when their presence was no longer required). “Look, here’s me,” Draco said, pointing. “So I guess this is where Mother used to be, and Aunt Andy.” He was looking at two small burns near the bottom, next to the embroidered name *Bellatrix*.

“Excuse me,” said Neville, and hurried out of the room.

“Here’s where Padfoot was,” said Harry, pointing at the burn under the names *Orion* and *Walburga*, next to *Regulus*. “If his mum knew we were here... I can see her now...”

“No, you can’t,” said Luna. “Mr. Moony burned up her portrait.”

Harry, about to argue, caught the wicked twinkle in Luna’s eyes and groaned instead. “I can’t believe I almost fell for that.”

“Sometimes you do fall for it,” said Luna. “You’re very funny then.”

Harry sighed. “Remind me to get a girlfriend that doesn’t like to make jokes at my expense,” he said to Ron and Draco. “One in the family is enough.”

Neville came back into the room, carrying a small plant in a pot. “Uncle Algie sent me this for my birthday,” he said. “It came this morning, and I had to open it to take care of it. It’s a *Mimulus mimbletonia*, from Algeria.”

“Is it sick?” Ron asked. Harry couldn’t blame him. The plant seemed to be covered in small boils, which were all quivering slightly.

“No, that’s how it always looks.” Neville looked around the room, then set the plant on an end

table and started dragging it towards the tapestry. Harry quickly grabbed the other end of the table and found Ginny beside him, and Meghan beside Neville. Together, the four lifted the table and set it, and the *Mimbulus mimbletonia*, in front of the tapestry.

“All right, everyone take cover,” Neville said, taking his quill out of his pocket. “If the book is right about it, it spurts pretty far.”

“I generally take cover anytime the word ‘spurts’ is involved,” Hermione said, backing away and crouching behind the large sofa. Ginny and Meghan joined her there, and Ron wedged himself in on the end. Luna and Draco took refuge behind a moldering armchair, and Harry knelt behind a wing chair and peered around the side. Neville was kneeling as well, most of his body actually under the table. Just his one arm was above it, with the quill in his hand, reaching up to jab the *Mimbulus mimbletonia* ...

Harry ducked as thick, dark green liquid squirted from every boil on the plant.

Well, that’s not so bad.

Then he inhaled, and choked.

From behind the couch came the screech of a profoundly unhappy cat, echoed more loudly a moment later.

“What. Is. That?” said Draco through his nose, which he was holding.

“It’s what they make the stuff in Gobstones out of,” said Neville, emerging from under the table. “It’s called Stinksap.”

“I can’t imagine why,” said Ron thickly. “It’s worse than Fred and George’s socks. Put together.”

“Worse than yours, too,” Ginny retorted. “Neville, that’s *awful*.”

“I thought they deserved it,” said Neville, looking with distaste at the Stinksap-soaked names on the tapestry. “I just wish I could do it to the real people. To Bellatrix Lestrange, and her husband, and his brother.”

“No, you don’t,” said Draco, standing up. “That would mean they were out of Azkaban, and we really don’t want them out of Azkaban. It’s where they belong.”

“Weren’t there four people?” Meghan asked.

“Yes, but the fourth one is dead. He was Mr. Crouch’s son.”

“Oh, right.” Meghan pinched her own nose shut, looking around the room. “And now who gets to clean this up?”

“I’ll do it.” Neville drew his wand. “*Scourgify!*”

“Wow,” said Ginny, looking around the suddenly clean room. “You do that almost as well as Mum does.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Ginny stepped out from behind the couch, Neenie the cat in the crook of one arm. “Here,” she said, handing Neenie to Ron. “Hold this.”

Ron looked down at Neenie.

Neenie looked up at Ron.

Luna developed a quiet case of the giggles.

Meghan didn’t bother with the quiet part.

xXxXx

“What was that about?” Harry asked Ginny over lunch.

“What? Oh, what I did to Ron?” Ginny shrugged. “Because I could, I guess.”

Harry grinned. “Yeah, it was pretty funny watching him just stand there. He didn’t know what to do, and neither did she.”

“Well, it’s not every day somebody hands you your friend like a parcel.” Ginny looked down the table. “I hope Dobby and Winky are all right.”

Harry stared at his sandwich while he reconstructed the logic of the conversational jump. *Not every day somebody hands you your friend... all right, we went from that to small people... and from there to house-elves... there, got it.* “I’m sure they’re fine,” he said, looking back up. “You and Ron told them to take the morning off, so they did. It’s barely lunchtime. I’m sure they’ll be back soon.”

“Who’ll be back soon?” said a man’s voice behind them.

“Padfoot!” Harry twisted in his seat. “What’re you doing back already?”

“Figured since I live close by now, I’d come home for lunch,” Padfoot said, taking a seat beside Harry. “Hi, Ginny. Hi, everyone.”

A chorus of “Hi” floated down the table, and Meghan set down her crisps and trotted over to get a hug. “Neville sprayed Stinksap on your family tapestry,” she said.

“Way to go, Neville,” said Padfoot, throwing Neville a thumbs up.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t let me forget,” Padfoot said to Harry, Meghan, and Ginny. “Aletha and I have an announcement to make tonight at dinner.”

“A good announcement?” Meghan asked.

“Yes, Pearl, good news.” Padfoot grinned. “At least I think it is.”

A pair of snapping noises beside the table made everyone look around. “And there they are,” said Harry, gesturing to the house-elves.

“Oh, is we late?” said Winky worriedly.

“Not at all,” Ginny said quickly. “You’re just fine. Did you have a good time?”

“Oh, yes, miss!” Dobby was bouncing slightly on his feet. “Dobby and Winky had a marvelous time!”

“Where’d you go?” Harry asked.

“We is going to the attic,” Winky said, pointing upward. “We is finding many old things there, and many things that is strange and interesting...”

“And made a decision,” Dobby said strongly. “Dobby and Winky talked for a long time and made a decision.”

Winky twisted her skirt with the hand that wasn’t holding Dobby’s. Clearly, she was less than happy with this decision, whatever it was. The rest of the Pride, scenting something interesting in the air, had stopped eating to watch.

Dobby whispered something to Winky, then slid his hand out of hers and marched down the length of the table, stopping beside Draco. “Master Draco,” he said formally. “May Dobby speak to you a moment in private, sir?”

“Sure.” Draco swung his legs over the bench and headed for the pantry door, Dobby behind him.

Padfoot snapped his fingers. “Kreacher’s still in his den, isn’t he?” he asked.

“He should be,” said Meghan. “I told him to stay in the basement, and not to speak unless he had something nice to say.”

Padfoot snickered. “That’ll show him. It must drive him up the wall to have to take orders from you, Pearl – but there’s nothing he can do about it, you’re Black by blood, and he’s bound to the family... still, if Dobby’s talking about what I think Dobby’s talking about, I might have an idea...”

Draco emerged from the pantry, Dobby behind him. “I have an idea,” he said. “Dobby’d like to stay here as the Order’s official house-elf – Winky would stay too, of course, since the Weasleys

aren't at the Burrow just now – but that would leave Hogwarts short, and Dobby doesn't like that..."

Padfoot chuckled. "I think you're thinking what I'm thinking."

"I think I'm thinking it too," said Harry, looking towards Kreacher's door.

Ron grinned. "This'll be fun."

Padfoot cleared his throat. "Kreacher!" he called. "Come out of there!"

The door wobbled open, and Harry took as long a look as he wanted, which wasn't very long. Kreacher hadn't looked very good when Harry was seven, and eight years hadn't done much for the house-elf.

At least now he's not muttering stuff.

"Kreacher, I want you to go to Hogwarts and work with the other house-elves in the kitchens there," Padfoot said, smiling smugly. "Don't give anyone any lip, do what you're told, and don't leave unless I say you can."

Kreacher stared furiously at Padfoot, then vanished with a crack.

"There," Padfoot said, dusting off his hands. "That's sorted. Dobby, pending a final decision by Albus, you're hired."

"Thank you, sir!" Dobby ran over to Winky and seized her hands. "Then Dobby and Winky can make their announcement right now!"

"Dobby, you is being silly," Winky scolded. "Masters is not wanting to hear about house-elves' affairs."

"But we do," Hermione said quickly. "Please, tell us."

"Yeah, come on," Ron said, putting down his sandwich. "What's up with you two?"

Dobby took a deep breath. "Dobby and Winky – with Winky's masters' permission, of course – are going to jump the broomstick!"

The girls of the Pride shrieked collectively. "You're getting married!" Hermione cried. "Congratulations!"

"Somehow I don't think they'll say no," said Padfoot over the noise, grinning. "Cheers, you two."

"Must be something about the house," said Ron, looking up fearfully as if expecting the ceiling to collapse.

“No, Charlie and Tonks got engaged before Headquarters was ever here,” Draco said. “I think it’s just something that happens sometimes.”

“Yes, I think you’re right.” Padfoot looked around the room. “Well, I suppose I can anticipate our announcement a little to you. It’ll cut down on the noise at dinner.”

Harry looked at his godfather suspiciously. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m not doing anything. Yet.” Padfoot chuckled. “I’ll be doing something in about four weeks, but I’m not doing anything yet.”

“All right, what will you be doing in four weeks?”

“Accounting for species differences, the same thing Dobby will. Though I think...”

Whatever Padfoot thought was drowned by renewed shrieking from the girls.

xXxXx

The twins, who had been closeted in their room since the drawing room curtains were finished, emerged to eat, and to congratulate Dobby and Winky. Then ten Hogwarts students trooped upstairs to the Pride’s room.

“Where’d Mr. Li go?” Harry asked everyone in general. “And the witch who came with Padfoot, what’s her name, Corona?”

“Out,” Hermione said. “Nobody’s looking for them, so they can. And I think Miss Gamp wanted to learn more about Muggles and how they live. She’s pureblooded.”

“Oh.”

Chairs were transported in from various of the bedrooms, the door was locked, and serious negotiations ensued. The twins, it seemed, were developing a full line of trick sweets, prank items, and other things necessary to run a fully-stocked joke shop. A few of the questions the Pride asked made them look at each other in surprise, and Ron asked to see one of the items demonstrated, causing Fred to Apparate upstairs for it.

“We haven’t got it working right yet,” George cautioned as Ron examined the wristwatch at close range. “I wouldn’t...”

A squirt of greenish liquid shot from the watch and up Ron’s nose. Ron sneezed and started coughing.

“Sorry,” George said, retrieving the watch from where Ron had dropped it. “The idea was to make it do the same thing Gobstones do, only have it be changeable, so that you could get someone with nasty stuff one time and sweet the next, so they never know what’s coming. But we can’t get it to spray accurately at more than six inches range, and people don’t read wristwatches at six inches.”

“If you want something really nasty, I can get you some undiluted Stinksap,” said Neville. “My supply’s limited, though, and I’d want to trade for that too...”

Ron wiped his eyes on the tissue Hermione had given to him and held out his hand. “Give me that back,” he said hoarsely.

“Your funeral.” George handed it over and started whispering with Fred, who had looked intrigued by Neville’s revelation.

Ron stopped the watch, popped its back off and used his wand to pop a connection off one gear and stick it on another, then twiddled the knob on the side and strapped the watch onto his wrist. “Look what time it is,” he said, holding it out.

Automatically, Fred looked.

Green liquid sprayed into his left eye.

“You fixed it!” George said. “How’d you do that?”

Ron shrugged. “You had the spray regulator on the wrong gear. Not a big deal.”

Hermione handed Fred another tissue. “Close your mouth,” she said to George.

Eventually, Pride and twins came to an agreement. Every week, each member of the Pride would receive what the twins determined to be one Galleon’s worth of goods. Neville would barter separately for whatever volume of Stinksap he could produce that the twins wanted, and Ron after each item that he fixed or improved. In return, the Pride would keep the twins updated on what they learned from the Order meetings Hermione attended, unless they were specifically told not to.

Something jogged loose in Harry’s brain at that. As soon as the meeting adjourned, he went looking for Danger.

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“Last night? Oh, of course.” Danger rolled up the scroll she was reading, tucked it back into the cubby of the desk, and stood up. “Let’s get out of the War Room, shall we? It depresses me.”

“This is the War Room?” Harry looked around the study. “Cool.”

“Glad you think so.” Danger led the way out of the room and into a living room across the way, where she plopped down on a dusty window seat. Harry pulled up a chair and straddled it, leaning on the back.

Danger waved away the cloud of dust and leaned back, basking in the sun that came in through the dirty glass. “Now, what is it?”

“Last night. What’s here that’s so valuable? You said it wasn’t a secret.”

“It’s not.” Danger laughed, then sobered. “But I thought you knew what the Pack values most of all.”

“Each other,” Harry said promptly.

“Exactly.”

Harry frowned. “But I don’t see...”

And then he did.

“Hostages,” he said, his hands tightening around the top of the chair. “He doesn’t want things. He wants people.”

Danger nodded somberly.

“He thinks he can make me do what he wants by threatening people I care about.” Harry stared at the glass in the window. “Can he?”

“I don’t know,” Danger said softly. “Can he?”

Harry opened his hand and let the sunlight play across it. He tried to imagine someone he loved in trouble, in the hands of the Death Eaters.

Thoughts came in flashes:

Danger unconscious in the night, lying abandoned on the ground and shivering in fever, while far away Moony howled in fury and threw his werewolf body against the silver bars of a cage...

Letha held by the Petrificus, her eyes filled with tears of rage, while Padfoot writhed on the ground before her, twisting in and out of dog form as the CruciatuS racked him...

Luna in Starwing’s form and Ron as Redwing, tied to a perch side by side, eyes dull and feathers broken, ignoring the meat jeering Death Eaters tossed towards them...

Meghan lying across Hermione, both of them far too still, Hermione’s arms and legs torn savagely and her wounds no longer bleeding...

Neville, blank-eyed under the Imperius, holding back a struggling Draco as Lucius Malfoy readied his wand...

Ginny, her face slack and her movements jerky, one in a vast army of Inferi...

And why does she get to come all by herself?

Harry snapped back to the moment. He was safe, so was everyone else. He was in number twelve, Grimmauld Place, watching the sunlight on his palm, with Danger waiting for his answer.

“I don’t know either,” he admitted. “I really don’t.”

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Facing Danger

Chapter 6: Blood and Gold (Year 5)

Chapter 6: Blood and Gold

“One of my better efforts, I think,” said Alex, holding out the roll of parchment to Danger. “We can dispense with the special effects this time, since you already know where it’s coming from.”

“Thank you ever so.” Danger accepted the scroll and snapped her fingers. A chair trundled up behind her, and she sat down, already unrolling the parchment.

“Can she do that?” Alex asked the air. “I didn’t think she could do that.”

Her attention focused on the lines, Danger barely heard him.

Seek black and white, for each holds part

Of answer that will gladden heart;

The lion’s son no harm shall take

From that which gold and red shall make.

The questioner unwelcomèd

May soon depart to clear her head,

But left alone, she will remain

And undeservèd places gain.

A flagging spirit must be fed;

Sing, then, O twin, of royal red,

And bring twofold rewards of glee

And necessary foolery.

The winter days bring sorrows all:

The once-endangered then shall fall;

The beast tries, as he said, to own,

And half-succeeds—but not alone.

Then flame shall rise to champion's hand,

Alighting fires to cleanse the land,

For death and pain shall bring to light

The hidden, unacknowledged might.

He bows to fate, but not to yield;

He'll use it to make fair the field.

And thus the path shall be begun

Which leads unto The Man Who Won.

“What do you think?” Danger asked, laying the parchment on her lap.

“I already told you,” said Alex, brushing fussily at a crumb on his robe. “I think it’s rather good.”

“I think she was asking me.”

Alex jumped. “You walk too quietly,” he accused Remus.

“You don’t pay attention.” Remus sat down on the arm of Danger’s chair. “I think, that like the others, it will likely come true in its own time,” he said, picking up the parchment to have a look through his own eyes. “The first two lines are in command form... something we have to do?”

“An answer to a problem of yours,” Alex confirmed. “You’ll work it out, don’t worry. It may even come and find you.”

“I like it when answers do that,” said Danger, closing her eyes to concentrate on what Remus was seeing. “Then the next two lines are related to those. A reassurance, I’d say, that whatever we’re doing won’t hurt Harry.”

Alex nodded, fiddling with the hem of his robe. “That’s all you really need for the moment,” he said. “The rest doesn’t come into play until the fall. That gives you a month or so to sort it out.”

“All right.” Danger opened her eyes and accepted the parchment back from Remus, scanning the lines in earnest in preparation for committing them to memory. “If you’re sure.”

“Would I lie to you?”

“Yes,” Remus and Danger said together.

Alex shrugged. “What can I say? It’s a family failing.”

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Snow Fox crept down the hallway, ears pricked. The four Ravenclaw women had swooped down on Luna and carried her off as soon as they'd arrived, and she hadn't been back since. It wasn't that he didn't trust them...

Yes, it is.

Shifting back to human form, Draco shrugged. People who'd been dead for a thousand years were bound to have different priorities than people who were still alive. He didn't think the Ravenclaws would hurt Luna on purpose, but they might not realize that something they were doing was hurting her or making her unhappy.

Thus, I snoop.

He changed again and sniffed. They'd taken the next right... the second left...

Ah-ha!

Voices rose behind the closed door of a room.

"You're getting closer, dear. Try it again."

"All right." Luna's voice was shaky. "But it hurts when I try it."

Snow Fox growled deep in his throat, his fur beginning to bush out.

"Yes, it does hurt. But it will hurt much more if you don't do it properly. Now, draw yourself in. Make all of you enclosed within your skin."

What? Even Draco's human form couldn't make much sense out of that. *How can you be out of your skin? It's what keeps you inside you in the first place.*

"Don't forget up here, Luna. Draw it all in evenly."

"I can't do it all at once!" Luna cried. "It's too hard!"

"You must learn how." Rowena Ravenclaw's voice was unmistakable. "You've made a good beginning, but it will be worthless if you don't progress. Release and try again. This is too uneven."

Luna's sigh said more of her frustration than another girl's scream would have. "Yes, ma'am," she said wearily.

"And you stay where you are, young man," Rowena's voice arrested Draco in the act of leaping to his feet. "If you want to come into this room, you come politely. Knock on the door and ask for admittance."

Draco clenched his teeth briefly, then walked across the hallway and knocked three times on the

door. "May I come in?" he called.

Sophia Ravenclaw opened the door. "You may," she said, stepping aside.

Draco knelt beside Luna, who was seated cross-legged on a cushion on the floor, and wrapped his arms around her. "Is it bad?" he asked in her ear.

"Some of it," Luna answered into his collar. "But they're right, Draco. I do need to learn this. If I'd known it before, I could have stopped myself seeing the bad things as soon as I understood them, so that I didn't always have to watch them. It just makes me very tired, and I feel as if I'll never get it."

"Everyone learning something new feels that way," said Margaret, sitting down beside them. "You felt that way yourself when you were learning Animagus, didn't you, Draco?"

Draco eyed her. "You know too much," he accused.

"An occupational hazard. Do you perhaps have a question for us?"

"Why should I bother to tell you? You already know."

"There are rules about these sorts of things, Draco Black," Brenna chided. "We can only answer the question you ask. And that requires that you ask one."

Luna nestled closer to Draco, and he stroked her hair. "What Luna Saw about us, while her Seeing was out of control," he said. "Will that really happen?"

"It will." Rowena's face was impassive. "Everything that she Saw will come to pass."

The chill around Draco's heart deepened a few degrees, and his arms tightened around Luna. "I thought the future was changeable until it happened," he said. "I thought that's why Seeing was so unreliable."

"It is, in both instances," said Sophia, seating herself next to her sister. "But in this case, two wildly different possibilities converge in that moment. It *will* happen. We know this."

"What we do not know," Brenna added, "is what it means. Or what will happen after it, or, to some degree, before."

"You don't know what's going to happen before it? Really?" Draco laughed a short, humorless laugh. "I think I could tell you that."

"You could. But what would you or we profit by it?" Rowena looked across the room at them, her face softening slightly. "Do not despair, child," she said. "You will have fullness in your life, no matter its length. The love that binds you reaches beyond such petty things."

Draco stared at her for a moment. "I never thought I'd hear anyone call death petty," he said.

Rowena smiled. “Having experienced it does change one’s outlook somewhat.”

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Albus Dumbledore arrived at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, early the next morning, and sought out Corona Gamp and Brian Li. “I understand there was a disturbance in Diagon Alley yesterday,” he said.

“That’s putting it mildly, Headmaster,” Corona said. “Though I admit I was grateful for it.”

“So was I.” Brian chuckled. “You couldn’t have ordered two sets of people more likely to annoy each other.”

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. “Tell me more.”

“We had been around Muggle London, to see the sights and the people,” Corona began. “And we thought we would stop for something to eat before we came back here.”

“So we went to Diagon Alley,” Brian picked up. “And we were sitting outside at Florean Fortescue’s when two witches came running up behind Corona, one older and one younger...”

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“Corona!”

Corona stiffened. “Oh no,” she breathed, turning.

“There you are!” Sempronia Gamp descended upon her granddaughter. “Dear Corona, we’ve been so worried! Has he hurt you? Are you under some compulsion to return to him? We will make him pay double for every injury and slight...”

“Grandmother, what are you talking about?” Corona freed herself from her grandmother’s embrace. “No one has hurt me, or put me under compulsion. Why would you think such a thing?”

“Because I told her so.” Elladora stepped out from behind Grandmother, her head lifted proudly. “It came to me shortly after my failure to stop you from leaving with him. The only reason for such a failure—and for your agreeing to go with him in the first place—is a coercive spell, likely one of a subtle nature. The sooner you come home, the sooner we can find it and remove it.”

Corona swallowed a desperate desire to laugh and gathered her dignity. “Grandmother, sister, please, sit down with us,” she said, waving to the empty seats at the table. “I would introduce you to a new friend of mine, and speech is more comfortable when all are seated. I believe there is much I must explain to you.”

“You need explain nothing, my dear Corona,” said Grandmother firmly. “We understand that it was not your fault in the least, and no stigma will attach to you as long as you come home immediately.”

“Grandmother, that is part of what I must explain. Please, will you sit down?”

“If you insist, child. For a moment.” Grandmother’s expression and tone combined to give the impression that Corona was five years old and demanding more time in the sweetshop.

Brian rose quickly to pull out a chair for Grandmother. His eyes met Corona’s as he did. *Courage*, the unspoken message passed between them. *You are not alone*.

Elladora drew out her own chair and sat down in it. “And who might you be?” she asked brusquely.

“My name is Brian Li, and I am honored to meet two such lovely ladies,” Brian said easily. “Corona has told me only a little about her family. I hope to learn more from your own lips.”

“Li,” Grandmother mused. “Is your family recently come to our fair isles?”

“My mother and father were born here, madam, but their parents were not. I believe that is recent enough to count as such.”

“It is. And your bloodline?”

“My...”

“Are you pureblooded, or do you have Muggles in your background?” Grandmother clarified. “I will not permit my granddaughter to fraternize with mongrels.”

Corona had to put her hand over her mouth, recalling the breakfast table. Elladora shot her a suspicious look.

“My parents were magical, as were their parents,” Brian said cautiously.

“Excellent.” Grandmother was practically purring. “I will give you our direction, so that you know where you may call as soon as Corona is restored to herself...”

“There he is!” shouted a hoarse voice from across the street.

Brian’s shoulders went up, and his jaw clenched. “I apologize to you, ladies, for what you may witness in the next few moments,” he said, standing.

“So you’ve finally come out of hiding, Li,” sneered the man who swaggered out of the crowd. He was of medium height, rather thin, with scars marking his face in several places. At his shoulder lingered a short, burly man with a dangerous look in his eye, likewise scarred. Elladora wrinkled her nose and edged her chair away from them. Grandmother was staring, aghast.

“Not with any interest in taking your offer,” Brian said quietly. “Simply to enjoy an afternoon with a new friend.”

“A new friend?” The taller man eyed the three women contemptuously.

“Her sister and grandmother have joined us unexpectedly. Now if you will excuse me, we were in the middle of a conversation.”

“And what if I don’t want to excuse you?” A nasty smile curled the man’s lip. “What if *I* want to have a conversation with you? I think I outrank them, don’t you?”

“How *dare* you say that!” Grandmother shouted, rising to her feet. “My granddaughters and I are pureblooded members of the House of Gamp! We bow to no one, and this young man is a prospective ally of ours! Leave at once, before I summon the authorities!”

“The authorities aren’t very interested in people like us, old witch,” the man said, smirking at her. “And you’d bow to me in my world. You’d be nothing but food, there.” He looked her over. “I probably wouldn’t even take you. You’re too stringy and bony.”

Grandmother’s complexion was turning mottled purple.

“So this is how Sirius Black treats the women he kidnaps,” Elladora said coldly. “Not even a day after ravishing them away from home and family, he hands them over to inhuman creatures to be devoured.”

“I don’t know about Sirius Black, but you have the other bit right, miss pureblood,” the man said, bowing mockingly to Elladora. “Li’s no human, though he may pretend.”

Brian closed his eyes for a moment, and Corona watched well-worn resignation pass over his features. A tight restraint within her chest, one she had worked on all her life, broke at the sight.

“Enough!” She was on her feet, her wand in her hand, pointed straight at the two men. “Go away! Take your filthy lies and your filthy selves elsewhere!”

Brian’s eyes flew open. Surprise warred with gratitude and something else Corona feared to name, before all was wiped away by a careful serenity. “Ladies, I’m afraid you’re mistaken about Corona,” he said, turning to Elladora and Grandmother. “She came away from your home of her own free will, and if she comes home, it will be because she wants to, not because you bring her.”

“Go now, before I find out if you still bleed red,” Corona snarled at the men.

“I would suggest you leave this to us, unless you care for fighting,” Brian counseled the women.

The shorter man, who had been silent all this time, backed up a pace, then stopped as the taller man growled under his breath. “I hope you like fear, girl,” he said, his eyes boring hatred into Corona. “You won’t live a day without it if you stay with Li.”

“I wish you joy of my granddaughter,” Grandmother snapped. “Selfish, heartless bitch that she is.”

Brian's expression changed not at all, and Corona kept her own face still. After a long moment, the two werewolves backed away, keeping their eyes on Corona's wand until they had several people between them and her. Corona watched them around the corner, then relaxed.

Elladora stood up and went to Grandmother's side, taking the old woman's arm. "This may be the last time we see each other, sister," she said to Corona. "I hope you find happiness in your choice."

"As do I for you." Corona lowered her wand. "May you find what you seek."

"May you also."

"Enough," Grandmother snapped. "You will not speak to her again, Elladora. You will forget that you ever had a sister. She is outcast, as low as the filth she consorts with. Let us go home."

Corona sank weakly into her chair and watched her past walk away from her. "All bonds are broken, all ties unbound," she whispered, reciting part of the Outcasting that had come down through the centuries in pureblood society. "She never was, and is no more, and will be never again."

"I'm sorry." Brian seated himself across from her. "I wish that hadn't happened. Either part of it." A smile worked its way reluctantly onto his features. "Though I think it's rather ironic that both our pasts caught up with us at the same moment."

"Ironic. Yes." Corona began to smile as well. "You could call it ironic." The smile grew larger. "Or you could call it utterly ridiculous."

"That works as well as anything."

They met each other's eyes for one moment, then broke into helpless laughter.

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"Yet despite their actions, you will miss your family," Dumbledore said to Corona.

"Of course. I still love my sister, and as much as I hate what my grandmother wants from me, I can understand it. In her world, the only possible interpretations of my actions are heartless and selfish." She looked around at the room where they sat. "I sought a wider world."

"Wise of you." Dumbledore met Corona's eyes and held them for a long moment. When they looked away, Corona was blinking hard, as to hold back tears, but Dumbledore was smiling.

"Are you all right?" Brian asked anxiously, passing Corona a tissue.

"Yes, I'm fine." Corona dabbed at her eyes. "I was just... I mean..." She shook her head. "Never mind."

Dumbledore rose to cross to them. “Allow me to be the first to welcome you, Miss Gamp, to our side of the war,” he said quietly when he was close enough for her to hear. “The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London.”

Corona’s eyes widened as this information sank in.

“Would you like me to explain, sir?” Brian asked, a hint of challenge in his dark eyes.

“If you would be so kind.”

Dumbledore did not smile again, or even look as though he might, until he had left the room, when he allowed himself the luxury of chuckling.

Young men are so touchy about their dignity.

Then he went in search of the adults of the Pack.

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“Two ideas?” Aletha said. “You have been busy.”

“One of them is not mine,” Dumbledore admitted. “Severus Snape originated it, but I believe it has merit.”

“Don’t worry,” said Sirius, raising a hand. “I’m through rejecting anything he came up with just because he came up with it.”

“Yes, you’ll listen to it and find some other reason to reject it,” Danger said.

Sirius grinned with no trace of self-consciousness. “She knows me so well.”

“We’re listening, Albus,” said Remus, raising his eyebrows at Sirius and shooting Danger a mental **Behave yourself**.

“Severus’ idea is that he, in his role as Voldemort’s spy, should tell Voldemort about Harry’s strange experiences and dreams,” Dumbledore began. “He will lay emphasis on the fact that I am interested in them—which I am, but not for the reasons Voldemort will assume.”

Aletha frowned. “Voldemort will think you want to know what he’s thinking,” she said.

“Yes, and for that reason, he will likely block off the connection between himself and Harry, to deprive me of this source of information. It will accomplish our goal immediately, without endangering Harry’s health.”

“Key word there,” said Sirius. “Likely. Voldemort’s never been one for likely. He’s unpredictable, and for all we know, he’s got some way to hear every word we say.” He raised his voice a little. “In which case, up yours, Snakeface.”

Danger snickered.

“He does have his spies, as we have ours,” Dumbledore conceded. “But I know who his spy in the Order is, and I shall continue to take precautions against him, as I did in the matter of bringing the children safely here.”

“Precautions including not telling us who he is?” Aletha asked.

“I would not want you to act differently around him. That will tell Voldemort immediately that his spy has been found, and that above all I wish to avoid.”

“Because as long as you know about the spy, and he doesn’t know you know, he won’t put in another one that you’d have to find out about,” Danger said.

“Precisely.” Dumbledore nodded. “Simply do not share information with anyone you have not been instructed to, and things should go well enough.”

“We got off track,” Remus said. “Sirius brought up a good point, Albus. What happens if Voldemort decides to strike back at Harry rather than blocking himself off? He’s always believed in attacking rather than defending, and Harry’s Occlumency is starting to come along, but it’s still very shaky. He can’t even stop these little, unintentional invasions—he couldn’t possibly repel one with Voldemort’s full strength and will behind it.”

“That is true. Which brings us to my idea—which, sadly, is not truly mine either.” Dumbledore sighed, but his eyes were twinkling. “I was visited by an old friend last night, a friend I believe we have in common. A lovely lady named Maura.”

“Yes, we know Maura,” Aletha said. “What did she have to say?”

“A great many things with which I shall not bore you, mostly dealing with my mental capacity and my age. One thing greatly to the point. ‘Not everything in life must be permanent.’”

“Very philosophical,” Sirius said. “Not very helpful, unless, as always, I’m missing something.”

“If you’re missing it, I’m missing it too,” said Danger. “Albus, what exactly doesn’t need to be permanent here... wait a second, do you mean what I think you mean?”

“I believe it would address Aletha’s objection.” Dumbledore sketched a bow towards her.

“Is there some way to do that, though?” Aletha looked skeptical. “That serious a thing, can it be done on a temporary basis?”

“It can. It will entail more paraphernalia than the permanent form, but Harry wears his pendants constantly in any case.”

“The temporary form involves linking it to an amulet, doesn’t it?” Remus said. “So that Harry would have it when he wears the amulet, and lose it when he takes it off.”

“Yes.”

Sirius sighed. “Would somebody please just give me a hint of what we’re talking about?” he said plaintively.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard about it yet,” Remus said. “A blood-bond between me and Harry, to counteract the one he has with Voldemort.”

“That’s a good thing…” Sirius’ eyes narrowed. “But it’d give him lupus, wouldn’t it? Like Danger has?”

“We think so. That’s Aletha’s main objection to it.”

“Do you mind if I join you?” Sirius asked his wife, waiting only for her nod before turning back to Remus. “You’re out of your mind. What could possibly be worth that?”

“Voldemort couldn’t touch him mentally if we went through with it,” Remus snapped. “Or maybe you’d rather he blood-bond with Snape. That was suggested as well.”

Sirius rocked back on his heels. “Blood-bond… with…”

“Told you he wouldn’t like it,” Danger said.

“But what Albus has just suggested makes sense,” Remus said, pressing Danger’s hand to calm himself. “If Harry and I place blood in a locket, with the right spells, we’ll be bonded so long as he wears that locket. And he’ll have lupus for just that long. As soon as he doesn’t need the bond anymore—when he’s learned Occlumency, or when the war’s over, or whatever happens—he can take it off and destroy it. No more bond, no more lupus.” His voice acquired a trace of bitterness. “Is that good enough for you?”

Sirius, recovered from his shock, snorted in exasperation. “Remus, you know it’s not you I’m objecting to. I just don’t want Harry sick.”

“And you also don’t want to be supplanted,” said Aletha. “And somewhere in your irrational mind, you’re afraid that’s exactly what might happen.”

“Am not,” Sirius said automatically, frowning in thought.

“He is,” said Aletha, nodding. “He just has to come to the conclusion himself.”

Sirius gave her a dirty look.

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Ginny set the Order of Merlin, First Class, presented to one of Mr. Padfoot’s ancestors aside. “I don’t think he’ll want it, but we should ask,” she said.

“Photograph Quidditch!” Fred called, grabbing two photographs off the shelf. “George, Keep for me!”

George grabbed the rubbish sack and spread it wide, wagging it back and forth irregularly. Fred charged at his twin, followed his fakes for a second, then dived at him and smashed the photographs into the sack, ignoring the squeals from the frames’ occupants. “Ha-ha! Twenty points to Gryffindor!”

“My turn,” George said, handing the sack off to Fred. “Ron, toss me one!”

The photographs lasted long enough for everyone to have a turn throwing. “What’s this?” Neville asked after his turn, opening the lid of a small box.

A tune tinkled out, slow and winding. Everyone stopped what they were doing, sitting down to listen. Even Mum was sitting, covering a yawn with her hand. Ginny felt a wave of lassitude. It would be so nice to rest, to lie down and sleep...

Oh no you don't. Ginny pinched herself hard, reached over, and slammed the lid of the box shut. Everyone blinked and stared around at each other.

“I don’t think we’ll listen to that again,” said Hermione, tossing the box into the sack.

Ron lifted a large, ornate locket from the shelf. “Got a snake engraved on it,” he said, peering at it.

“Like everything else around here,” said Draco. “Open it, see who’s inside.”

Ron fiddled with the catch for a few moments, then shook his head. “It won’t open. You try.”

Draco took the locket and likewise tried the catch. “I think it’s jammed,” he said. “Either that, or it’s magically shut. Anyone else want a go? Luna?” He held it out to her.

Luna’s eyes widened more than Ginny had ever seen before. “Draco, I think you should put that down right now,” she said quietly.

“Why? Is something wrong with it?”

“Yes.”

Draco set the locket on the floor and backed away warily. “Now what?” he said. “Is it going to go off?”

“I don’t know.” Luna closed in, staying two paces from the locket at all times. “I don’t know what I’m Seeing, but I don’t like it.”

“Do you think a bit of magic would set it off, Luna dear?” Mum asked.

Luna considered, then shook her head.

Mum drew her wand and levitated the locket, moving it to a back table and conjuring a glass dome over it. “That should keep people away from it, until you have some time to figure it out,” she said. “Let’s keep going.”

Ginny smiled to herself. Nothing flustered her mum for long.

“I wonder what’s keeping Harry,” Hermione said as they continued to pull items off the shelves. “I know the Pack-parents wanted to talk to him, but I didn’t think it would take this long.”

Meghan went to the door to get a fresh sack, since even with Mum’s wizardspace improvements (or would that be witchspace, Ginny wondered whimsically), they were starting to run out of room in this one. “Here he comes!” she called, disappearing around the corner.

Ginny went to the door. Harry looked as if a star had fallen on him and he hadn’t adjusted to it yet, but he was responding to Meghan rationally. “It’s all right,” he said, holding out his hand to her. “It’s not him. It’s safe.”

Meghan grasped his hand, then moved in to hug him tightly. Over her shoulder, Harry’s lips moved.

Ginny blinked. *It might never be him again? What does that mean?*

Meghan pulled away, and Harry smiled at her. “That always makes me feel better,” he said. “Thanks, Pearl.”

“You’re welcome.” Meghan squeezed his hand, then danced back up the corridor and slipped past Ginny into the room.

“Hey, Ginny,” Harry said, following his sister.

“Hi, Harry. You look confused.”

“I am confused. Hoping you can help me sort it out.”

“Me?”

“Well, everyone, but everyone includes you, so yes, you.” Harry turned to Mum. “Mrs. Weasley, can I steal the Pride for a little while? Something’s come up.”

“Yes, go ahead. We’re nearly finished here, the twins and I can take care of the rest. Send your parents up here if you happen to see them, and Luna when you’re finished, there’s something we need to take care of specially.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked Luna as she passed.

Luna shrugged, then stopped, looking speculatively at Harry's forehead.

"Look, Luna, it's bad enough when everyone else does it," Harry said in exasperation. "Do you have to?"

"Maybe." Luna was still staring. "Harry, do you know what Voldemort used to look like?"

"You mean when he was young, about our age?"

"A little older than that, but yes. Before he got scary."

"Ginny and I saw a memory of him in the Chamber of Secrets," Harry said. "He was sixteen there, I think."

Ginny nodded. "He had dark hair and a strong face," she said. "He was handsome, but frightening."

"But he didn't frighten everyone he saw," Harry said. "He couldn't have, not and get away with pretending to be just an innocent kid."

"Maybe he didn't bother to wear his 'ordinary person' mask with us," Ginny said. "He was trying to frighten us, to flaunt how strong a wizard he was, that he could bind a memory into a diary and have it last there for fifty years." She frowned. "How would you do that, anyway? Most spells fade over time, but that one didn't."

Harry shrugged. "The Map still works," he said. "Is that what you need to know, Luna?"

"Sort of. We can talk more later. What's bothering you, Harry?"

"You know, that's going to get annoying," Harry said, starting down the hall towards the stairs. "If you can see everything that's wrong."

"I won't tell anyone. Just the Pride."

"That's bad enough," Harry muttered. Ginny chose to pretend she hadn't heard.

Ron locked the door of the Pride's Den behind him and took his place in the circle on the floor. "Spill, Harry," he said, putting his wand away. "What happened?"

"It's not what happened, Ron." Harry had his hands in front of his face and was flexing the fingers, staring at them as if memorizing them. "It's what could happen."

Ginny listened carefully, shaping the situation as she might a statue she was copying from life. Here was the predicament—Harry's mind linked to Voldemort's, to the extent that Harry had been having dreams where he *was* Voldemort, along with dreams that smelled like Voldemort but consisted only of long windowless corridors ending in locked doors. Here were possible solutions—Harry learning Occlumency, Voldemort choosing to block the connection himself, Harry blood-

bonding with Mr. Moony—and here were the problems with those solutions...

And that's where it gets really complicated.

"I'm starting to get the hang of Occlumency, but every time I think I have it, it gets away from me," Harry was saying. "It's just that it takes a couple seconds longer to get away now. At this rate, I might be able to keep Voldemort out of my mind for a full minute by the end of this year."

Ginny noted in passing that Ron hardly shivered at the name.

"I don't like the sound of Voldemort finding out about the connection," Hermione said. "It sounds much too dangerous. What if he decides that it would be worth more to go digging in your head?"

"That's why Snape's not doing anything until Dumbledore says he can," said Harry.

"Snape came up with that, didn't he?" said Neville.

"Yes, and don't even start. I don't like Snape either, but if he told Dumbledore he wouldn't do something, then he won't."

"Unless he's gone back over to You-Know..."

Harry and Hermione fixed Ron with a double glare.

"Oh, all right. To *Voldemort*. Happy now?"

"Some," said Harry. "I'll be even happier when you do it without us having to look at you."

"But my point hasn't changed, Harry. What if Snape's back on the Dark side? What if he suggested this so... *Voldemort* can have a bloody good rummage in your head?"

"What's he going to find out?"

"That you're an Animagus," said Draco. "That we're all Animagi here, or well on the way." He nodded to Meghan. "That the other three Founders all have Heirs in our group—don't you think he might like knowing that?"

Meghan laughed suddenly. "I just thought of something," she said. "Do you realize Voldemort used Gryffindor blood to come back to life?"

"Huh." Harry smiled. "The Heir of Slytherin has Gryffindor blood."

"It sounds like an advertising slogan," said Draco. "New and Improved Heir of Slytherin! Now with Gryffindor Blood!"

When the Pride was done laughing at that, Harry finished his story, explaining what he'd found out just today. "So now I have to decide what I want to do," he wrapped up. "If I take the blood

bond, even if it's temporary, I will have lupus while I'm wearing the amulet. Letha knows some of the potions I can take to help with the symptoms, but I'd still be sick."

"But Voldemort couldn't get into your mind at all," said Neville.

"Not at all," Harry agreed.

"Even if he knew about the connection, it wouldn't make any difference," said Hermione.

"Right."

"And you'd stop being sick as soon as you ended the bond, or took off the amulet," Luna said.

"Yes."

"Would there be any permanent damage?" Meghan asked. "Would you get better after the bond was over? Or don't you know?"

Harry shrugged. "No one's ever done this before, so they don't know for sure. But Danger got her prophecy last night, and these are the first four lines here. She thought they might be about this." He took a scroll out of his pocket. "Have a look." He passed it to Hermione, and she read the lines aloud.

"Black could mean Professor Snape," said Neville musingly. "And white, Professor Dumbledore. Each of them has part of the answer that will make us happy."

Ginny's mind pounced on a possible answer to the other two colors. "You'd wear it on your pendant chain, wouldn't you?" she asked Harry, who nodded. "Then you'd probably use a gold locket to match, and blood is red. That's what gold and red will make. The amulet." She held out her hand, and Hermione gave her the prophecy. A quick look found the place she wanted. "And here. *The lion's son no harm shall take.* That's you, Harry. This means it won't hurt you."

Harry's grin flashed out. "Ginny, I need to ask you things more often," he said.

"What am I, dragon dung?" Neville asked the room at large.

"No, but you're not nearly as cute as she is."

Ginny felt her face heat. *Can't hide it. Might as well play it up.* "Oh, Harry," she said in a trembling falsetto. "You think I'm cute. Shall I faint at your feet now?"

"No thank you." Harry held out his hand to ward her off. "I have enough girls do that, thanks. I don't want you there too."

"Oh, come on, Harry," Draco objected. "No girl's ever really fainted at your feet."

"They were coming close before the Yule Ball."

“And if they’d thought it would work, they would have tried it,” Hermione added. “But Harry doesn’t go for helpless damsels in distress.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Harry said. “I don’t like seeing damsels in distress, but I don’t think I’m quite ready to see them out of dis dress.”

Everyone groaned, and the impromptu den disintegrated into a bad joke session.

“What did you see on the locket, Luna?” Neville finally asked when the Pride had worn themselves out laughing. “Is it cursed?”

“I don’t know. I see…” Luna scowled. “I wish you could all see it too,” she said. “I can’t think of the right words to tell you about it.”

“So show us,” said Meghan, reaching over and hooking Luna’s chain out of her robes. “Put it on us, and take us there.”

Luna closed her eyes for a second. “I feel silly now,” she announced.

“Don’t worry, we love you anyway,” said Harry. “In the most proper of senses, of course,” he added hastily at Draco’s glare.

Within moments, they were within Luna’s memory of the drawing room. Everything seemed to have an aura around it, or a second shadow, Ginny noticed. Even Meghan was beginning to show the shape of a graceful, slim-legged deer. *She’s only two spells away from Animagus, I think...*

“Anyone else want a go?” asked memory-Draco, the fox-shadow behind him flickering as he turned. “Luna?” He held out the locket.

Luna froze the scene. “Do you see?” she asked, pointing to it.

Ginny felt her lips peel back off her teeth. The locket had its own aura. A wavering man-shape stood between memory-Draco and the Pride.

“I can’t see its face,” she murmured aloud. “It’s like it keeps changing.”

“It does keep changing,” Harry said coldly. “But I’ve seen two of the things it’s changing between. It’s him.” He took a step closer and stared up at the man. “It’s Voldemort.”

Meghan shivered. “I knew Dadfoot’s family was Dark,” she murmured, “but why would something of Voldemort’s be here?”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “Padfoot’s parents thought Voldemort had the right idea, but they were never Death Eaters, and his brother Regulus was, but he tried to leave. Voldemort wouldn’t have given him anything important—or if he had, he would have come and taken it back, after Regulus got killed.”

“Mother liked Regulus,” Draco said, his voice tentative, as if he wasn’t sure of what he was saying. “Father didn’t want me named after him, but Mother said he’d picked my first name and she should be allowed to pick my middle. They argued for a long time. Mother won. She always did, if it was something important.”

“And she turned out good, in the end,” Ron said thoughtfully. “She probably wouldn’t have liked anyone who was really bad.”

“Besides, he tried to leave.” Ginny walked around the memory-figure, watching the shape of Voldemort change blink by blink, from the boy she remembered from the Chamber, to a young man with hunger in his eyes, to an older man with pale skin and a strangely flat nose, to a red-eyed monster with slits for nostrils. “Regulus tried to get out. So he can’t have been all bad.”

“Did he try to get out just to get out, I wonder?” Harry said, joining Ginny beside Voldemort. “Or did he run because he had to?”

“Sorry?” said Draco.

“If you steal my homework and I find out, what’s the first thing you do?”

“I run... oh.”

“You think Regulus stole this from Voldemort?” asked Ron, hardly hesitating over the name at all, though he wasn’t looking directly at the figure.

“It has to have been his at some point,” Neville said. “But why can Luna see him in it? Did he love it that much?”

An idea flickered in Ginny’s mind. “Neville, the ring you gave up for the Pride-pendants,” she said. “It had an H on it, and it was your dad’s...”

Neville laughed briefly. “He was a little mad when he heard what I did with it, but when he found out what these do, he understood.”

“But why was he mad?” Ginny pressed. “Why was that ring so important?”

“It was Helga Hufflepuff’s. It came down in our family.”

“So at least one thing survived from the days of the Founders,” Ginny said.

“Two,” said Harry. “That sword I pulled out of the Sorting Hat. And three, if you count the Hat itself.”

“What are you getting at, Ginny?” asked Hermione.

“A reason for Voldemort to love this locket,” Ginny said. “Luna, can you back this up a little? To where Ron was talking?”

The memory figures moved quickly backwards several steps, then reanimated. “Got a snake on it,” Ron said, peering at the locket he’d just lifted from the shelf.

“That’s what I thought you said.” Ginny smiled in satisfaction. “And we all know who could talk to snakes.”

“You think this might have been Slytherin’s,” said Luna, looking at the locket dubiously. “That would be a reason Voldemort would love it, but I don’t think that’s all of it.”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“I have an idea,” Neville announced. “Can we get out of here?”

“*Remigribus*,” said Luna, and the memory scene blinked out. There was a brief feeling of flying through lightning-filled skies, and then Ginny was wincing at the tingling of her very real feet, which had fallen asleep while she was elsewhere.

When everyone could walk again, Neville led them back to the drawing room. The Pride gathered around the table where the glass dome covered the innocent-looking locket.

“Can anyone get through this?” Neville asked, rapping on it with his knuckles.

“Maybe,” said Hermione, frowning. “I could try a Cutting Spell, but I don’t know if that would work or if it would just break it...”

“We can always fix it again,” said Ron.

“I hate to break up a good discussion,” said Harry, “but have any of you considered this?” He put his hand against the dome and pushed. It slid across the table’s surface. Draco, on the other side, hooked his fingers under it and lifted. Luna and Hermione, on either side of him, caught it smoothly as it turned over, and the three of them together set it down on the floor.

“We can put it back when we’re done,” Harry said. “No one will ever know.”

“Unless we tell them.” Neville took Meghan’s hand in his. “I don’t think you’ll like this,” he said. “But will you still do it, please? For us?”

Meghan made a small gesture with her free hand. Ginny hid her smile. *For you, she says. How are they ever going to wait until she’s seventeen?*

Neville was reaching out now, Meghan’s hand still joined in his. Together, they lowered their hands over the locket, Meghan’s skin touching a part of the chain, Neville’s the smooth metal of the locket itself.

Both of them jerked back as if they’d been burned. Meghan made a little mew of distress and shook her hand hard. “Slimy,” she said with a shudder, then looked around at the Pride. “Whatever that is, it’s not normal,” she said firmly. “There’s some nasty magic on there, and I

don't want to be anywhere near it."

"Then you won't be," said Harry, nodding to Draco, who bent to pick up the half-globe. "Neville?"

Neville nodded. "What Meghan said," he agreed. "Except I've felt something like this before. It wasn't so strong, or maybe it was strong in a different way. But the only other thing I've ever touched that felt like this was Tom Riddle's diary." He smiled across at Ginny. "And I wouldn't have thought of that if you hadn't brought it up."

Harry caught the other side of the dome. Ginny stepped up quickly to help him, placing her hands on the curve of the dome rather than under its lip, slowing its progress with friction. Harry nodded thanks to her as the dome settled smoothly back into place. "So it definitely belonged to Voldemort," he said. "And he did something complicated to it, possibly something like the diary. Do you think there might be a memory in this too?"

The Pride looked at the locket, lying innocently beneath its sheltering glass.

"I think we need to tell the Pack-parents about this," said Hermione.

"I think you're right," said Harry.

The Pride filed out of the room. Ginny closed the door behind her, resisting the urge to look back at the locket one more time. It was under glass, and she'd never touched it. It couldn't hurt her. She was safe here.

"Oh, there you are!" Mum came bustling up the stairs. "We've been looking all over for you. I have some good news, Ron, Ginny. Percy's coming to dinner tonight!"

"Er, great," said Ron feebly. He leaned back to Ginny. "Move to keep him out of the drawing room," he muttered as Mum went past.

"Seconded. All in favor say aye."

"Aye," said eight voices.

"Vote is unanimous," Ginny droned. "Motion carried."

"Bet Percy'd love to hear that," said Ron with a nervous grin.

"Oh, and Harry, I have a message for you," said Mum, popping back into sight at the end of the hall. "Your parents want to know if you've decided yet. They're down in the kitchen."

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley." Harry looked at the Pride. "I'm doing it," he said.

"All in favor say aye," said Ginny promptly.

Harry tried to say something, but was drowned out by the chorus of seven “Aye”s.

“It’s not a vote,” Ginny said, having been close enough to hear the gist of Harry’s protest. “We’re just telling you we approve.”

“Oh. Thank you, then.”

“Good luck, Harry,” said Hermione, moving up to hug him. Meghan latched on from the other side, and Draco stroked his cheek before shaking Harry’s hand in the special pattern Ginny had noticed they only used with each other. Ron gave Harry a brief hug, then ducked back as if embarrassed, and Neville shook his hand firmly and grinned at him.

Then Luna stepped up and kissed his cheek. “For luck,” she said as Harry blushed and the other boys chuckled. Hermione hid a smile, and Meghan giggled. “Because I can’t do it the other way.”

Ginny got a firm grip on her emotions. “More luck is always good,” she said, and stepped around Harry to his other cheek.

Harry turned his head to watch her move.

Ginny pulled back not quite in time, as her lips brushed his.

She caught a hasty breath and pulled in a random memory, one of being backstage before the performance of *Joseph*. “Break a leg, Harry,” she whispered, looking anywhere but at him.

“Thanks. I will.”

Was it her imagination, Ginny wondered, or did his voice sound faintly flustered?

She didn’t look up until Harry’s footsteps changed from the hollow thuds of the stair treads to the softer thumping on the threadbare carpet below in the hall.

Six people were doing their best to look somewhere else.

“Move that never happened,” Ginny said as firmly as she could manage.

“Seconded,” said Hermione quickly. “All in favor.”

“Aye,” said five voices together.

“Motion carried,” Ginny said, breathing a silent sigh of relief.

“If it never happened, does that mean we’re not allowed to talk about it?” said Ron wistfully.

Hermione hit him.

xXxXx

Harry used his dagger to peel another shaving of pine off the wood chip. “Enough?” he asked Moony.

“Two more that size, and I think you’re good.” Moony looked critically at his pile of dogwood, then set his own knife aside and started to measure drops of potion into the golden bowl. “We’re lucky to have Aletha here,” he said, frowning at his work. “We can trust her to brew correctly, even if she doesn’t agree with what the potion will be used for.”

“She probably did it to get you to stop talking about it,” Harry said.

“Probably,” Moony agreed. “Now if I’d brewed these, I’d be the first one to tell you not to go through with this.”

“And I’d be the first one to take your advice. You or Padfoot.” Harry finished the second shaving, set the pine aside, and blew the dust off his dagger, then sneezed.

“Don’t put that away yet,” Moony said without looking up. “We need these both chopped fine.”

“Separately or together?”

“Separately. Let’s not mix them before they need to be mixed.”

“I should use your knife for the dogwood, then.”

“Good thinking.”

Moony finished measuring the two potions at the same time Harry chopped the last shaving into splinters. The two wizards looked at each other.

“Ready?” Moony asked hoarsely.

Harry swallowed. “As I’ll ever be.”

Moony pulled up his left sleeve. “Of my own free will do I give this blood,” he said, nicking the skin of his forearm near the elbow with Harry’s dagger. “I give it for this binding and for this binding only. So I speak, so I intend.”

“So let it be done,” Harry said softly. He closed his hand around Moony’s, and together they held the dagger high over the saucer. Three drops of blood dripped from its point to mix with the two potions.

Moony let go of the dagger and drew his wand. “*Scourgify*,” he muttered, cleaning the blade, then pointed the wand at his arm and conjured a bandage for it. Harry took the opportunity to gulp.
Here we go...

He placed the point of the dagger against his skin. “Of my own free will do I give this blood,” he repeated, surprised at how little the cut on his arm hurt. “I give it for this binding and this binding

only.” Blood welled onto the blade, and he pulled it away, worried that it might be too much. “So I speak, so I intend.”

“So let it be done,” Moony said, lifting his hand to place it around Harry’s on the dagger, holding it over the saucer together. Three drops fell, then Harry lowered the dagger, and Moony released his grip to clean its blade once more.

Harry sheathed the dagger and looked up. From beneath the table, Moony had produced a tiny gold locket, devoid of chain, and was just now placing it into the potion-blood mixture.

Harry took a deep breath to calm himself. One of the tricky parts was over, but the other was just beginning.

Moony swept his pile of dogwood into the center of the table. Harry did the same with the pine. Together, they lifted the saucer and held it over the shavings.

“You know your lines?” Moony muttered.

“As well as you do.”

“Let’s find out.” With one quick gesture, Moony set the wood on fire and began to speak.

“Fire of dogwood, fire of pine,

“Make this boy a son of mine.

“Join our bloods in secret gold,

“Where no foeman may behold. ”

Harry spoke up, obscurely proud that his voice was steady. The liquid in the saucer was boiling furiously, the fire burnt bright, but he felt no pain in the hand holding the dish above the flames.

“Pine and dogwood, burning here,

“Make this man my father dear.

“In this gold our bloods conceal,

“So no enemy them steal. ”

The fire in the shavings went out even as Harry spoke the last word.

The liquid in the saucer was gone. The tiny locket lay there alone.

Moony began to lower the saucer to the table. Harry quickly did the same. “Did it work?” he asked.

“I know one good way to find out.” Moony picked up the locket and held out his hand. Harry quickly took off his pendant chain and willed it open, and Moony slid the locket onto it. Harry watched it slide down the chain and clink gently against the engraving of the stag on his first pendant.

“Put it back on,” Moony prompted.

Harry did. “I don’t feel any different,” he said.

“Just wait.” Moony stood up, motioning Harry to do the same, and to come to one side of the table. He placed his hands on Harry’s shoulders. “By the power that is in me and by the blood that we share,” he said formally, “I do release any bindings that may be on the power of the line of Godric Gryffindor within you, Harry James Potter, my blood son. I charge you to use this power always for good, never for evil, and to remember that even the very wise cannot see all ends.” His hands tightened for a moment. “And also to remember that I love you.”

A peculiar feeling ran through Harry’s body, starting at Moony’s hands and working its way down and up simultaneously. It was like a shiver, except that a shiver was cold, and this was hot, burning hot—but it didn’t hurt...

No, it tickles.

Especially in my nose.

Harry sneezed violently, twice, feeling rather than seeing Moony dodge aside. “Ugh,” he said, pressing at his streaming eyes. “Sorry.”

“It’s quite all right,” Moony said, sounding amused. “Here, try this.” A handkerchief found Harry’s hand. “And then you may want to deal with these.”

“Deal with what?” Harry wiped his eyes and looked where Moony was pointing.

Three tiny fires smoldered merrily in the carpet below.

Harry dropped to his knees. Holding his breath, he slid his hand under one of the flames.

It came up with no more trouble than a dropped Knut or quill. A faint warmth radiated down from it, but nothing worse.

“I did it,” he breathed. “I really did it...” He looked up at Moony. “Where did these come from?”

“They came from you.”

“I know that, but where?”

“Do you honestly want to know that?”

Harry considered the process of sneezing. “No, I don’t think I do.”

“I don’t think you do either. But I do think it worked.” Moony bent and picked up another of the flames. “I believe this belongs to you,” he said, adding it to the one on Harry’s palm.

“Congratulations, Harry, and many happy returns of the day. Your father would have been proud of you today.”

“My father is proud of me today,” Harry corrected. “Aren’t you?”

The remaining flame on the carpet was extinguished by water from above.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 7: Joinings and Partings (Year 5)

Chapter 7: Joinings and Partings

Albus Dumbledore lifted the heavy locket from the table and traced the snake marking on it with one finger. “Fascinating,” he murmured.

A small noise from the direction of the door made him smile. “You may come in,” he said aloud. “All of you.”

“I *told* you so,” Hermione hissed at Ron as the Pride filed in, looking chagrined.

“I had meant to speak to you about this at some point anyway,” Dumbledore said, turning to face them. “This will merely facilitate things. Luna, you say that you can see Voldemort’s shape around this locket?”

“It changes,” Luna said, “but Harry says it’s all Voldemort. I believe him.”

“Harry.” Dumbledore beckoned the boy forward. “Have you touched it at any point?”

“No, sir. Just held up the dome so Neville and Meghan could try.”

“And they disliked how it felt.” Dumbledore looked at the mentioned two.

“Very much, sir,” Neville said as Meghan nodded hard. “I don’t want to touch it again.”

“I will not ask you to. But I will ask Harry.” Dumbledore held up the locket. “If you will, Harry.”

Harry reached out tentatively and laid a finger on the locket. A shudder ran through his body, and he snatched his hand away, clapping it to his forehead. “It burned,” he said. “But with cold, not hot. Does that make sense?”

“It does. And your scar?”

Harry took his hand away. “It hurt for just a second. It’s stopped now.”

“But I held it,” said Ron. “And Draco, too. We didn’t feel anything.”

“And I would imagine any of the rest of you could hold it without discomfort,” Dumbledore said. “Though Luna might not care for it.”

Luna pointedly clasped her hands behind her back.

“Blood Heirs,” said Ginny. “Harry and Neville and Meghan are, and we’re not. And Voldemort

is, too. He put some kind of enchantment on it that blood Heirs of the Founders respond to..."

Her tone was doubtful, questioning, but Dumbledore nodded. "Well spotted, Ginny," he said.

And better than well, as she does my work for me. Now I must maintain it here, and plant the doubts elsewhere.

He slid the locket inside his robes. "If you ever see another item with that exact look to it, Luna, you must tell me immediately, no matter what else is going on," he told her. "Objects with this enchantment can be dangerous if mishandled. Fortunately, your handling of the situation was perfect." He made that a general statement, and more than one person beamed. "Now, if I may ask you all to leave Harry and myself alone for a short time? I wish to speak with him, now that it is safe to do so."

The rest of the Pride vacated the room, several signing comments to Harry as they went. Harry sat down in an armchair when they were gone, tucking his legs up under him. "I feel like I can still feel it," he said, rubbing the finger that had touched the locket. "Doesn't it bother you to have it there?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "I do not have your particular sensitivity to it. And on that subject, Harry, I want to thank you for your willingness to take on this new burden."

"New... oh, that." Harry shrugged. "Letha's being so motherly, I can't even turn around without her asking if I feel all right. That's the worst of it just now."

"It may grow worse." Dumbledore considered his position carefully. "Harry, I encourage you not to give up your Occlumency practice because of this new level of safety. Voldemort may, at some point, find a way around it, or some problem with the spell may arise. I ask you to develop your other lines of defense, should this one some day fail you."

"Why don't you just tell me to do it?" Harry's tone made it a serious question, as free from sarcasm as any question asked by a Marauder's child could ever be. "Why ask?"

"Courtesy, perhaps." Dumbledore regarded the boy sitting across from him with an inner sigh. "In our world, a boy is a man at seventeen. You are fifteen as of yesterday—many happy returns, belatedly—but you are approaching manhood rapidly. As well, whether we care for the fact or not, you will be an inevitable part of this war. I feel it incumbent upon me to treat you with courtesy."

"Do you treat Tonks like that? Or Padfoot, or Moody?"

Dumbledore frowned, unsure where Harry was going. "I attempt to be courteous to all."

"But do you just ask them to do things? Or do you tell them? We're in a war, Professor, and you're leading us, unless something changed and I don't know about it. We swore to you, the Pride and I, that night after the third task." Harry's legs came down, and he lifted his chin.

“Maybe we’re just kids, but we can fight. And we can take orders.” A grin lit his face, reminding Dumbledore sharply of James Potter. “We don’t like it, but we can do it.”

“Though I run the risk of having those orders reinterpreted.”

“Only if we need to, sir.”

Dumbledore hid his smile. “In that case, I will tell you to continue your Occlumency practice, even though I understand you find it a hard discipline to follow.”

“Yes, sir. To both.”

“You have strong feelings, Harry, and you have never learned to hide what you feel. It has never been necessary, living as you do within a loving family. Those who have lived with trouble and worry frequently make better Occlumens.”

Harry’s eyes were far off. Dumbledore let him think. After a moment, the boy nodded. “I can do that,” he said quietly, as though finishing a conversation, and turned back to the Headmaster. “Is there anything else, sir?”

“There is, Harry.” Dumbledore smoothed an imaginary wrinkle out of his robes. Why was this so hard? The boy’s future would not change merely because he knew about it.

But his outlook will change. His feelings and his thoughts will change. And thus, he will change, and you do not want to be the one to change him, because you love him.

He banished the treacherous voice and looked up. “You know the beginning of the prophecy which names you as the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord. I believe it is time you knew the whole of it.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Now?” he blurted.

“Do you have somewhere else to be?”

“No—but...”

Dumbledore waited, letting Harry put his thoughts together.

“I don’t know if I’m ready,” Harry said finally. “I don’t know if I want to know it.”

“You will have to know it eventually,” Dumbledore pointed out quietly.

“I know...” Harry’s shoulders slumped. “But you never think eventually will come until it does.”

“Would it help your decision if I told you that Voldemort is seeking a way to find this prophecy, since he knows only the part you know yourself?” Dumbledore watched Harry carefully, and knew he had the boy’s attention when Harry’s head turned slightly. “And that some of your

unusual dreams while staying with your relatives relate to this?”

“Is it written down somewhere?” Harry asked after a moment of thought. “Does the Ministry keep records of prophecies?”

“It does, but not written ones. And the safeguards on the records are extreme. The magic placed on them is such that only someone who the prophecy is about —someone like yourself—would be able to touch them.”

Harry frowned, wrinkling his nose. “Do you mean if he wanted it, he’d have to use me to get it, sir? But it’s about him too, isn’t it? Couldn’t he get it?”

“He could, but Voldemort has long believed in taking as few risks as possible with his own body, and after thirteen years disembodied, he will likely be more careful than ever. Especially now, with the Ministry refusing to recognize his return.” Dumbledore kept the anger light in his voice, though he felt it thoroughly. “Voldemort will not jeopardize such a valuable fact by appearing in public.”

“So since he won’t get it himself, he might try to use me to get it, by...” Harry looked up. “Threatening someone?”

Dumbledore let some of his approval show. “He might. Or he might work through someone else, someone you have reason to trust, or think you do.”

“And that person asks me to... what? Take a record off a shelf at the Ministry?”

“Basically.”

“It’s easy, then, sir. I just say no. Why would I even be at the Ministry in the first place?”

“There could be reasons. And the record could be disguised, or the reason why it is needed falsified. You might even be led to believe that someone is in peril of his life, or hers, and that the record is the only thing which will save them.”

Harry smiled. “That’s what these are for, sir.” He hooked a finger around his pendant chain.

“And if your pendants tell you the same story as the person in front of you?” Dumbledore sighed. “Voldemort will not skimp on this, Harry. It is one of the driving forces of his life at the moment, to hear in full the prophecy he believes shapes his life.”

“He believes, sir? Doesn’t it really?”

Dumbledore chuckled dryly. “In a way, it shapes his life *because* he believes in it. If he had not believed, he would never have attacked you. Your parents would never have died. You would never have known your Pack, nor become this young man seated here before me. You would still have been Harry Potter, but a very different Harry Potter. Voldemort, likewise, would have been different. Perhaps he would never have fallen, or perhaps some other circumstance would have

brought about his downfall.”

Harry looked somewhat crestfallen. “But I thought I was the only one who could defeat him.”

“A prophecy is only words, Harry. It takes belief to make it come true. Because Voldemort believes in the prophecy, which states that you have the power to defeat him, you do. He fears you. You are his weakness.”

Harry stared at him. “So it’s only true because he believes it is?”

“Do not discount belief, Harry. Belief is behind every great act of magic. And the end result is the same as if the prophecy was magically binding. Because Voldemort believes that you are the only one who can defeat him, you become the only one.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I think I understand,” he said. “But I still don’t see why you want me to know the whole prophecy, Professor. If the only thing that makes it important is that Voldemort knows it, and Voldemort doesn’t know the end of it, why does the end matter?”

Dumbledore laughed aloud, surprised. “Neatly done, Harry,” he said. “I find myself trapped in my own logic.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry inclined his head.

“I suppose my ultimate reason is as simple as human curiosity,” Dumbledore said. “The prophecy has to do with you. I cannot imagine that you have not wondered what it says.”

Harry shrugged one shoulder.

“If you know, you are less likely to be tempted when you face the recorded form of the prophecy. You would also be more able to destroy it, which may yet have to be done.”

“Destroy it?”

Dumbledore hid a laugh at the sudden interest in Harry’s eyes. “It would be tipping our hand to do so now,” he said. “Voldemort has not yet indicated interest in it, except through your dreams. Also, I hate to do anything which cannot be undone, and destruction of a recording of this sort is final.”

“And every minute Voldemort spends chasing the prophecy is another minute he’s not hurting people,” Harry said.

“Indeed. So will you hear the prophecy, then?”

“Yes, sir. May I tell anyone else about it?”

It was the question Dumbledore had been expecting. “Your parents already know, as I am sure you are aware. And I cannot imagine you would have kept the general contents of the portion you

were given secret.”

“It’s actually why we made the Pride,” Harry confided. “So I could tell them the first part of the prophecy as a den-secret.”

“Then let this second part be a den-secret as well.” Dumbledore took a breath, composing himself, then began to speak the words which had branded themselves into his mind that day more than fifteen years ago.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...”

xXxXx

Someone knocked on the door of Sirius and Aletha’s bedroom.

“Come in,” Aletha called from her chair by the window, where she was studying some notes she’d taken at St. Mungo’s.

Harry opened the door and stepped in. “Is Padfoot around?” he asked.

“No, he’s still at work. Will I do?”

“I guess.”

Aletha set her notes aside and stood up. “What is it, Harry?” she asked, worried by his tone. “What’s happened?”

“I know now.” Harry shut the door behind himself. “I know what has to happen.” He looked up at her. His eyes held the same lost, frightened look they had when he’d awakened from his nightmares as a baby.

Except that now I can’t tell him it was all a dream.

Aletha crossed the room and gathered her Pack-son into her arms. “The prophecy,” she said, making it a statement. “Albus told you the prophecy.”

“Mm-hmm,” Harry said into her shoulder, holding onto her tightly.

“Come on, over here with you.” Aletha pulled him across the room and half-lifted him onto the bed. “Lie down.”

“Wha...”

“Lie down, I said.”

Harry curled up on his side, craning his neck to look up at her.

“You can change forms if you like.” Aletha reached down to stroke Harry’s hair, but settled for the neck of the yearling Wolf. “There now. You’re safe.”

Wolf shook his head.

“No, you’re not safe?”

Wolf snorted in exasperation and changed forms again. “I’m not ever going to be safe,” Harry said bitterly. “Either I have to kill Voldemort, or he has to kill me. That’s not safe. That’s just... wrong.”

Aletha shut her eyes for a moment, then released the barriers she usually held between her feelings and the outside world. When she looked at Harry again, she wasn’t surprised to see him flinch, just a little. “You’re right,” she said softly. “It is wrong. I’ve been thinking about how wrong it is for a long time, and wishing it was some other way. But it isn’t.”

“So what? I should just stop whining and try to ignore it?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, Harry James Potter. I never said anything of the sort.” Deliberately, Aletha adopted the tone she’d use if she’d caught Harry trying to bend a household rule. “I was attempting to offer you some comfort, but if you’re going to snap my head off, you can leave.” She tapped the tip of his nose with one finger admonishingly. “And you can take your self-pity party with you.”

“I am not having...”

“You’re feeling very sorry for yourself and looking for people to make it all better. Do you have a better definition?”

Harry’s fist clenched.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Aletha said. “I hit back.”

“It’s not *fair!*” Harry shouted, sitting up, both fists balled now. “I never wanted this! I still don’t want it! Dumbledore even said the prophecy doesn’t matter, except that Voldemort knows about it, but it does and it’s not *fair!*”

Aletha shook her head. “You’re so right,” she said. “It’s not fair. And you bear the brunt of the unfairness. I hate it just like you do.” She refrained from saying “just as much,” since Harry didn’t need anything else to yell about. “But Voldemort is going to come after you, whether you like it or not. Still, I think he’s likely to put it off for a while, for the simple reason that he can’t get at you here.”

She reached out and laid her hand on Harry’s shoulder for a moment. “You are safe, Harry. Right here and right now, you are safe. You won’t be forever, and you wouldn’t want to be, but you need it now. So here it is. You are safe.”

Now as long as you believe me...

Harry slumped, then changed forms and crawled towards her as Wolf, whining. Aletha pulled her legs up onto the bed and crossed them, presenting as much space as possible, and Wolf plopped his front half into her lap and pushed his nose under her arm. Aletha didn't try to hide her smile, since he would smell it on her anyway, but busied herself rubbing around his ears and along the sides of his jaw.

“You can't get away from this by shouting about it, Harry,” she murmured. “But you don't have to face it right away, and you don't ever have to face it alone.”

Wolf gave her a skeptical look.

“I mean that. Even when you've fought alone, you're never really alone, are you? Our love is always with you.” Aletha smiled, stroking Wolf's forehead over the white-furred line of his scar. “And we usually manage to get some practical help in there as well.”

Wolf sighed and laid his head back down.

They sat until the door opened without a knock. “I'm home,” Sirius said, “and what a... Harry?”

Harry tumbled off Aletha's lap and ran to his godfather.

Aletha let Sirius see her smirk over Harry's shoulder. “And you thought he'd forget about you,” she mouthed at him.

Sirius shrugged the shoulder Harry wasn't leaning against.

Take care of him, Aletha signed, and slid off the bed. As she closed the door, she made a mental note to put Unbreakable Charms on the lamps and other valuables in their room later on.

It might not be a bad idea to do every room in the house while we're at it. Or ask Dobby or Winky to do it...

She'd done her best, but there were times when a boy needed a man.

And Harry has two. Lucky boy.

A growl from within the room made her chuckle quietly. “Just remember you have to clean it up, you two,” she murmured. “And don't hurt each other too badly.”

Humming to herself, Aletha made her way downstairs.

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The Pride met once more in their new Den, this time in full secrecy, with no outside members allowed (Ginny had wheedled Tonks into teaching her the Imperturbable Charm, and placed it on

the door to discourage Fred and George from listening in). “What’s going on, Harry?” Draco asked. “You disappeared after Dumbledore was here, and we didn’t know where you were.”

“I had to talk with Letha and Padfoot for a little while, about what I found out.” Harry breathed deeply, reminding himself that he was in-den and safe. “It’s dangerous. It’s probably one of the most dangerous things in the world to know right now, because it’s what Voldemort wants to know. And now I know it.”

“Are you going to tell us?” asked Ron, his eyes lighting up.

“Do you want to know?” Harry looked at his friend. “I mean that, Ron. Do you really want to know this? Voldemort’s going to be after anyone who knows, and he doesn’t play around. You could get hurt. Or killed.”

“I can’t talk if I’m dead.”

“There are lots of things that hurt worse than dead.”

Ron scoffed. “How’s he going to get me? I’m with you everywhere you go, and you’re protected out your arse. Besides, how’s he going to know I know? He doesn’t even know you know, does he?” He stopped. “Did that make any sense at all?”

“No, it did,” Hermione said quickly. “If Voldemort doesn’t know we know about whatever it is, he won’t try to get it out of us. Ron’s right, Harry. You don’t have to worry about us.”

Except that I always do.

But Hermione had a point, Harry had to admit. This was the kind of information Voldemort would never have dreamed of telling anyone else. Why would he think that Harry would do differently?

Hell, he might not even think Dumbledore would tell me. We’re safe enough.

He just wished he didn’t have the feeling that he was making a terrible mistake.

“Dumbledore told me the rest of the prophecy,” he said. “The one that could have been me or Neville, but turned out to be me.”

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord,” Neville recalled. “The rest of it must be pretty bad, Harry. You look like you want to throw rocks at something.”

“You could say that.” Harry bowed his head to remember. “I’m supposed to be marked as Voldemort’s equal and have power he doesn’t know about.”

“That’s not so bad,” said Draco.

“But that’s not the end,” Luna countered. “Is it, Harry?”

“No, it’s not.” Harry looked up. The Pride was watching him closely. “The end... the end says that either I have to kill him, or he has to kill me. Neither one of us can live while the other one does.”

A shocked silence reigned. Hermione broke it. “That doesn’t make any sense,” she said passionately. “You’re alive right now, and so is Voldemort. How can the prophecy say you can’t both be alive at the same time?”

“What does it say exactly?” Ginny asked.

Harry closed his eyes. ““Either must die at the hand of the other,”” he recited, ““for neither can live while the other survives.””

Ginny’s forehead wrinkled in thought.

Without a word, Meghan moved across the circle and embraced Harry. Her skin was ashen pale, she shivered in his arms, but her embrace was as tight as though she were already denying him to death.

“I think it may mean being really alive,” Ginny said after a moment. “The prophecy. It may mean Harry can’t have a real life until Voldemort’s dead.”

“Define real life,” said Harry, feeling a surge of indignation. “Does it mean I can’t have friends? Or a family? Or go to school? I do that all already, Voldemort or no Voldemort, and I’m not giving it up.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” Ginny flared back. “I just meant you’re always going to have to think about him, until he’s gone. And he has to think about you, because he has to be afraid of you.”

“Voldemort has to be afraid of Harry?” Ron said. “Doesn’t that go the other way around?”

“It goes both ways,” said Hermione. “Harry even has the advantage. He has power Voldemort doesn’t know about... how did that bit go, Harry?”

““He shall have power the Dark Lord knows not,”” Harry recited. “It’s kind of ambiguous.”

“Prophecies like to do that,” Luna said. “Then they can claim they meant whichever one actually happened. This could mean that Voldemort doesn’t know about your power, or that he does know about it but that it’s something he doesn’t understand or can’t use.”

Harry looked down at the top of Meghan’s head, and something came back to him. The night after the third task, before the moment he’d mentioned to Dumbledore earlier—another conversation between the two of them, when Harry had been close to despair because he thought that what he wanted most of all would be impossible to have ever again...

“I think I know what it is,” he said. “Dumbledore told me that night, after the third task.” He held

Meghan a little tighter. "It's love."

"Love?" Draco sounded skeptical. "The power the Dark Lord knows not is love?"

"He doesn't love anyone," Meghan said, turning in the circle of Harry's arms to face Draco. "He doesn't care about anyone, except what they can do for him. And no one cares about him, not the way we care about Harry. All the Death Eaters stay with him because they're afraid, or because they think they'll get ahead with him."

"And we're with Harry because he's our friend," Ron said. "If things get really bad for Voldemort, a lot of the Death Eaters will probably bail. We won't." His look was challenging.

"You think I'm going to bail?" Draco demanded.

"Stop it," said Hermione, glaring alternately at her brother and her friend. "No one's going to do that. None of us, at least. Pride together."

"Pride forever," came a ragged chorus.

"Pathetic," said Ginny. "Say it like you mean it."

The response this time shook the room.

Hermione exchanged smiles with Ginny.

Harry hid his own smile behind Meghan's braids, remembering one part of his conversation with Padfoot.

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They'd wrestled in Animagus form, then talked some as humans, then gone back to wrestling. They were lying on the floor catching their breath when Harry thought of a question he'd been meaning to ask.

"Padfoot? Is it possible to like two girls at the same time?"

Padfoot rolled over to look at Harry. "Girlfriend like?"

"Yeah."

"Yes, it's possible. Not the best of ideas, but it's possible." Padfoot's expression clearly said, *What are you up to now?*

"Thanks. I just wanted to know." Harry sat up and turned away.

"Oh no you don't." Padfoot reached over and caught Harry's shoulder, bringing him back around. "You can't just ask a question like that and run away. Who're the lucky girls?"

Harry leveled a glare at Padfoot.

“No teasing, I promise. Or how about this—you tell me one of them, and the other one stays secret. Deal?”

“Deal.” Harry leaned back against the bed. “Her name’s Cho Chang. She Seeks for Ravenclaw. She’s really pretty and really smart, and she used to be Cedric Diggory’s girlfriend.”

“Ouch.” Padfoot winced. “That could hurt your chances.”

“She kissed me before term ended last year.”

“Maybe not, then.” Padfoot nodded several times, his eyes speculative. “Now tell me a little about the other one. Not who she is, but why you think you like her.”

“She’s...” Harry thought hard. How could he describe her without Padfoot guessing? “She’s my friend. I know her, and I like her. She knows me, and I think she likes me, but I don’t know if she likes me as anything more than a friend, but she might. We like a lot of the same things, and I trust her. And she’s smart and nice and pretty,” he added almost as an afterthought.

“I’m sure she’d appreciate that,” Padfoot said with a straight face. “But you still like the Chang girl.”

“Yeah.”

“She’s not your actual girlfriend, is she? You’ve never gone anywhere with her?”

“I wish.”

“Maybe you’ll get the chance this year,” Padfoot said. “Harry, if there’s one thing I’ve learned...” He stopped. “Merlin’s beard, I’m turning into Moony.”

Harry leaned over and poked him. “You still feel like you.”

“Har har.”

“Just say it.”

“Don’t ruin a friendship over liking a girl. That was my biggest mistake with Letha. I thought that because I liked her, we couldn’t be friends. I had to show off and make her impressed with me, because if she actually got to know me, she’d hate me.”

Harry frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Now you tell me.”

Both of them laughed.

“Harry, if this other girl is really your friend, keep her that way,” Padfoot advised when they were done. “If she’s meant to be something more, it’ll happen. But don’t give up... Cho, was it? Don’t give up Cho just because you think you might like someone else too. That’s the point of being young. You try lots of things. Some of them work, some of them don’t.”

Harry grimaced. “And the ones that don’t let your friends tell embarrassing stories about you your whole life.”

“Now you’re catching on.” Padfoot grinned. “Just remember to get adequate dirt on them while you’re at it, and you shouldn’t have a problem.”

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Dirt on the Pride from the summer wouldn’t be too hard to come by, though it wasn’t the sort you could sell to a newspaper, Harry mused. It was just the funny little things that happened in life, like Ron running away screaming from the teacup-sized spiders in the third-floor closet, or Draco fighting with a homicidal robe from the attic, or Ginny and Meghan getting locked in the bathroom for two hours before anyone noticed they were missing.

Neville’s expression the day they’d been introduced to their new Defense teacher was definitely on the list. His mouth had dropped open, and he’d gone a shade of yellow Harry’d never seen on a human face before croaking one word.

“Mum?”

“Do close your mouth, dear,” Mrs. Longbottom had said fondly. “I am a qualified Auror, you know.”

“Yeah, but...”

“You could ask Harry what it’s like to be taught by a parent, or Draco or Hermione,” she’d suggested. “I’m sure they could tell you.”

Neville had watched her out of the room, his jaw still hanging loose.

“Problem?” Hermione said.

“My *mum* is teaching Defense!”

“Is she not a good teacher?” Draco asked.

“I don’t know!” Neville sat down at the kitchen table and put his head in his hands. “It’s just... it’s just...”

“She’s your mum,” Harry suggested.

“Yes!”

“It was a little strange for us, too,” said Hermione. “But we got used to it. And they knew what they were teaching us, so why does it matter?”

“Because...” Neville looked appealingly at the rest of the Pride.

“It is odd to think about your parents doing something else,” said Luna. “Especially if you haven’t seen them work before. I always knew what Dad did, and Mum, because they worked at home, but if you don’t see your parents working, you just think of them as your parents. You don’t think of them as grownups like your teachers.”

Neville shook his head. “I don’t know why I’m making such a big fuss over this. Mum and Dad are both good at what they do, and we need a good teacher this year like never before.”

“And it’s getting hard to get a good teacher,” said Ron. “Do you think the job’s really jinxed?”

“That’s part of the reason I don’t like Mum there,” Neville confessed. “If it really is jinxed, what’s going to happen to her?”

A moment of silence fell as the Pride thought about that.

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Another marvelous moment, Harry thought, had been the opening of the Hogwarts letters, a day or two after they’d found out Mrs. Longbottom would be the new Defense teacher. Dumbledore had talked with him a little about the prefect appointments, and Harry’d agreed that he got into too much trouble to be a good choice for prefect. “Besides, I lead the Pride already,” he said. “If I try to be a prefect too, I’ll get mixed up.”

“Precisely.” Dumbledore had smiled. “And I think a taste of responsibility would be no bad thing for the young man in question.”

Harry contrived to be watching Ron at the moment when his friend realized his Hogwarts letter was too heavy to be just a piece of parchment. He only wished he’d remembered to bring the camera.

One not-so-wonderful part of the summer, of course, was Harry’s lupus, but as he’d told Dumbledore, Letha was watching him like a jarvey with a gnome, and had a potion ready for him if he so much as winced. Apart from occasional stiffness in the mornings, the only symptom he really experienced through August was the thick aftertaste in his throat that came from drinking too many potions.

“You’ll have to keep track of it yourself while you’re at school,” Letha reminded him some days. “Madam Pomfrey knows about it now, enough to keep an eye on you, but you’re the first line of defense, Harry. The potions won’t hurt you, so take them if you need them.”

But of course, the greatest events of the summer were the three weddings.

Dobby and Winky's wedding came first, since it was a simple ceremony, requiring only the two of them, a broomstick, and a witness. Ginny and Mrs. Weasley, however, insisted on something more for Winky's special day, and Dobby admitted with a slight look of shame that he'd been saving his wages at Hogwarts for just this kind of chance.

And so it was that Dobby and Winky were the first house-elves in centuries to be married in house-elf-sized wedding robes, crisp black for Dobby and ruffled white for Winky. They made the traditional house-elf promises to be faithful as far as their prior loyalties to their masters would allow, and Ron and Draco set Harry's Firebolt on the living room floor for them to jump.

"The better the broomstick, the better the jump," Draco had wheedled Harry that morning. "And what could they do to it?"

Harry had looked tentatively at his beloved broomstick before relinquishing it. "If it gets damaged," he'd told Draco, "you get to buy me a new one."

"Deal."

But both house-elves cleared the broomstick on the first jump, making all the wedding guests cheer. The party adjourned to the kitchen for the wedding lunch, prepared, as was traditional, by the newlyweds.

Charlie and Tonks' long-awaited event was next, held, as promised, on 19 August. Like Dobby and Winky's wedding, it happened at Headquarters, but the preparations were more elaborate. Both house-elves worked unceasingly to get the house ready, and the Pride was pressed into service at every turn.

Harry escaped some of the more onerous labor because he was helping Mrs. Weasley, Ginny, and Danger in the kitchen, preparing as much as possible ahead of time for the wedding dinner. Remembering Padfoot's advice, he tried to treat Ginny as he always had, as if she were his little sister as well as Ron's (minus the teasing, of course).

At least she doesn't blush every time she sees me anymore.

"How are the maid of honor rehearsals going?" he asked on the 17th, carefully steering the magical icing bag around the side of the wedding cake.

"It's not that hard, really," Ginny answered from behind him, where she was placing a tiny candy heart in the center of each flower Harry's bag laid down. "I walk down the aisle, stand behind Tonks, take her bouquet when it's time for her and Charlie to exchange rings and touch wands, give it back to her when she's done, and walk up the aisle with Bill. Nothing too exciting. But then, being in *Joseph* wasn't either, until I realized how many people were going to be looking at me."

“You did fine there,” Harry said. “You should do fine here.”

“Thanks. How about you? How are you doing with being a groomsman?”

Harry laughed. “Like you said, walk up the aisle, walk down the aisle. Not too hard, even for me.”

“Who are you paired with, Meghan or Hermione?” Padfoot and Letha hadn’t had much trouble choosing people to be in their magical wedding—Padfoot, in fact, had joked that they’d have done it earlier if they’d realized they had a built-in wedding party in the house.

“Hermione. I’m taller than Draco right now, so they thought it’d fit better.”

“That’s true, you are,” Ginny said musingly. “I saw it, but I didn’t really notice. How long has that been going on?”

“Since I got back. I shot up while I was with the Dursleys. Draco’s starting to catch me up, but he probably won’t make it before the end of the month, so he’ll walk with Meghan.”

“And Mr. Moony with Mrs. Danger, of course. Do you think they’ll ever get magically married?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe someday, if it’s ever a problem. They’re not pureblood, so it’s not as big a deal.” Two seconds too late, he realized his blunder. “I mean, not that it’s a big deal only if you’re pureblood. Getting married is always a big deal. It’s just that they were married, they’ve been married, and they don’t need to get married magically to be really married the way Padfoot and Letha do—and they don’t either, it’s just that...”

“Harry.”

“Yeah?” He looked over his shoulder.

“It’s all right. I understand.” Ginny was grinning at him. “You don’t have to explain it to me.”

“Good, because I was doing a piss-poor job,” Harry said, then bit his lip. *Why did I say that to her?*

Ginny laughed. “Yes, you were.”

Oh, that’s right. Because she doesn’t mind.

Padfoot knew what he was talking about, Harry decided. Ginny was a very good friend to have.

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Tonks woke up on her wedding day with excitement tingling through her entire body. It was like the feeling she got on stakeouts, but stronger and far more joyous. Stakeouts resulted in fights, arrests, and at the very best, someone’s life ruined, even if he was a berk who deserved nothing

better. This, though...

Well, if it ruins my life, at least I'll go out happy.

Winky delivered a tray of breakfast just as Tonks finished buttoning her day robes. "Best wishes for your day, miss!" the house-elf said, bobbing a curtsy. "I is looking forward to calling you a new mistress of mine!"

"Thanks, Winky." Tonks picked up her spoon, then put it down. She didn't feel like eating.

Eat, girl, Mad-Eye Moody's voice growled in her head. You're no good anywhere if you faint from hunger.

She managed to swallow a good bit of the porridge, and a strip of bacon and a few bites of egg followed before her throat closed again. A few sips of tea eased the tightness, and she was able to eat an entire piece of toast, rounding out the breakfast.

Not nearly as much as I usually have, but it'll do...

The day passed in a blur. Fred and George delivered her Charlie's compliments on the hour, every hour, which was how she kept track of time. There was an outbreak of indignant squealing when George tried to gain access to the dressing chamber at three, shortly before the ceremony was set to start, but he managed to shout out, "He can't wait to see you!" before Aletha shut the door in his face.

Or was that Aletha? Tonks blinked. No, Aletha was off to one side helping Meghan with her makeup. The woman who had just shut the door on George was older, with white hair and glasses.

"Aletha's aunt, Amy Freeman," said Danger close to Tonks' ear. "She works for Noxet Bank in America, she's here for a few weeks to help the Gringotts goblins with their little experiment with human tellers."

"Oh." Tonks recalled this vaguely now, and the introduction of a tall, willowy, blonde girl with an accent as well...

"Fleur Delacour," Danger said when Tonks mentioned this. "She's back there with Hermione, doing something with her hair. I might ask her to do the same with mine, it certainly seems to be working. She's come with Bill. You and Charlie are the first, but Bill may not be far behind."

The Weasleys were having an interesting summer all around, Tonks thought. Charlie was getting married, Bill was dating a part-veela girl, the twins were laying plans for their joke shop, and Ron and Ginny got to spend almost all their time indoors because it wasn't safe for them to go out without an escort. Even Percy, usually the golden boy, was apparently becoming more and more unsatisfied with his parents' politics.

Tonks, like the rest of the Order, knew that Percy's dissatisfaction was in appearance only, that in

reality the third Weasley son was firmly on his parents' side, and Crouch's, since Crouch sided with Dumbledore. However, Fudge had been making overtures towards Percy for most of the summer, hinting that a job might be opening on the Minister's personal staff, and he'd finally come out and offered it to Percy at the end of July. Percy had brought the story to Order Headquarters under the guise of coming to dinner, and he, Crouch, the Weasleys, and Dumbledore had spent nearly three hours working out what to do.

I'm glad he can be here for our wedding, even if the "final break" is going to be tonight. The Weasleys had decided that it would fit the picture their enemies had of them as vulgar and uncivilized to fight with one son in the middle of another's wedding. Only the family, the Pack, and Dumbledore knew that what Percy, Arthur, and Molly would be doing tonight had been carefully planned.

I'll probably get lots of people consoling me on how my wedding was ruined. But as long as they don't do anything in the middle of the ceremony, honestly, I don't care.

But then she looked into the mirror and saw herself, dressed in white, with the veil over her long brown hair (she'd decided to go with her most natural look, in honor of the way she'd looked when she and Charlie first met), and she felt tears welling up in her eyes, because the one woman she'd always hoped would be there on her wedding day, couldn't...

They say every bride gets a wish on her wedding day—well, here's mine. I wish to find whoever murdered my mother, and to make sure they never do that to anyone else, ever again.

It wasn't enough. It would never be enough. But the tears receded, and she was able to smile again, and to blow a kiss to the ceiling before she finished getting ready for the happiest day of her life.

Because even though she can't be here, I'm sure she's watching.

xXxXx

"Quite a house," Amy commented to Sirius and Aletha during dinner.

"You should have seen it three weeks ago," Sirius said. "It was a mess."

"What happened?"

"House-elves," Aletha said. "Decent ones. Sirius, is there any way you can get rid of Kreacher without him becoming dangerous? The Black family house-elf," she explained to Amy. "If Sirius frees him, the other side might realize there's something up with this house. They won't be able to find us, but they'll know we're in London. The trouble is, he gives me the creeps, and once we're magically married, he's tied to me too."

"He'll never be back here, you know," Sirius said. "I sent him to Hogwarts, and he can just stay there. Dobby and Winky have this place under control."

“I still don’t like it.”

Amy chuckled. “Is it just that he’s small and annoying, or does he have other endearing qualities?” she asked.

“He treated everything my mother said as gospel truth,” said Sirius. “Which means he calls everyone vile names and tries to steal things that used to belong to my parents. Or he did, until I kicked him out.”

“Still bound, but serving elsewhere...” Amy’s eyes were distant. “Think I heard something about that once, from a pureblood I worked with... it can be trouble, if I remember right. Take a house-elf out of his house for too long, and the family tie starts weakening. He only obeys you because he has to, right, Sirius?”

Sirius nodded. “I’m a blood traitor in his book, and Meghan shouldn’t even exist,” he said. “He has to obey us, but he hates every second of it.”

“So if you leave him at Hogwarts too long, that tie starts getting weaker. He might be able to disobey some of your commands.”

“How long is too long?” Aletha asked urgently.

“Not sure, but it was definitely more than a year, so you have some time to think about it. Just don’t forget. Now, let’s talk about something more uplifting. Tell me about these two lovely young people.”

xXxXx

Outside their bedroom, Charlie scooped Tonks into his arms. “Quite a fight there at the end,” he said. “I’m glad I knew they were pretending, or I would have been scared.”

“I knew they were pretending, and I was scared. I thought your dad was going to hit Percy.”

“I think he got carried away. On the good side, whoever the spy is, he’ll be pretty well convinced Percy’s on the outs with Mum and Dad.”

“As long as he’s not listening right now. Are we going to stay out here all night, or are we going inside?”

“After you, my love.” Smiling broadly, Charlie carried her across the threshold, laid her on the bed, and shut the door with his wand.

xXxXx

29 August dawned bright, warm, and musical.

I’m getting married in the morning,

Ding-dong, the bells are gonna chime...

The singer paused a moment, as if thinking how to change the song to fit her situation better.

Boys, come and kiss me,

Show how you'll miss me,

But get me down the stairs on time!

Sirius frowned as he combed his hair. "I hope that superstition about seeing the bride on the wedding day doesn't go to hearing her too," he said to his reflection.

"I doubt it does," said Remus, coming in from the bedroom. He and Aletha had swapped rooms the night before, so that Sirius and Aletha wouldn't see each other by accident in the morning and ruin the wedding. "Are you worried?"

"Just a little. I suppose I'm getting all my wedding day jitters now, since my actual wedding day wasn't much to speak of." Sirius chuckled. "Even though it was one of the best days of my life. I was free, I finally had everything I'd ever wanted... what did I care about dress robes or a fancy hall?"

"And now you're getting that, too." Remus leaned against the wall, waiting for his friend to finish at the sink. "I guess some people have all the luck."

"I guess."

xXxXx

Sirius swallowed hard as he stepped into the living room, where the entire Order sat in neat rows of conjured chairs, all of them staring at him.

"Just like in rehearsals, Padfoot," Remus murmured to him, then smirked for some unknown reason.

Easy for you to say, Moony. You're not the one getting married here.

Dumbledore, in his gray-and-blue best, nodded gravely to them as they stopped in front of him. Although most of his titles were currently lacking thanks to Fudge's untiring efforts to discredit him, all that was really necessary for a magically binding marriage was that the ceremony be carried out by both members of the couple before three witnesses, who were then magically implicated in the vows as well. Remus, Danger, and Dumbledore would be Sirius and Aletha's three, as Ted Tonks, Molly, and Dumbledore had been for Charlie and Tonks...

Sirius jerked himself back to the moment as Luna, at the piano, began to play the beginning of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* series. It was the piece he'd heard the night he'd escaped from Azkaban, the piece he'd used to convince himself he was mad and hallucinating the swim to shore,

unaware that Danger's magic had formed a connection among the four adults who would soon become the Pack, that thinking of Aletha had allowed him to actually hear the music she was playing at that very moment in her home in London...

The Order oohed and aahed as Draco and Meghan came into sight around the corner. Sirius let his nervousness out in one great sigh of wonder.

Would you look at them.

Aletha had selected a pale yellow as the color for her bridesmaids' robes, since it would flatter all three of them. Sirius wondered if she'd realized that this would make Draco and Meghan look rather like backwards reflections, light and dark in equal proportions.

Never mind.

Harry and Hermione rounded the corner, and the noise increased a little. Some of these people obviously hadn't realized how tall Harry was getting, or how adult he looked these days. Hermione, on his arm, held herself like a queen, her robe nearly touching the floor and making her seem to float.

"Right out of a dream," Sirius breathed, and it wasn't until he heard Remus' small noise that he realized he'd spoken aloud. He risked a sideways glance. Remus' face was impassive, but his eyes were all too active.

All right, what'd I say?

But there was no time to think about it. Danger was halfway up the aisle already, smiling warmly at Sirius, her eyes at first whirling, then sinking back to brown. Her hand moved from the small bouquet she carried as matron of honor. *Good luck*, she signed before taking her place.

The music changed to Pachelbel's *Canon in D*. Strange, Sirius mused, how he'd heard the piece hundreds of times over his life with Aletha, but never known its name until two weeks ago...

Aletha stepped into the room. The Order of the Phoenix rose to its collective feet.

Her robe was white and deceptively simple, until the light struck it and it shimmered with the silver thread woven into the fabric. A sapphire pendant hanging from a gold chain lay against warm brown skin above the neckline of the robe. More sapphires sparkled in her ears, and the gauzy veil on her head covered only her hair. Her radiant face was visible to all, but her eyes were fixed on one man.

On me.

What did I ever do to deserve this?

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Danger smiled as she watched Sirius watching Aletha. **I wonder if he knows he's got his heart in his eyes?**

Remus watched Aletha hand her bouquet to Danger without taking her eyes off Sirius. **I don't think he cares. And I know she doesn't.**

And those are the only people really qualified to say anything, so we can just shut up.

What a good idea.

Danger inhaled deeply, and Remus caught the scent of white roses and baby's breath. Her voice, when she spoke again, was wistful. **Do you think it ever will really happen, the way we dreamed it?**

It could. The cubs were all grown, or nearly, so we still have time.

Let's plan on it, then. Three years from now, no more, less if we can.

Remus used the excuse of checking his pocket for the ring box to smile at his love's impulsiveness. **It's a date.**

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Dumbledore cleared his throat as Luna brought the *Canon* to an end. "Dear friends," he began, "we are gathered here today to witness one of the most important events in these two lives. This man and this woman have come here today to dedicate their lives to one another." He paused. "Again."

The Order of the Phoenix chuckled.

"Though their marriage by Muggle means was legal in the eyes of our magical government, they have decided to bind their lives together with a bond that can never be broken. They have chosen to be married by a custom which is still observed in some levels of our society, but in a twisted form. They have taken that custom and they have restored it to its original intent." Dumbledore nodded to Neville, who was standing nearby, and the boy carried the small writing desk forward. "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the marriage contract of Sirius Black and Aletha Freeman."

Applause, and Dumbledore stepped back. He would do nothing more until the very end.

Of course, the contracts signed by purebloods in our days restrict only the wife and not the husband, and most magical folk merely speak these words to one another, or variations thereof... still, I find beauty in this form of the marriage.

Sirius picked up a long black quill and held it loosely in his left hand. "I, Sirius Valentine Black, do on this twenty-ninth day of August, 1995, give myself as husband to Aletha Carina Freeman," he announced in a carrying voice. "I swear to love her and only her as a husband should love his

wife, and to name our children heirs to all that I possess, including a father's love. I swear to support her with my gold and my bronze, to fly by her side in clear skies and in fog, to remain with her always in good times and in bad, until death does part us, though that shall not be for long. And to this oath, I do sign my name, in my own heart's blood, to bind it firm, and in token of this oath do I give her this ring, engraved with her name and mine and this date of our marriage."

Draco watched the signing impassively, his throat working only once as he swallowed, and all trace of the brightness in his eyes was gone by the time Sirius slid the sapphire ring onto Aletha's hand.

Aletha repeated the vows, singing them out for all to hear, before she wrote her name in her flowing script under Sirius'. Setting down the quill, she slid the plain gold band onto Sirius' finger, then held out her hand behind her. Danger passed over her wand. Sirius took his own from Remus and placed its tip against the tip of his wife's.

"If I should ever draw wand against you, my husband, may my magic turn to fire in my veins," Aletha said clearly. "May my power rebel and refuse my call, and strike me down where I stand."

"If I should ever draw wand against you, my wife, may my magic turn to ice in my heart," Sirius answered. "May my power turn inward and freeze my life, to punish me as I deserve."

Dumbledore stepped forward, placing his own wand's tip against the pair. "As you have spoken, as you have written, so let it be done," he said. "From this day forward, where there were two, let now there be one."

A flare of golden light from the place where the three wands met made everyone exclaim.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Dumbledore said, "I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Sirius Black."

He would have finished with the traditional instruction to the groom, but it seemed that Sirius needed no prompting.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 8: Love, Hate, Marry, Date (Year 5)

Chapter 8: Love, Hate, Marry, Date

“It was a lovely ceremony,” Corona told Aletha the morning after the wedding. “Very traditional. But I would have thought...”

“You can say it,” said Danger, accepting a plate of breakfast from Winky. “We’re notoriously difficult to insult.”

Corona colored up nonetheless. “Well, with your... background, and the way some of...I mean, some people treat you, and how that must make you feel...”

“Do you mean you hadn’t expected a Muggleborn to want a traditional magical wedding?” Aletha asked.

Corona nodded.

“You can call it greed if you like.” Aletha smiled. “This way, Sirius has to buy me two anniversary gifts.”

Molly and Corona laughed, while Danger looked speculative.

“But I suppose I was also admitting to myself that there’s a part of Sirius that goes beyond what I’ve always known of him,” Aletha continued. “He did grow up as a pureblood, and that means the earliest things he saw and knew were all in that tradition. The things you learn when you’re very little are part of you in a way that’s almost impossible to overcome. Since they’re not in any way wrong, what’s the matter with taking a few of them and using them ourselves?”

“I never thought of it in that way,” said Corona.

“It takes time, and distance, before the pain goes away enough that you can think rationally about things you’ve left behind,” Molly said quietly. “And it won’t happen on its own. You have to work at it. Don’t force it, dear. Remember the good times, and let the bad ones go.” She sipped at her tea, then put it down. “You did have good times, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did,” said Corona with a tinge of heat. “I loved school. And even the season was seldom bad, so long as my friends were there. But as soon as we had left school, most of them were married, and by the time I saw them again, they were exactly what their husbands wanted them to be.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” said Danger.

“You shouldn’t.” Corona’s eyes were far away. “If I think about it in the abstract, without my friends’ faces on those women, it could all be some colossal joke. Historically, women have had

great freedom in magical society. Women made many of the greatest discoveries, women held important jobs and worked as hard as men—and yet, the people among whom I was born insist that women be subject to their husbands.”

“And the husbands insist too, don’t they?” Aletha asked.

“Oh, yes.” Corona smiled bitterly. “Why should they not? They have learned from their own fathers how to behave, and so the cycle continues.”

“But not forever,” said Molly. “Not even close. People are starting to pack up and leave, Corona, and well before they’re thrown out. What Sirius did was marvelous, I’m not disparaging it at all, but he was a rebellious teenager. You are a woman grown, and correct me if I’m wrong, but before this, you had never given your grandmother even a moment’s cause for alarm.”

“She did wonder why I kept inventing excuses to keep from being married, but she was sure it would come in time,” Corona said with a wan smile. “The most frightening thing about what happened to my friends is that they were part of it. They were eager for it. Most of them chose their own husbands, and they seemed to enjoy what happened to them, to welcome it.”

“We might be able to break the purebloods out of their little insanities while we’re fighting this war,” Danger said flippantly. “If by no other means than by removing all the perpetrators.”

“That’s horrible,” said Aletha.

“So is what’s happening to those women,” Danger shot back. “And so will this triple-damned war be.”

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“Ridiculous!” The shout echoed through the house.

“Professor McGonagall,” said Neville, looking up from his Potions text. “Should we go downstairs and say hello?”

“She doesn’t sound like she wants to see anyone just now,” said Hermione, but she was already marking her place and closing her book.

“Absolutely ridiculous!” Professor McGonagall was stalking up and down the hall, looking as if she wanted to throw things. Mrs. Longbottom stood near the front door, her face carefully neutral. “Teaching me—*me*— to...to...”

“To what?” Ron asked from the stairs.

“To *teach*,” Professor McGonagall snapped. “The Ministry of Magic has decided that teachers—all teachers, regardless of their age or experience—will not be allowed to remain in the schools unless they have attended a conference, designed to teach them how to teach. And, of course, they hand down this ruling two days before the opening of school! Sabotage is what it is, deliberate

sabotage!”

“Minerva, the conference is only one day,” Mrs. Longbottom said delicately. “I think we can all live through one day.”

“One day, yes.” Professor McGonagall came to stand near the wall which had once held Mrs. Black’s portrait. “This year. What of next year, or the year after that? Must I allow my summers to be taken up by overfed, overeducated fools who think they know more about my profession than I do, even though their last time in a classroom was likely as a student—one of *my* students?”

“Speaking of your students,” Mrs. Longbottom began, waving towards the stairs, but Professor McGonagall wasn’t listening.

“And to add to that, this new post—a Liaison was humiliating enough, as if Albus weren’t perfectly capable of owling Fudge, but an *Inquisitor*? What, I ask, has ever been done at Hogwarts that would warrant such treatment?”

“Dumbledore does not fall precisely in line with Fudge’s policies,” said Mrs. Longbottom loudly, “and Fudge is a badly scared man. Despite what he says out loud, he knows that Albus Dumbledore does not lie and is very seldom mistaken. Fudge wants nothing less than to be caught in the middle of another war—except to lose his position and prestige, all the more because he has already lost them once.”

“And thus, Hogwarts must play host to one of Fudge’s toadies, and attempt to keep from becoming just another branch of the Ministry,” Professor McGonagall said bitterly. “At least Albus was able to block Fudge’s first brilliant idea. Thank you again, Alice, I have no idea how I would have survived a year of calling that disgusting woman my colleague.”

Mrs. Longbottom discreetly cleared her throat and nodded towards the stairs.

“What—oh!” Professor McGonagall seemed startled to see the Pride. After a moment of confusion, she looked directly at Harry. “You heard none of this,” she said briskly.

“None of what, Professor?” Harry said.

Professor McGonagall nodded in satisfaction. “However,” she added, “you may pass along that a new post has been added to the staff at Hogwarts. Madam Dolores Umbridge, a secretary to the Minister of Magic himself, has been graciously spared from her duties in the government to join us as the Hogwarts High Inquisitor.” Her tone was mocking.

“What are they inquiring into, Professor?” Ginny asked.

“Anything and everything,” said Professor McGonagall coldly. “Including many things that they would have done better to keep their noses out of.” She shook her head slightly. “However, you will address her as Professor Umbridge, and you will treat her with all the respect you give to your other teachers.”

“Yes, Professor,” said Draco, a wicked smile starting on his face.

“Make that more respect,” Professor McGonagall said, looking sternly at him. “This is no laughing matter, Mr. Black. Dolores Umbridge is a powerful woman, and more powerful than ever with this new post.” She made a shooing motion with her hand. “Go and finish your homework, all of you, I’m sure you’ve not done any of it yet this summer...”

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“So what’s an Inquisitor anyway?” asked Ron when the Pride was redispersed over the floor in their den.

“Someone who asks questions,” said Ginny. “Like you.”

“Someone who asks questions for the government,” Luna corrected. “Fudge has a lot of them, but they’re usually secret. They have powers like the people in those double-up-heaven stories.”

Harry let this one pass. “So Fudge wants more power at Hogwarts,” he mused. “I think I’m almost sorry for him.”

“Why?” asked Ron. “Because Dumbledore could kick his sorry arse without even trying?”

“That’s part of it.” Harry stood up and went over to the pull-up bars Moony had installed in the ceiling for them.

“What’s the other part?” Meghan asked.

“The other part...” Harry chinned himself and came down. “...is that...” Again. “...we could do it...” Again. “...without trying much harder.”

“And that’s probably what he’s afraid of,” said Hermione. “Fudge, I mean. He’s afraid Dumbledore could use us, could make us into something dangerous.”

“Dangerous to who, though?” said Draco. “Dangerous to Voldemort, hell yes. Dangerous to Fudge...why would we bother?”

“He thinks he’s important,” Luna said. “He has to, or his whole world falls down. He’s spent his whole life making himself important, and if he let anyone else be more important, he wouldn’t know who he was anymore.”

“Sounds like Percy,” said Ron.

“Not really,” Ginny said. “Percy could be that way, but I don’t think he will. Not now.”

Harry finished his tenth pull-up and dropped to the floor. “Have you heard from him at all?” he asked, flexing his arms. “From Percy?”

“Just a note a couple days ago,” said Ron. “It said he’d got that place on the Minister’s staff after all...something about someone taking a higher position and leaving a place free for him...” He frowned. “Could it have been What’s-Her-Face, Umbridge, who left?”

“It could,” said Neville. “It probably was. Dad says Fudge is getting paranoid. He doesn’t want anyone around him he can’t trust.”

Ginny snickered. “He should never have hired a Weasley, then.”

“Don’t ruin it for him,” said Meghan. “Let Percy do that himself.”

The Pride all laughed.

xXxXx

“So how’s married life?” Remus asked Sirius the night of the 31st.

“About the same as it was before. Were you watching the bouquet toss?”

“Yes.”

“How did Ginny end up with it, exactly?”

“Luck. Danger wanted it, but Letha misjudged which shoulder to throw it over, and Ginny just happened to be in the right place.”

“Are you sure it was luck?” Sirius sat down at the kitchen table. “Ginny’s been giving Harry some interesting looks lately.”

“Don’t look now, but Harry’s starting to look back.”

“I know. He asked me about her, very vaguely, of course, but it’s not hard to guess. I mean, what other girls does he know well? His sisters and Luna, and Luna’s taken.”

“We do have some verification, you know,” Remus reminded his friend. “Remember Danger’s first?”

“I remember. But that one said Ron and Hermione, too, if I’m thinking of the right one, and at the moment that looks about as likely as...”

“As James and Lily in our fifth year?”

“Point,” Sirius conceded. “That particular pair did look about as likely to happen as a meteorite ending our Voldemort-problem.”

“And yet, Harry exists. So I think it’s a bit early to be making decisions.”

“True.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Sirius broke it. “Lay you money Harry makes his move first.”

“I won’t take it.”

“One Knut? Just a friendly bet?”

“Not against Harry, no.”

“You’re no fun.”

“You’ve noticed. Go try your luck with Arthur.”

“Are you crazy? He won’t know which way to bet.”

“Yes, he will. Ginny’s much more proactive than Ron. She’ll have Harry tied up before Christmas, and that I will lay money on.”

“Before Christmas? You’re on.” Sirius dug in his pocket. “Name your stakes.”

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Platform nine and three-quarters was as busy and noisy as ever. The news that the wizarding world was at war again seemed not to have made much of an impact.

Harry, standing near the train as the other members of the Pride said their goodbyes, snorted at his own stupidity. *Of course it hasn’t. Most of these idiots believe the tripe the Prophet has been printing for two months, about Dumbledore going senile and me being a pathological liar, and possibly insane to boot.*

“Brian!” shouted a girl’s voice.

Brian Li turned quickly around to catch the shouter, a girl of Harry’s age whom Harry thought might be a Ravenclaw in his year. “Su!” They held each other in a tight hug for a moment before Brian let go. “How have you been?” he asked, holding the girl at arm’s length.

“Well, big brother. And you? *Where* have you been?” The girl looked Brian up and down. “All you told Mother and Father was that you had a place to go and things to do, and we haven’t heard from you since.”

“I’ve been well. I’m doing important work, Su, very important. Have you been reading the newspaper this summer?”

The girl frowned. “Yes, but it seems so strange. Mother and Father aren’t sure what to believe.”

“I’ll write to them tonight, but I can tell you now. The *Prophet* is wrong, Su, very wrong.” Brian

looked over his sister's shoulder and beckoned to Harry tentatively. Harry nodded and started toward him, hearing footsteps at his shoulder before he'd gone more than a pace or two. *Too light for the boys, too heavy for Meghan, wrong rhythm for Hermione or Luna...*

"Do you know Harry and Ginny?" Brian asked his sister.

"Only by sight. We've never been introduced."

"Then allow me. Su Li, Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter. They're part of what I'm part of now. Ginny, Harry, my sister, Su."

"Pleased to meet you," Ginny said, shaking the girl's hand.

"Likewise. And you, Mr. Potter."

"Harry, please." Harry shook Su's hand in his turn. "It seems wrong that I don't know everyone in my own year. It's not as if the school's too large..."

"It's the Houses," said Su certainly. "They're good for promoting unity within themselves, but they divide us in other ways. When was the last time you saw two people from different Houses sitting together to eat?"

"Maybe that should change, then," said Ginny. "What do you think, Harry?"

"It won't change as long as we have the House tables," Harry said. "We're too used to them."

"So get rid of the House tables!" Su said emphatically. "Keep them for big feasts and the like, but have a lot of smaller tables instead of the four huge ones. Let people sit with their friends, no matter what House they're from."

"It would be harder on the house-elves, though," Ginny pointed out. "How could they make sure everyone had what they wanted?"

"We all have legs," Su said impatiently. "We can get up and get platters from other tables. Or have one large serving table in the center, and everyone gets their food from there."

"I like that better," said Harry. "Then people won't always be complaining because they didn't get whatever they liked on their table. If we're going to break with tradition, we should go all the way."

"Yes, that's what I've always..." Su broke off, looking at Harry again. "You have a good mind for a Gryffindor," she said.

"You have a lot of guts for a Ravenclaw," Harry countered.

Su laughed. "So my big brother has a famous friend," she said. "And you're not nearly as mad as the *Daily Prophet* says you are."

“No, he’s madder,” said Ginny. “It just doesn’t show.”

“Ginny!” Harry could feel his face beginning to redden.

“You’ll have to tell me more later,” said Su speculatively. She looked back at Brian and suddenly hugged him again.

“Come on,” Harry muttered to Ginny, pulling at her sleeve. “I think they want to be alone.”

“I didn’t know he hadn’t been home for two months,” said Ginny, shaking her head, once they were out of earshot. “I can’t even imagine.”

“We stay away from home longer than that every year,” Harry objected.

“But we’re at school. Our families know where we are, and they can visit us if they like. His parents had no idea where he was.”

Harry smiled humorlessly. “Try having them know, and hate it, and not be able to change it.”

“No thanks, I’ll leave that to you.” Ginny grinned at him and scampered away as the train whistled.

Harry stood on the platform, trying to figure out where he’d gone wrong.

xXxXx

“Don’t tell me,” said Draco in a long-suffering voice when Ron and Hermione returned from their prefects’ meeting. “Nott is our year’s prefect from Slytherin.”

“Actually, that would be me,” said a voice from behind Ron.

“Zabini,” said Harry in greeting, standing up to shake Blaise’s hand. “How was your summer?”

“Uneventful. Yours?”

“Hard to describe.”

“I’d imagine.” Blaise stepped into the compartment. “May I?”

Hermione scooped up Crookshanks and sat down where he’d been. “If you can find a seat,” she said.

Blaise seated himself across from Harry. “My mother takes the newspaper very seriously,” he said. “She only let me come back to school because she thinks I’ll be safe in my dormitory, and that I can defend myself in the halls.”

“From what? Me?”

“To be honest, yes.”

Ron looked up from polishing his prefect’s badge with his sleeve. “So be a little more honest,” he said. “Do you believe the *Daily Prophet*? Because if you do, there’s the door. You can leave, or I can help you out.”

“Is he always this belligerent?” Blaise asked mildly.

“This is actually one of his better days,” said Draco. “I think it has something to do with the hair. All that red means it leeches the blood out of his brain, so he’s got nothing left to think with.”

“And yours is so pale because there’s no blood going to your brain at all,” Ron retorted.

Draco clapped a hand to his chest. “A hit, a very palpable hit.”

“Stop it,” said Hermione wearily, stroking Crookshanks so that his rumbling purr filled the compartment. “Blaise, you don’t believe what the *Prophet*’s been printing, do you? It’s all rubbish. Harry’s telling the truth, and Fudge doesn’t want to admit it.”

“Who would?” Absently, Blaise rubbed his own prefect’s badge with a corner of his robe. “It’s much nicer to think about pleasant things. But pleasant things won’t save us if there really is a war coming.”

“There is,” Harry said quietly. “It’s already started.”

“Then you can count me your friend.”

Harry got to his feet and held out his hand again. “We’re going to need friends,” he said. “Welcome aboard.”

They shook on it.

“Two,” said Luna absently, looking out the window.

“Two what?” said Ron.

“Oh...two sheep.”

Ron looked at Draco, who looked back at him with a shrug, as if to say, *How should I know?*

xXxXx

Meghan frowned, worried. “You haven’t seen Graham at all?”

Natalie shook her head. “We wrote a few times at the beginning of the summer, but not since then.”

Meghan bounced on her toes. “I thought maybe his owl couldn’t find me,” she said. “We’re staying at my grandmother’s house, and she made it Unplottable a long time ago, so I thought maybe...but if you didn’t get any letters either...”

“And I don’t think he’s on the train,” Natalie added. “I’ve looked everywhere.”

Meghan sucked on her teeth for a moment. “We’ll look for him at the Welcoming Feast,” she decided. “And if he’s really not here, we’ll tell Professor McGonagall. She’ll know what to do.”

“Do you think it’s...bad?” Natalie whispered. “With what happened to your brother...”

“But Graham’s a pureblood. He ought to be all right.” Meghan spoke with a confidence she didn’t feel. “He’s probably just in a compartment you missed.”

“But Meghan, I looked everywhere! Twice!”

Meghan hugged her friend. “It’ll be okay,” she said firmly. “It has to be.”

“Why?”

“Because I say so, that’s why.”

The girls shared a giggle, and everything was okay, at least for the moment.

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“Three,” Luna murmured, holding up a handful of Cauldron Cake crumbs for Pigwidgeon.

“What are you really counting?” Ginny asked quietly.

“Friends.” Luna smiled as the tiny owl shook his feathers, sending crumbs everywhere. “We’ll need as many as we can get.”

“No argument.”

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Harry backed out of the crowd, holding his cloak over himself and Meghan, who was clutching Hedwig’s cage close. As he turned, he caught his breath in shock.

“What is it?” Meghan asked, looking around.

“Thestrals,” Harry breathed, recalling what Hermione had told them in second year. “I can see them now.”

Meghan freed one arm from Hedwig’s cage to wrap it as far as it would go around Harry’s waist. “Neville says they’re ugly,” she said as they walked forward. “Are they?”

“Very. They don’t have any meat on them—they’re just skin and bones...” Harry laughed at the sound of one of Danger’s favorite expressions coming from his mouth. “But really, they are. Here, feel.” He handed Hedwig up to Hermione, who was already in the carriage, then took Meghan’s hand in his and guided it to the thestral’s side. The thestral snorted warningly.

Meghan jerked her hand back. “It’s smart,” she said in surprise. “Not like a human, or even like a dog, but it’s smart.”

“They can find any place that their riders need to go,” said Neville, coming out of the crowd to join them, keeping a firm hold on the little toad-leash his father had made for him. Trevor dangled from a tiny harness on its other end with a sulky look on his wide toad face. “And they eat meat. Most animals that are smart do.”

Meghan backed up a step. “Maybe I shouldn’t pet it anymore,” she said.

“Maybe not,” Harry agreed, offering Meghan his hand to help her into the carriage. “Since when do you like animals, Cap’n?”

“I thought I might as well learn about them, since I can see them,” Neville answered, following Meghan in and holding out his hand to help Harry climb in after them. “They’re really almost as interesting as my *Mimulus mimbletonia*.”

Harry didn’t trust himself to answer this, so he let it go.

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“Strange,” Ginny said after the Sorting Hat had finished its song.

“What?” Harry asked.

“We were just talking to Su Li earlier about this. About how the Houses have become too divided.” Ginny looked across the Great Hall as Professor McGonagall called the first name on her list (“Abercrombie, Euan!”). “And now the Sorting Hat says it too.”

“The Sorting Hat has Gryffindor’s brains in it,” said Harry, watching the boy squirm on the stool. “Maybe it knows something.”

“GRYFFINDOR!”

“So what are we going to do about it?” Ginny asked under cover of the clapping.

“We?”

“We, the Pride. And you, the alpha of the Pride.” Ginny gave him an appraising look. “You are the alpha of the Pride, last I looked.”

“Yes, of course I am.”

“And you are Harry Potter, Boy Wonder.”

“No, I am...” Harry found his voice cut off by Ginny’s hand, just in time, as the clapping died away suddenly. If she hadn’t stopped him, he would have shouted out that he “was not” to the entire Hall.

I don’t need the Prophet’s help to look mad. I’m doing a bang-up job on my own.

“Thanks,” he muttered as Ginny took her hand away.

“Any time.” Ginny wiped her hand on her napkin. “So what are you going to do about it?”

“About what?”

“About what we were talking about. The way the Houses are separated.”

“Why should I do anything about it? Why do you think I’ll be able to? Half the school probably thinks I’m going to attack them, and the other half knows better but would like to kill me anyway, because they have parents working for Voldemort...”

“That’s not true.” Ginny applauded for “Baker, Jon” (“HUFFLEPUFF!”) before going on. “Even if it was, that’s all the more reason you have to do something about it. If people see you working to unite the Houses, to do good things and make a difference, they’ll know you can’t be mad. And I don’t think half the school has Death Eater parents.”

“So I exaggerated some. Who cares?”

“I do.”

“You do?”

“I do.” Ginny crossed her arms firmly. “Don’t start acting like nobody likes you and everybody hates you. You know it’s not true, and besides, worms don’t taste good.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“It’s a song.” Ginny hummed the tune.

“Oh, that.” Harry clapped for “Cauldwell, Amanda.” (“RAVENCLAW!”) “Ginny, has anyone told you recently you’re odd?”

“You just did.”

“I mean...never mind.”

“You mean never mind? I’ll remember that.”

Harry leaned over to Draco. “Are all girls mad?” he asked conversationally.

Draco looked across the table at Hermione and Luna, then leaned closer. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“Thought so.”

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As the desserts melted away from the golden plates, Professor Dumbledore got to his feet. “The usual start-of-term announcements will now commence,” he said. “Those of you who have heard them before, I beg your indulgence for the repetition. Those who have not, please pay close attention, as they are important. Firstly, I would like to introduce two new additions to our staff. Joining us this year in the role of Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts is Auror Alice Longbottom.”

Mrs. Longbottom rose and inclined her head as the school applauded her politely.

“Second is a new position on our staff this year,” Dumbledore went on as Mrs. Longbottom—*Professor Longbottom*, Harry corrected himself mentally—sat down again. “The Ministry of Magic, in response to recent events, feels that Hogwarts needs careful supervision, and has created the post of Hogwarts High Inquisitor to this end. Madam Dolores Umbridge joins us from the Ministry to take up this post. Although she teaches no subject, you will address her as Professor Umbridge, and treat her with the same courtesy and respect that you would me or any other teacher in this school.”

“He’s looking at us,” Ron said out of the corner of his mouth.

“He’s looking at the Gryffindors,” Hermione corrected.

“We are Gryffindors.”

“I mean all the Gryffindors.”

“Shush,” said Harry and Ginny together.

As Professor Umbridge stood up at her place, Harry got a good look at her.

I’d say she looks like a toad, but that’s rude to Trevor.

Professor Umbridge’s face was very wide and flat, with eyes that bulged most unattractively (as opposed to Luna’s, which gave her face its constant air of mild surprise). She wore a bright pink cardigan and a matching bow in her mousy hair, and she was beaming insincerely around the Great Hall as she acknowledged the unenthusiastic clapping.

Professor Dumbledore waited for the applause to die away, which didn’t take long, then continued. “Tryouts for Quidditch teams will begin...”

“Hem, hem. ”

Several hundred heads whipped back to Professor Umbridge, who hadn't sat down. She was simpering girlishly at Professor Dumbledore. “If you don't mind, Headmaster,” she said in a breathy voice which grated on Harry's nerves, “I had a few words I would like to say to our dear students.”

Dumbledore inclined his head and seated himself, looking attentively at her.

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“If this is a few words, I'm a Blast-Ended Skrewt,” Ron muttered partway through Umbridge's speech. “What is she even talking about?”

“Shh, I'm trying to listen,” Hermione said absently.

Harry, too, was trying to listen, but it was hard going. Professor Umbridge had used more words with multiple syllables in the last five minutes than even the Pack usually used in a day, and the words twisted around each other in his mind. What did it mean to “understand that stepping forward is not always progress, or that not all progress is good progress,” or to “acknowledge that only change which betters ourselves and our society should be encouraged, and that change which does not should be discouraged as quickly as possible”?

Luna was watching Umbridge quietly, her eyes half-shut. Harry leaned across the table. “What do you see?” he asked her in a whisper.

“Not much,” Luna replied. “She's not an Animagus, or someone else pretending to be her. There is a little red around her, though, and some of the red is redder than the rest of the red.”

“Right. Thanks.”

She makes less sense than Umbridge does.

Finally, Umbridge delivered herself of a triumphant-sounding conclusion and took her seat. Professor Dumbledore applauded her, as did Ron.

“What are you clapping for?” Hermione hissed. “That was horrible!”

“Because it's over.”

“Oh.” Hermione let go of Ron's wrist. “Good point.”

“How was it horrible?” Neville asked. “It didn't make sense.”

“It made perfect sense...” Hermione looked around. “I'll tell you later. I think we should den tonight.”

“I think so too,” said Harry. “I mean, seconded.”

“All in favor?” said Draco.

“Aye,” said six voices.

Meghan rapped the butt of her fork on the table. “Motion carried,” she said in a deep voice.

The Pride cracked up.

When the announcements were over, the Hall began to buzz with chatter as people started getting up to make their way to bed. Ron started for the door, but Hermione stopped him. “We have to show the first years which way to go,” she said. “Come on, help me.”

“Oh. Right. Oy, midgets!”

“Ron!”

Harry took the opportunity to escape the Hall, the Pride behind him.

“Mr. Potter!” called a high-pitched voice as Harry emerged into the entrance hall.

Harry swore under his breath, plastered a smile on his face, and turned around. “Professor Umbridge,” he said, bowing slightly.

Professor Umbridge stepped forward, her pink bow almost glowing in the torchlight, her smile as fake as Harry’s. “I just wanted to speak with you about your conduct last year, at the final task of the Triwizard Tournament,” she said. “I was deeply saddened by it, and by its tragic conclusion.”

Harry stiffened as her words hit home. “I never hurt Cedric Diggory,” he said stiffly.

“I never said you did, Mr. Potter.” Umbridge’s smile widened. “I merely wish to tell you that a new era has begun here at Hogwarts.” Her voice was pitched to carry, and most of the school had stopped to listen to her. “Those who lie for their own gain, those who circumvent established and lawful authority, and those who give themselves a false sense of importance will not remain at this school for long.”

“That’s wonderful, Professor,” Harry said enthusiastically, matching her volume. “When are you leaving?”

The Gryffindors laughed outright. Ravenclaws tittered, Hufflepuffs snorted, and even a few Slytherins snickered. Behind him, Harry could hear the Pride having a collective fit, and Fred and Lee Jordan were guffawing halfway up the marble staircase, while George grinned at him. He only wished Ron and Hermione could have heard it.

The door’s open. Maybe they did.

Umbridge's eyes, improbably, had widened even further. "I...I..."

Harry quickly donned his best "Who, me?" expression.

"I have never...never in all my years..." Umbridge recovered her power of speech. "Detention, Mr. Potter," she said breathlessly. "Detention with me, tomorrow night. At eight o'clock, in my office. This will not happen again."

"Yes, Professor." Harry made his voice as plaintive as he ever did when wheedling another piece of tart out of Danger. "May I please go to bed now, Professor?"

The laughter, which had showed signs of dying away, rekindled at this.

Umbridge's flabby face was starting to turn a shade of maroon that Harry had become familiar with on Uncle Vernon's face over the summer. "Yes," she said shortly. "Go."

"Nice work, Potter," whispered anonymous voices as Harry started for the stairs.

"She needed that."

"Keep it up."

"That," said Fred as Harry reached him, "was brilliant."

Harry turned to look at the Pride. Their wide grins spoke for them.

"He took mine," said Draco, pointing at Fred. "That was just amazing."

"Whatever she makes you do for detention, that was worth it," Ginny added.

Harry climbed the stairs to Gryffindor Tower feeling as though he'd won the first battle of the war.

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Professor McGonagall was less thrilled.

"You call that showing more respect than you give to your other teachers?" she stormed at Harry the next day in her office, where she'd told him to come directly after breakfast. "You, of all people, must be careful around Dolores Umbridge, Potter!"

"Yes, Professor," Harry said. *I knew it wasn't a good idea, what I didn't know was how bad it was.* Hermione had made it quite clear in the Den that Umbridge had power at Hogwarts, and knew she had power, and was prepared to use that power to interfere with everything she could.

But what was I supposed to do? Lie down and take it?

McGonagall glared at him. “Don’t give me that. Do you understand what she could have done to you? What she could still do to you? The decree which gives her that position states that not even the Headmaster himself can overrule her decisions, and you have placed yourself permanently in her bad graces. This year is not about showing off how clever you are, Potter, or about who or what is right or wrong. This year is about surviving!”

Harry rocked back in his chair, appalled. “I’m sorry, Professor. I didn’t know...”

“Obviously not.” McGonagall’s look was stern. “Now you do.”

“Yes, Professor.” Harry looked at the rocky landscape painting on the wall, trying to work out how to word his next question. “Professor, may I ask you something?”

“Speak up.”

“If someone...didn’t like Professor Umbridge. If someone wanted to let her know she wasn’t wanted here.” Seeing understanding in McGonagall’s eyes, Harry plowed onwards. “If that someone decided to tell her how he felt in...in a traditional family style. For his family. Would you...I mean, what would...”

“Let me make things perfectly clear to you, Potter,” said McGonagall, her eyes flashing as she leaned forward. “I will firmly punish any wrongdoers whom I catch, or whose wrongdoing can be proved to me. Do you understand me?”

Harry carefully did not grin. “Perfectly, Professor.”

“Excellent. You may return to your class—History of Magic, I believe?”

Harry nodded.

McGonagall gave him a small smile. “Then your professor may not notice you were gone. If he does, feel free to tell him that you were with me.”

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Minerva McGonagall watched Harry Potter down the hall, then stepped back inside. A quick word with her great-grandmother, and a few minutes later, she was on her way up to Albus’ office.

“I’ve just allowed Harry Potter and his... Pride, is it?” she said without preamble as she entered, pausing only to make sure they were alone. “Whatever they are, I’ve given them free rein to make Dolores Umbridge’s life miserable, providing we don’t catch them.”

“Minerva, really, I have no idea what could have possessed you to do that,” said Albus gravely. “I must go on record as telling you to do no such thing.”

“It’s too late now.” Minerva sank into a chair. “Albus, what have we come to? You-Know...”

Albus gave her a stern look.

“Very well, *Voldemort* on the loose and absolutely nothing being done to stop him, a minor functionary like Umbridge dictating our every move, and Harry Potter has no idea of the dangers involved in tweaking her nose. I believe he thought he could get away with it!”

“In his own household, he would have been allowed to,” Albus noted. “Or the punishment would have been light.”

“And he has gone through four years of schooling without ever realizing that the rules are different here?”

“No, but he was provoked in the entrance hall, and he responded in his most deeply entrenched manner. One cannot argue with one’s earliest training, Minerva. I daresay you would still obey a command given to you by an authority figure of your childhood, or one given in that way. I trust you have explained to him that he must be more on his guard.”

“I did.” A small pop made Minerva look around. “Ah. Thank you,” she said to the tea-towel-clad house-elf offering her a cup of tea. The house-elf bobbed a curtsy and disappeared again.

“Albus, to be perfectly frank, I still do not entirely understand Harry, or any of his friends—his siblings, of course, are particularly obscure, but even the youngest Weasleys and the other two are beginning to take on the same characteristics. What is it about them? What am I missing?”

Albus sipped at the tea another house-elf had supplied to him. “I believe it is their response to authority,” he said thoughtfully. “To authorities they perceive as legitimate, their obedience is... not absolute, and not unquestioning, but it runs very close to both of those. And their only test for legitimacy of authority is whether or not they have chosen that authority. You and I, luckily for us, are both authorities they choose to obey. Dolores Umbridge is emphatically not; thus, their response to her is to challenge her authority, in hopes of uprooting her.”

Minerva blew on her tea. “Albus, is it ill-natured of me to hope that they succeed in that challenge, and soon?” she asked.

“If it is, I must share your ill nature, Minerva.” Albus’ eyes were bleak. “I have seldom wanted anything so much as I want Dolores Umbridge gone from this school. She is a liability we can ill afford at this juncture.”

They sat quietly for a moment before Minerva recalled something else that had been weighing on her mind. “Albus, before I forget, Meghan Black spoke to me this morning. She expressed concern about a friend of hers, a second year Slytherin named...”

“Graham Pritchard,” Albus finished for her. “I had intended to speak to you and Severus about that matter today. I received a letter from Mr. Pritchard a few days ago, withdrawing his son from the school, citing differences with my politics.” He opened a desk drawer, rummaged through it for a moment, then extracted the parchment he wanted and passed it across to Minerva. “Perhaps you can explain to Meghan better if you see the reasoning yourself.”

Minerva took the letter and scanned it. “This is very messily written,” she said. “As if his quill were badly trimmed...” She looked up. “Or as if someone under duress were attempting to send a hidden message.”

“Do you think so?” Albus asked blandly. “That had occurred to me, I confess.”

Minerva returned to her perusal of the parchment as a knock sounded at the door.

“Come in, Severus,” Albus called.

Minerva barely noticed. Her mind was busy holding the letters which were worst blotted and placing them in order. *S,O,N, son. T, A, K, E, N...*

She looked up again as Severus Snape took a seat beside her. “See what you think,” she said, handing the parchment to him.

Snape ran his finger along the lines once, then a second time, then a third. “*Son taken,*” he recited the hidden message aloud, laconically. “*Help me.* Something no pureblood wizard would ask, were he not desperate.”

Minerva huffed. “Are you surprised? The boy is twelve!”

Severus glared at her. “The boy is one of *my* students, Minerva. I am fully aware of his age, and of his current situation.”

“And bickering will help neither him nor his father, nor does it reflect well on either of you,” said Albus firmly. “We have several tasks ahead of us. We must first find the boy and rescue him, then convince his father to speak up.”

“Unlikely,” Severus said. “He will not want to admit publicly to an inability to keep his family safe.”

“Nonetheless, he must speak.” Minerva had heard that tone in Albus’ voice before, and it usually meant a difficult time ahead for the one spoken about. “For the good of all.”

Severus’ face was skeptical, but he kept any comments to himself.

“What should I tell Meghan, Albus?” Minerva asked, recalling how she had originally entered into this topic.

“A twelve-year-old girl?” Severus said dryly. “And you have to ask if she should be told that her friend has likely been kidnapped by Death Eaters?”

“A twelve-year-old girl who once healed her brother of a mortal injury,” Minerva snapped back, “a twelve-year-old girl who spent seven of those years keeping secrets even from her closest friends. A twelve-year-old girl who has spent her entire life knowing Death Eaters exist, and the sorts of things they can do. And a twelve-year-old girl who is not accustomed to being lied to.”

Albus nodded. "Tell her the truth, Minerva," he said. "But ask her not to tell her friend, Miss Macdonald, who I am sure is also worried. You may give her the publicly available story for Miss Macdonald, and anyone else who may ask."

"Headmaster," Severus objected, "a sensitive piece of intelligence like this, given to a child not even in her teens yet?"

"Severus, Meghan Black is many things." Albus rose. "But one thing she will not be for much longer is a child. None of them will." His eyes held depths of pain Minerva couldn't even begin to guess at. "War ages us all."

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Meghan barely ate at lunch. "I wanted to know," she said finally. "But I didn't want to know this."

"That's the problem with wanting to know things," said Hermione, setting aside her soup. "You can't un-know them afterwards, and you never know what they'll be until you know them."

Meghan looked up with a little smile. "I know."

Hermione held out her arms, and Meghan came to her big sister, laying her face against Hermione's shoulder. "Professor McGonagall said he'd only be scared," she said into Hermione's robes. "She said they wouldn't hurt him, because then his father wouldn't do what they wanted."

"That's right," Hermione confirmed. "That's in Moony and Padfoot and Letha's stories about the war, too, remember? The *first* war," she corrected herself ruefully. "It has to be the first war now, since there's going to be a second war."

"There *is* a second war," said Neville from across the table. "Meghan's friend's caught in it. Dad's in it every day. The Ministry just hasn't caught on yet."

"And..." Ginny glanced around the Hall and lowered her voice. "*Voldemort* wants to keep it that way. The longer he can stay out of sight, the stronger he can get. And then my dad and yours, Neville, and your parents, Meghan, Hermione, have to go out and fight against people like Mr. Pritchard, who're only fighting against us because people they love will get hurt if they don't." She shook her head. "War is so stupid."

"Not if you don't care who gets hurt," said Neville. "It's the smartest way to get what you want, then."

Meghan lifted her head. "It's kind of scary that you know how people think who don't care if other people get hurt," she told her friend.

"Mum always says, know your enemy." Neville grinned. "And Dad always says it's easier to kick his arse that way."

“And then what?” Hermione asked.

“Then Mum yells at Dad for swearing in front of me, then Dad tells Mum I probably knew those words before they ever woke up so it’s not his fault, then they have a big fight and kiss and make up...” Neville shrugged. “Usual stuff.” His smile returned. “And there are days I still can’t believe it happened to me. Especially around the holidays—I wake up and wonder if we’re going to go visit Mum and Dad at St. Mungo’s today, and then I remember.”

“That must be great,” said Meghan, sitting up. “Remembering, I mean.”

“You can’t even imagine,” Neville said quietly. “And I can’t ever thank you enough.”

“You already did.” Meghan blew him a kiss. “But I’ll always listen again.”

“Get a room, please,” said Ginny, picking up her sandwich. “Some of us are trying to eat here.”

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Harry arrived at the door of Professor Umbridge’s office a little before eight, trying to swallow the nervous feeling in his throat. This was ridiculous. He’d had detention with Snape before; this couldn’t possibly be any worse.

Could it?

He knocked.

“Come in!” Umbridge’s sickly-sweet voice called.

Harry opened the door, stepped inside, and nearly gagged. Professor Umbridge’s decorating style ran about the same as her clothing. Everything that could possibly be pink was pink. If it wasn’t pink, it was draped in doilies. Quite a lot of things were both. On the wall behind her desk hung a row of decorative plates, each painted with a jewel-toned kitten with alarmingly large eyes, all of which were gamboling in meadows and batting at butterflies.

“Ahh, Mr. Potter. Do close the door, please, I don’t want any nasty drafts getting in.” Umbridge was sitting behind her pink-draped desk, her flabby hands folded in front of her. Though her face was polite, she positively reeked of self-satisfaction and gloating, which wasn’t helping Harry’s stomach any. “You’ll be over there, at the small table, writing lines. I want you to write ‘I must not be pert.’”

“How many times, Professor?” Harry asked politely, going to sit at the table.

“We’ll discuss that later, Mr. Potter. For now, let us just say that I want the message well engraved on your mind.” Umbridge gave a little giggle which set Harry’s teeth on edge. “You’d better get started.”

Harry picked up the quill lying on the table and looked at it. It was long and black and very

sharp. For some reason, it made him think of Padfoot and Letha...

Wearing his best robes, standing very tall, listening to girls sniffle and watching Padfoot sign his name on the wedding contract without wincing, even though the long black quill was magically cutting the words into the back of his hand as he wrote...

Harry blinked and looked at the table in front of him again. “Professor, I don’t see any ink here,” he said, turning in his chair. “And I didn’t bring any with me.”

“Are you sure?” Umbridge’s smile was definitely nasty now, and her scent echoed it.

“Yes, Professor, I’m sure.”

“You’ve just earned yourself another night in detention, Mr. Potter,” Umbridge said briskly, “and I can make it three if I hear any more backtalk out of you. To work.”

“Professor, I can’t write lines without ink.”

“Yes, you can, Mr. Potter, and you will. Three nights.”

Harry bit down on a curse and turned back to the parchment. *Might as well get it over with. What was it again? I must not be pert?*

He set the quill on the parchment and began the upstroke of the I.

Pain seared across the back of his writing hand, and he hissed involuntarily, sucking in his breath. *How did Padfoot do his whole name without even flinching?*

The hiss was repeated behind him, and Harry caught a whiff of eagerness and enjoyment.

What the...

He inhaled again, to make sure he hadn’t mistaken the scent, but it was stronger the second time.

She likes it. She did this on purpose, because she likes hurting people.

Several of Padfoot’s more colorful metaphors came to mind.

Harry looked down at the quill, then at his hand. The gash the quill’s magic had opened was closed now, but the skin there still throbbed, as though it had only just been healed, and the curved line was just visible, slightly redder than the rest of his skin.

I am a Marauder.

If Marauders don’t like the games, they change the rules.

And I don’t like this game one little bit.

Harry turned the quill over and over in his hands, trying to find the proper phrasing for what he was about to say.

“Why do I not hear the scritch-scratching of a little quill from over there, Mr. Potter?” Umbridge called petulantly. “If I don’t start to hear it, I’m going to get testy, and that might mean a fourth night here with me. You don’t want that, now do you?”

Harry took a deep breath, set down the quill, and turned around. “Professor, I’m not going to write lines with the quill you gave me,” he said. “I’ll write them with my own quill if you like, but I won’t use that one.”

Umbridge stared at him. Harry had the odd feeling that no one had ever told her “no” to her face before. “You...won’t...use it,” she repeated slowly. “You refuse to use my quill.”

“That’s right, Professor.”

“You refuse to write lines with my quill.”

“That’s right, Professor.” Harry didn’t like the smile spreading over Umbridge’s face, the way her breathing was starting to speed up, or the way she was exuding raw jubilation. “I’ll do them with my own quill if you want me to...”

“No, no, I don’t think that will be necessary,” said Umbridge briskly, standing up. “But you’ll be coming with me, Mr. Potter. Quickly now, come along!” She clapped her hands.

Harry stood up and started out the door.

“Move along, move along,” Umbridge chided him, beckoning coquettishly. “We don’t want to keep the Headmaster waiting!”

Dumbledore? Then I should... Harry turned, meaning to pick up the quill as evidence of his story.

“No, no, no, Mr. Potter, quickly!” Umbridge had her hands on her hips. “Do you know the meaning of the word quickly?”

“Yes, Professor.” Harry dawdled his way out of the room.

“Then show me that you know!” Umbridge set off for the Headmaster’s office, moving surprisingly fast for such a short woman. “You’ll have to keep up!” she called over her shoulder. “Don’t fall behind, now, and don’t try to run off and hide, or I’ll have to get cross with you...”

Harry kept pace easily, trying not to laugh. *She’s taking me to the Headmaster over a detention. What happened to all that authority Professor McGonagall said she had?*

He rubbed the back of his hand, smiling. *And what kind of idiot did she think I was? Who would be dumb enough to sit there and cut his hand open with that thing, just because she said so?*

The smile was still on his face as Professor Umbridge knocked at the door of Dumbledore's office, as Dumbledore told them to enter, as Umbridge opened the door and ushered Harry in.

"Dolores," said Dumbledore, standing up. "And Harry...what a pleasant surprise."

"I'm afraid it won't be pleasant for long, Dumbledore," said Umbridge, a great deal of poorly suppressed glee leaking into her tone and her scent. "I'm terribly sorry to inform you of this, but a few moments ago, Mr. Potter refused to perform my very simple detention task of writing lines. I attempted to reason with him, but he remained adamant. I'm afraid—and as Hogwarts High Inquisitor, I have this power—I'm afraid that Mr. Potter's actions leave me no course but to expel him from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

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Facing Danger

Chapter 9: Explorations (Year 5)

Chapter 9: Explorations

“What?” Harry burst out.

“Speak when you’re spoken to, Mr. Potter,” Umbridge admonished, smiling poisonously at him.

“Perhaps I fail to understand, Dolores,” said Dumbledore, moving his right hand in a darting gesture, thumb and first two fingers coming together in a swift horizontal line. Harry bit back the disbelieving words threatening to explode from him. “For what is Harry being expelled from school?”

“For repeated and flagrant disobedience to my directions.” Umbridge had drawn herself up to her full height, which would have been more impressive if she weren’t so dumpy. “I had assigned him to write lines as the task for his detention, and he refused to do so, several times.”

In Harry’s mind, Wolf stirred. *Taste her blood*, he growled, the words coming out as a rumble in Harry’s chest, directly under the burning cluster of his pendants. *Taste it to see if it is as much toad as her looks. She is not for eating—she is as something long dead, and soon she will be something long dead...*

Harry forced back the change, concentrating on his human self. *Not this time*, he told Wolf. *This is human. I have to deal with it as human.*

Spoilsport, grumbled Wolf as the prickles of growing fur disappeared from Harry’s arms and legs and his elbows and knees returned to their human articulation.

They still hurt, though. Harry released his death grip on his own hands to rub his right elbow. *I don’t think I forgot to take my potion this morning...*

“Harry,” said Dumbledore’s voice. Harry looked up. “Is it true, what Professor Umbridge is saying? Did you refuse to perform the task she set you for detention?”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts,” Dumbledore cut him off, making the gesture for silence again. “I want only the answer I have asked for, no more.”

A shiver ran through Harry’s body. *He’s on her side. Or he has to pretend to be, to stay at Hogwarts. Either way, I’m still going to be expelled, and he can’t stop it—maybe he wants me expelled, maybe he wants me away from the school, so Voldemort won’t try to attack here and put all the other students in danger—*

Dumbledore sighed heavily. “Gratitude,” he said aloud. “Gratitude is the one virtue of which the

young never quite grasp the value. That is your failing, Harry—you have failed in gratitude, in your thankfulness for all that you are blessed with. Did you know that?”

Harry shook his head slowly, bemused by the sudden turn in the conversation. *Is he losing it? Why would he be talking about this right now?*

“Gratitude towards those who have sacrificed to bring you where you are.” Dumbledore was warming up to his subject. “Gratitude towards those who have gone before. Gratitude even to those who are, to us, only inked words on a dusty page. We must never forget all that they have done for us, and continue to do for us to this day.”

Harry nodded, trying to keep his confusion off his face. *He’s definitely lost it.*

“Dumbledore, is this really necessary?” Umbridge asked pointedly. “I would like to expedite things if at all possible, I don’t want the students thinking justice will be delayed for the sake of a student’s fame...”

“Forgive me, Dolores, but I have grown fond of Harry over these last years,” Dumbledore said, turning towards the woman. “Allow me a little time to give him some last words of wisdom, before he passes forever out of my reach?”

“Very well,” said Umbridge, sitting down in one of the chairs in front of Dumbledore’s desk. Her smile showed clearly that she thought she’d won.

She has won. Dumbledore’s giving up. Harry shivered again, not sure if the Headmaster’s office was actually colder than the rest of the castle had been or if it just felt colder. He’d been so sure that Dumbledore wouldn’t let anything happen, but all Dumbledore seemed able to do was talk...

“Gratitude can take many forms, Harry.” Dumbledore resumed his speech, pacing about behind his desk. “You show your parents gratitude for the food and shelter they provide for you by obeying their dictates. You show your friends gratitude for their friendship by being a good friend to them in return. And you show your teachers gratitude—or you should—by obeying them as you would your parents.”

Harry couldn’t hold himself back any longer. “But Professor—”

Dumbledore cut him off. “To fail to show your teachers this courtesy is the most base kind of ingratitude. It shows not only that you fail to respect what they are here to teach you, but that you fail to respect all that they stand for! In short, Harry Potter, by failing to be grateful for what Professor Umbridge has tried to teach you, you stand convicted by your own actions of ingratitude towards her and all that she is!” Dumbledore met Harry’s eyes and held his gaze for a moment. “I hope you understand me.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said shortly. *I understand that you think I should be grateful for the chance to hurt myself to prove I’ll do whatever I’m told, but that’s not how I work. I’ll do things I don’t like, that’s what detention is about, but I’m not about to cut my hand open just because I fought fire*

with fire.

He took a deep breath to calm himself, turning away from Umbridge to minimize his chances of getting a noseful of toadish glee, and coughed in surprise at what he got instead.

It smells like April Fool's at the Den...

Dumbledore was still talking. "Our school has a long and important tradition of gratitude. Students grateful to their teachers for the opportunity to learn, teachers grateful to their students for the opportunity to pass along what they know, and all of us grateful to those who came first, who passed this marvelous castle along to us, who founded it. Our best gratitude to *them* is, or should be, expressed by learning about them and who they were, what they did and loved, and what roles they played."

Harry's breathing was starting to speed up. *Dumbledore's got something planned. All this babble, everything he's saying, it's for Umbridge, to make her think he has no idea what to do. He's not just going to throw me out—he never was—this is all part of something, I just have to figure out what...*

"Harry, come here." Dumbledore's peregrinations had led him to the fireplace, where flames flickered on the hearth. He was standing before it, gazing into them. "I have an important question for you."

Harry crossed the room to the Headmaster's side, flicking a quick look at Umbridge as he passed. She looked a bit bored, but also triumphant. *She has to think he's lost his Gobstones. Maybe she even thinks she made it happen, by threatening to throw me out of school. That would make sense, the way she thinks—and I bet she thinks she'll be Headmistress if he has to leave—*

"Harry, look at me," Dumbledore said, breaking into Harry's thoughts. The light blue eyes behind the half-moon glasses were solemn, but deep within them Harry caught just a hint of the well-known twinkle. "Do you know which of the four Founders was the first Head of Hogwarts?"

This is important. He's trying to tell me something. Harry's gaze skipped from Dumbledore's face to the bookshelf behind the Headmaster's desk, where a silver sword lay in a glass case. "I thought...I think..." He hesitated. "I don't know, sir."

"Tell me who you think it was, then." Dumbledore's face was encouraging.

"I think...I always thought it was Gryffindor, sir."

"So many people do," said Dumbledore with a sigh. "But no, it was Hufflepuff. Hufflepuff, Harry. She was the first Headmistress of Hogwarts—she resided in these very quarters, walked these very floors, gazed out these very windows."

He turned away, looking around the room. "So many times I have wondered, did she ever stand as I do, watching her students at play, wondering what they would make of their lives? Wondering if

any of them would ever bother to return and thank her for all that she had done for them, all she had sacrificed? For she gave her very life for this school, and I have no doubt that if there were some way she could have given up whatever comes after this life, she would have done that as well.”

Harry frowned. *Does he know...?*

“Gratitude, Harry,” Dumbledore said firmly, turning to face him once more. “Display gratitude—express it wherever you go, whatever you do, in deeds and in words—and you will not be the loser by it.” His hands, hanging by his sides in loose curls, moved, his index fingers uncurling, then curling again with the other fingers. “Have I made myself clear?”

“I...” Harry faltered. *No, you bloody well haven’t!* shouted an indignant part of his mind. *Babbling on about gratitude and thanking people, about Hufflepuff, telling me to run away not two minutes after you made me come over by the fireplace, away from the door—*

“Remain by the fire, then,” Dumbledore said calmly. “Watch the flames and see if you can find some peace in your...heart .”

Harry turned away and stared at the fire, only half-hearing Umbridge begin to tell Dumbledore why Harry should be expelled without a moment’s delay. His mind tumbled from thought to thought.

Gratitude. Thanking people. Thanking Hufflepuff—he made a big deal out of Hufflepuff—and he wants me to stay here, but he wants me to run away—how can I do both? How can I run away when I can’t get out the door? And why did he say “heart” like that, like it was a big deal? What is he trying to tell me?

He cracked a smile. *If this was the common room—any of the common rooms—I know what I could do. Or the hospital wing, for that matter, or the kitchens...*

His train of thought suddenly became a runaway. *Thanking people—Hufflepuff—the password—and the heart, that’s what he calls it—and the fireplace, that’s where it always is, where every one we’ve ever found has been—*

Harry glanced over his shoulder. Dumbledore was nodding gravely as Umbridge expounded loudly on Harry’s many faults. *I hope you fall down the stairs and break your neck,* he thought venomously towards her. *Now...*

He looked back at the carvings to either side of the stone fireplace. *To the right. It’s always to the right. And I can even make it so they don’t notice—if I’m right to begin with—*

“Stealth mode,” he breathed. “Thank you, Helga.”

xXxXx

Albus Dumbledore kept his eyes firmly on Dolores Umbridge as she continued to rant about how

Harry Potter was a menace to the entire school.

A menace to you, you mean, Dolores. Harry is your worst nightmare—an intelligent and self-assured young man, too firmly set in his own ways to be swayed into yours.

I wonder if you and Cornelius realize what you have done by sending you here? You serve as the visible enemy that Harry can use to rally the students to his cause. When the students realize why you are really here, they would follow a fire-crab if it promised to rid them of you. Harry will have no trouble. Then, slowly, he can use their existing loyalty to him to convince them that his invisible enemy—Voldemort—exists, and that they should be fighting against Voldemort as well as against you.

It always pleased him to see the tactics of evildoers adapted for the use of those fighting for good.

I wonder if Harry has pieced together the hints I dropped for him yet?

He seated himself, still listening with half an ear to Dolores, and knocked a quill from his desk in the process. Bending to pick it up, he glanced towards the fireplace.

Harry was gone.

As he straightened up, Dumbledore could hear a few of the portraits on the walls sniggering quietly in their frames. As though thinking, he placed a fingertip on his lips, and was gratified to hear the laughter die down.

There will be a time for laughter, my friends. Dumbledore put on his most serene smile and listened to Dolores' continuing tirade.

Though, for all our sakes, I hope it comes soon.

xXxXx

Harry scrambled into the hole in the wall and let his hand slide up the smooth, curved side of the tunnel.

It worked. I don't believe it. It really worked.

He looked back into the Headmaster's office. Umbridge and Dumbledore were still talking—or rather, Umbridge was talking and Dumbledore was listening—in the middle of the room, unaware that anything unusual was happening.

And I think I'd like to keep it that way.

“Thank you, Helga,” Harry murmured again, and pushed off as the stone slab grated closed behind him to seal the tunnel.

Down, down, down—wow, this goes faster than the one from the common room—I wonder where it

comes out? It's Hufflepuff's password, so it's probably one of the yellow rooms, but the bedrooms go to the common rooms, so this one would go to the other yellow room, which is—

The floor disappeared underneath Harry.

He had a blurred glimpse of a bright, reflective room as he fell.

The bathroom—but then what—

Impact. Strangely hard, yet yielding. Holding him up, hampering his movements, and when he tried to breathe in, he choked—

Water, he realized foggily. I must have fallen into the bathtub.

A long string of bubbles emerged from his lips. Dreamily, he followed them upwards, almost not caring if he made it or not. The water felt cool and comforting around him.

His head broke the surface, and suddenly getting air became a priority. Coughing and spluttering, he paddled towards the side of the pool-sized tub, still trying to take everything in.

Umbridge can expel me all she likes, he realized. She can't make me leave unless she can find me. And she has no idea the Den even exists! She could look for years and never find it—Dumbledore knows about it, but he'd never tell her—he told me so I'd have somewhere to hide, somewhere she can't find me!

He clambered awkwardly out of the tub, wincing as his knees and elbows complained at the motion, and stood dripping on the floor, looking around the bathroom with new eyes. *This is my place now. I have to stay here. I can't leave, or she'll find me.*

He grinned as a corollary of this development hit him. *I can't even go to classes—*

Or to Quidditch practice.

That was going to make Angelina Johnson, new captain of the Gryffindor team, very unhappy with him.

*It's going to make **me** unhappy with me.* Harry pulled off his outer robes and dropped them to the floor, shivering more than ever. *What am I going to do in here all day? Fly around by myself and read? Hermione might go for that, but can I?*

The room was starting to tilt around him. Harry dropped to one knee, and swore under his breath as it stabbed with pain.

I'm having a flare-up, he realized as from far away. The lupus can get worse all of a sudden, if I get upset or excited—I need to lie down, get warm, take a potion for it—

But he couldn't leave the Den, and all his potions were up in Gryffindor Tower. The room spun

faster and faster around him, shaking him like a rabbit in Wolf's jaws.

Wolf—yes— Harry tried to focus his mind on transforming. If he could get four feet under him, he might be able to move at least out into the main room, where he could lie down and get warm. *Fur and a tail...ears, eyes, nose, tongue...*

He couldn't keep from whimpering a little, as his joints, already under attack, protested this sudden change in their status even more vigorously. Finally, it was done, and a shivering Wolf lay on the floor of the bathroom.

Need to get up. He rolled shakily onto his belly. Front paws braced against the tiles, he lifted his rear end until his legs were fully extended and his rump pressed against the side of the bathtub, then shuffled his front paws backwards to pull himself to standing, whining as he did. Everything hurt, and he was hot and cold at the same time—he wanted someone to come and hold him and make it all go away—

I have to help myself to start with. First, why don't I try getting a little dryer? He shook the excess water out of his coat, carefully, so as not to knock himself over. *Now, to the door.*

The door seemed determined not to let him find it, but he kept his eyes locked on it, and though he staggered a few times, he finally fetched up against it, panting. A paw reached up and pressed down on the handle, and Wolf tumbled unceremoniously into the main room of the Hogwarts Den.

There. He lay on the soft floor, panting, gratefully tasting the safe and familiar scents that pervaded the room. Their faces flickered before him, shifting from human to animal and back again.

Like me. Harry was only dimly aware that he'd returned to his human shape, that he was curled up on his side, hugging his knees. His clothes were still unpleasantly damp, he ached all over, but he was safe.

If safe includes so bloody sick I can barely move.

If he could just get up for long enough to call a house-elf, send a message to Ron or Hermione or Draco, tell them where he was and that he was feeling ill—they'd know what to do, they'd come right away and bring the potions Letha had brewed for times just like this—

But I don't think I can.

He tried to open his mouth and call out, but nothing emerged from his lips except a croaking noise that Trevor could have made.

Sounds like what I would have expected from Umbridge...

The thought, and the humor behind it, went with him into darkness, as did the face of the one person he knew he could have shared it with, the person who would have laughed her hardest at it, the person who would have melded Umbridge's own simpering voice and Harry's croak into a

perfect toad-woman impersonation.

He didn't even realize that he'd whispered her name as he fell.

xXxXx

Ginny paced up and down the common room, unaccountably nervous. Harry had done detentions before; why was she so worried? Nothing Umbridge could do to him would be worse than what Snape kept ready for Gryffindors, especially the Pride. Harry would be back in a few hours, laughingly complaining about whatever she'd made him do, boasting that it took more than that to take down the alpha of the Pride.

But he's upset about whatever it is that she wants him to do. Ginny fingered her pendants. She, like the rest of the Pride, had cooled the heat of Harry's unhappiness with the murmured spell "*Cesso aestum*," since there really wasn't anything they could do about it, but the wolf cub was still glowing brightly on Ginny's second pendant.

Bringing the pendants closer to her eyes, she frowned. Was it her imagination, or was the carving of the wolf a little larger than it had been before?

A sudden flare of light made her gasp and drop the pendants, shielding her eyes uselessly after the fact. The image of the wolf burned purple on the insides of her eyelids.

Something's happened to Harry. Something worse than just a detention.

She turned and hurried towards the fireplace, ignoring the questions curious Gryffindors were calling to her.

I have to find him.

"Ginny!" Ron called from across the room. "Where are you going?"

Ginny turned to face him. *To the Den*, she signed, sliding her right hand down into the shelter of her left.

"Why?" Ron mouthed silently, aware of the inquisitive eyes on him.

Ginny bit her tongue to keep from swearing and crossed quickly to her brother. "Something's wrong," she said, displaying her pendants. "Look at the way this is glowing. If we could still feel it, it would probably be burning us. I have to find out what's wrong."

"How will going down to the Den help you find out what's wrong?"

"I can call a house-elf there and ask what's going on with Harry. They see everything, and they like us." Ginny smiled. "They like you, after what you did for Winky. I get the knock-on effect because I'm your sister."

Ron blushed. "I was just thinking about Mum," he muttered.

Keep telling yourself that, big brother. "I'm still going down there. You can come if you want." Ginny looked around the notably empty circle of chairs. "Where's everyone else, anyway?"

"Hermione and Meghan went off to work on Meghan's Animagus, Draco and Luna probably found a broom closet somewhere, and I don't know where Neville went."

A chair coughed slightly, and Neville looked up from his book. "I'm right here," he said.

"What do you want to hide from us for?" Ron demanded.

"Just practicing." Neville shrugged. "Making sure I can still do it after summer."

"Can't you do it over summer?" Ginny asked curiously.

"It hardly works at all away from Hogwarts. I'd have to get a power boost from somewhere, and that's not good for me." Neville touched the white streaks at his temples. "When Dad and I took the hedges down at the Triwizard Tournament, I boosted us with one of my pendant jewels, and this happened."

"I wondered where those came from," said Ron. "Do you have any more of those jewels left?"

"Just one. I used another one a long time ago. But you have one too, you know."

"Me?" Ron fished out his pendants and looked. "Oh, that's right. I remember now. Because I was too stupid to get out of Myrtle's bathroom."

"Too loyal," Ginny corrected. "And we need to go check on Harry. Coming, Neville?"

Neville marked his place and set his book aside. "Downstairs?" he asked, signing as Ginny had to indicate what he meant.

"Right." Ron led the way to the fireplace. "Let's see what the toad had him do for detention. Stealth mode, thank you, Godric."

The hole grated open. Ron was about to clamber in, but Neville coughed. "Ladies first," he said, holding out a hand to Ginny.

Ron scowled. Ginny made a face at him where Neville couldn't see, then climbed into the hole and pushed off. Her thoughts kept pace with her rapid slide.

I'll want to talk to Kady. She's our best house-elf friend here, now that Dobby's left. If she doesn't know what's going on with Harry, she'll know how to find out. As long as it's something Harry can deal with on his own, we'll leave him alone, but the pendants don't usually go off unless it's something we should be helping someone with...

She dropped onto the bed, bounced once, and rolled off. “Clear!” she called up the slide, stretched her back, and opened the door into the main room.

Harry lay crumpled near the bathroom door.

Hissing words she hadn’t even known she knew, Ginny raced to his side. His skin was hot, she could feel it even before she touched him, and his knuckles were visibly swollen.

“He’s having a flare-up,” she said loudly. “He needs one of his potions.”

“What?” Ron checked in the doorway. “He’s *here*?”

“I’d hardly know that if he weren’t!” Ginny snapped back. “Go get him one! They’re in his trunk—the stronger ones are to the right, he needs one of those—”

“I’ll get it,” Neville said from behind Ron.

“How did he get in here?” Ron hurried across the main room to where Harry lay. “Did Umbridge have him serving detention in the kitchens? I thought she wanted him in her office.”

“I don’t know, and right now, I don’t care,” Ginny said, letting her hand rest on Harry’s face. “He needs to be in bed, though. Or something like a bed.”

The room squirmed slightly under their feet, and Harry sank a little deeper into the floor where he lay, his head rising as the Den made him a pillow. Ron picked up the blanket that had appeared beside him, draping it over Harry. “There,” he said. “Good enough?”

“I think so.” Ginny wished for a moment that she had Meghan’s gift, to heal with a touch, to take Harry’s pain away and make him better in an instant...

“Something must have happened,” Ron said. “He wouldn’t have come to the Den unless he was in real trouble. I think I’m going to go find the twins. They know everything.”

“Find the rest of the Pride while you’re at it,” said Ginny, looking up. “Just a potion isn’t going to get Harry better right away, if he’s this bad. He’ll need people around to take care of him.”

Ron nodded and started for the red bedroom. Ginny watched him go. As soon as the door was shut behind him, she lifted the blanket over Harry. “How did you get all wet?” she wondered aloud, drawing her wand. “Was it part of the detention?” A charm Hermione had taught her started hot air blowing from her wand tip, and she began to play it over Harry, drying his clothes. “Or was it something else?”

Harry sighed in his sleep and relaxed a little, and Ginny smiled. Unbidden, Mrs. Danger’s words at the train station, years before, drifted back through her mind. “*Alpha females don’t cry in public unless they can’t help it.*” Was she trying to tell me...

She shook her head. *No, that’s ridiculous. She can’t have meant that the way I thought she did*

back then. She was just trying to make me feel better.

A hand on Harry's side found no moisture there. "A little help, please?" Ginny said aloud. "He needs to roll over."

The floor bulged up beside Harry, rolling him gently to his other side. Ginny directed her jet of hot air at this side of her alpha, smiling at his endlessly messy hair, now even worse than usual. Lifting his glasses from his face, she tucked them into her pocket for safekeeping.

"You don't get these back until I'm sure you need them," she teased. "That way, I'll always know where you are."

Just as the last bit of water steamed out of Harry's T-shirt and disappeared, Neville reappeared in the doorway of the red bedroom, clutching a vial. Meghan was right behind him. "Let me see," she said, kneeling beside Harry. "Is he any better?"

"I got him dry." Ginny put away her wand. "I have no idea how he got wet, but he's dry now."

"Perfect." Meghan took out her own wand and accepted the potion from Neville. Her face creased in concentration as she tapped her wand against the glass, then traced Harry's lips with its tip, murmuring a phrase. Slowly, the liquid in the vial began to disappear, and Harry swallowed, his Adam's apple moving up and down as his throat worked.

Ginny found herself swallowing as she watched. This wasn't how Harry should be. He hated lying around and letting other people take care of him—he always wanted to fight, to beat whatever was threatening, to take care of everyone else—

"There," Meghan said, setting aside the empty vial. "But he needs to stay warm. It'll help his body fight off the fever."

"We can warm the room up," said Neville.

"But then we'll all be too hot." Meghan looked at Ginny. One eyelid flickered shut so fast Ginny wasn't sure she'd really seen it. "Ginny, do you think you could help?"

"H-how?" Ginny coughed to get rid of the unaccountable catch in her throat.

"You're warm when you're Lynx. You could curl up beside him, and I'll put the blanket over you both." Any silliness there might have been on Meghan's face had vanished. "It would really help, Ginny. He needs to stay warm, so his body doesn't get worn out trying to keep itself too hot. Please?"

"Yes." It came out too fast, too strident. Ginny coughed again. "Yes, I'll do that." She changed faster than she ever had, to hide the blush she could feel starting to stain her face. Deliberately, she picked her way to Harry's side and lay down beside him, curling up against his chest.

I'm going to help you get well, she thought towards him. Maybe I can't heal you with just a touch,

but I have other ways.

Softly, she began to purr.

xXxXx

Meghan draped the blanket over Ginny and Harry, then turned to face Neville. He was smiling. *You see it too?* she signed.

Neville's fingers flew. *I think everyone sees it except them. And even Ginny's starting to see it now, but...* He shook his head. *Let's go in there,* he suggested, pointing towards the yellow bedroom. *We can be private.*

Meghan bounced towards the bedroom door. She liked privacy.

"Ginny knows she likes Harry a lot," Neville said when the door was shut. "But she has no idea how much yet, I think. And she doesn't know what's going to happen when Harry finally figures out how he feels about her."

"What?" Meghan asked curiously.

"Well, I only know myself, but..." Neville reached out and took her hand in his. "It was the best, and the scariest, feeling I'd ever had."

"Why scariest?"

"Because there was someone who needed me, who wanted me, who believed in me." Neville raised his head to meet her eyes. "Because I didn't know if I could be good enough to be what she believed in."

Meghan sighed. "We've been over this. You're wonderful."

"How do you know?"

"Because I say so, that's why!" Meghan planted her free hand on her hip. "And I mean it!"

Neville laughed. "Yes, dear," he said in a mock-submissive voice.

Meghan grinned and pulled herself in by their handgrip.

Submission, even mock submission, shouldn't be wasted, after all.

xXxXx

Hermione pulled aside Draco's bedcurtains with no announcement whatsoever. Luna looked up, startled, and Snow Fox yipped.

“Harry’s in trouble,” Hermione said, sitting down beside her friend. “Umbridge just expelled him from school.”

Snow Fox, trying to leap over to Ron’s bed, missed his landing and hit the floor hard as Draco. “Ow.”

“Can she do that?” Luna asked, leaning over to help Draco up. “I thought only Professor Dumbledore could do that.”

“Her new position means she can do what she wants,” Hermione said. “Dumbledore can’t stop her.”

“This is bad,” Draco said, wincing as he sat down on Ron’s bed. “Where’s he going to go? Back to Headquarters? That’s the only other safe place for him right now, and he’d go crazy stuck in there all year long without us around.”

Hermione grinned. “He’s not going anywhere,” she said. “Umbridge can’t expel what she can’t find. And Harry’s disappeared on her. She nearly tore Dumbledore’s office apart looking for him, and now she and Filch are looking through the rest of the school. The teachers are looking too—”

“But maybe not as hard as they could be,” Ron said, coming in.

Hermione sniffed. “Thank you for stealing my thunder.”

“You’re welcome. Here, have it back.” Ron pretended to toss something towards her.

“But where is he?” Luna asked. “You have to know, or you wouldn’t be so happy.”

Ron shut the door. “He’s down in the Den,” he said. “We don’t know how he got there, but Ginny found him there a little while ago. He was having a flare-up.”

Luna’s eyes widened in worry, and Draco cursed under his breath.

“He’ll be all right now,” Hermione said quickly. “Meghan got some of his potion into him, and he’s asleep. But he has to stay in the Den from now on, or Umbridge will catch him and expel him.”

Draco shook his head. “Of all the people to be under house arrest, it had to be Harry,” he said. “He can’t even sit still through a double period.”

“He has the Quidditch pitch, if he wants to fly or run,” Luna pointed out. “And he can go swimming in the bathroom.”

“That’s not the point.” Draco stood up and rubbed at a sore spot on his back. “Harry doesn’t always do well in enclosed spaces. He can handle it sometimes, but if he’s there for a long time, bad things might start happening.”

“We can sneak out at night and go running,” Hermione said. “We have the Invisibility Cloak, and Neville can make us all invisible for a little while if we need it. It’s classes that worry me. The whole reason for Harry to be here is so he can learn magic.”

“So we’ll take him our notes,” Ron said. “You’re a better teacher than half the professors anyway, Hermione. Anything he needs to learn, he can learn from us.”

“I hope so.” Hermione swallowed and thought hard of snow and chill and Christmas to keep the blood from reaching her cheeks.

“And I don’t think most of the professors like Professor Umbridge,” Luna put in. “They might not think it’s important enough to tell her if they’re still getting homework from a student who’s not in class anymore.”

Draco chuckled. “Harry’s not going to like that,” he said, and pulled a long face, imitating his brother’s voice. “‘What do you *mean*, I can’t play Quidditch but I still have to do my homework? That’s not fair!’”

“Welcome to our lives,” said Hermione dryly. “When was the last time anything was fair?”

xXxXx

Harry squirmed. Whatever was around him, it was too heavy, too tight, too hot. He needed to get out.

One arm made it free first. His face came up, and he gasped in air the way he had coming out of the bathtub earlier that day. Pulling his other arm free, he shook his head hard to rid himself of the sleepy feeling, then planted both hands on the floor and pushed, lifting himself entirely free of whatever-it-was all around him.

I’m still in the Den, so I guess the Pride found me. Either that or the house-elves.

He turned back to look at what he’d climbed out of and yelled in shock.

There was still a Harry Potter lying on the floor. He was breathing slowly and deeply, he was covered with a blanket, and something large and furry was nestled against his chest. Looking more closely, Harry could see the distinctive tipped ears of Lynx-Ginny.

*So I’m lying on the floor with Ginny beside me. He wondered vaguely why that didn’t disturb him the way it should. But I’m also standing up and looking at myself. I can’t be dead—I’m breathing—so what *is* happening?*

He recalled a discussion last year with the Pack-parents, talking about a talent related to Draco and Hermione’s dreamsculpting, something called astral travel—instead of making dream worlds in his own mind, he could travel to real places and see real things happen in his dreams—

I’ve done it before. Twice last year, and some other time—back in first year, when I wanted to see

the Mirror of Erised! He caught his breath in surprise as he recalled this. I came to Hogwarts while I was asleep, and I looked in the Mirror, but it didn't show me anything I wanted. It just showed me...me.

But that didn't matter now. What mattered was, he knew now what it felt like to climb out of his body. As that body looked very comfortable where it was, and Harry's last memories of being in it were not, he wasn't too eager to get back in.

"I'll do it eventually," he said aloud, just to make sure he could talk like this. "But not right now."

He looked down at his hands and was unsurprised to see them paler than usual, semi-translucent, and vaguely luminescent. "I wonder if I glow in the dark?"

Deciding to check this out, he wandered over to the bathroom door. *I can look in the mirror while I'm at it. See what I look like all over.*

He reached for the handle of the door—

And his hand went through it.

Thrown off balance, Harry stumbled forward, bracing himself for pain—

Which never arrived.

Oh. Right. Stupid.

If I can't touch the handle, the door can't touch me either.

Floors were still solid, Harry discovered, but soft. He hadn't hurt himself at all falling.

And he did indeed glow in the dark.

He grinned at his ghostly reflection in the mirror. "This is going to be fun," he said.

Further experimentation proved that walls were also solid-but-soft, while doors he could walk through at will. *Makes sense. People walk through doors all the time—just not usually while they're closed!*

He stepped into the green bedroom and looked at the empty frame on the wall. "Alex?" he said tentatively.

"Harry?" answered Alex's voice.

"You can hear me?"

"You're talking." Alex stepped into his frame, his usually neat green robes spotted with white. "Oh, you're running around without your body on. I wondered when you'd get around to figuring

that one out.”

“What’s that stuff on you?” Harry asked, pointing.

Alex made a face. “You don’t want to know.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you really don’t. Trust me on this.” Alex pulled his robes off over his head and snapped his fingers, making them disappear. “I didn’t even want to know what it was.”

“I didn’t know you knew how to dress Muggle,” Harry said, looking with interest at the jeans and T-shirt Alex was wearing now.

“It’s a bit of a new thing. Hard to explain. Maybe next summer.” Alex sat down and pulled his wand from his pocket. “I need some new robes, and you need to go see what else you can find out with this, so shoo. Don’t stand here talking to me all day. I’m not that interesting.”

“I’ll remember that.” Harry started for the door, then turned around as he remembered a question he’d had. “How do I get out of the Den?”

“You can use any of the exits just like you normally would,” Alex said, sketching in the air with his wand. “You don’t even have to say the password. Bathroom exit is in the bathtub, but I think you already figured that out.”

Harry rolled his eyes and stepped out through the bedroom door.

“Where have I already been?” he said aloud, pointing at the doors as he named them. “Bathroom, green bedroom, yellow bedroom, Quidditch pitch…”

Behind him, one of the doors opened. Harry whirled in surprise.

Draco stepped out of the library, talking to someone behind him. “—just have to make sure we don’t give anything away. If Umbridge ever found out about this—”

“I don’t think she could get in anyway,” said Hermione. “We could lock the entrances against her to make sure, if we want.”

Luna shook her head. “You can’t lock the entrances against someone,” she said. “You can only—”

Her eyes fell on Harry, and she stopped as though her feet were made of lead.

“Luna?” said Hermione tentatively. “What’s wrong?”

Harry shook his head, seeing a terrible fear dawning in Luna’s eyes. “I’m all right,” he said quickly. “I’m not dead. I can go back any time I want. If I was a ghost, everyone could see me, right?”

Luna nodded, her hand against her chest. "You scared me," she whispered.

"Sorry." Harry pointed at himself. "Have a look. I'm breathing, my heart's beating. I'm even still connected. Look." He lifted the silvery cord he'd discovered when he'd looked at himself in the mirror, which was wrapped around his left wrist and disappeared into his body's back. "This is just something I can do, like Draco can make dreams or Ron can fix things."

"Luna, who are you talking to?" Draco asked nervously.

"Harry," Luna said, starting to smile. "He's practicing walking around without his body."

"What?"

Draco, the closest, dropped to one knee. "He's breathing," he said quickly.

"Yes, he's just fine," Luna said, now smiling broadly. "But I think he's having fun. Are you?" she asked Harry.

"Loads. What's going on in the rest of the castle? And could you ask Hermione please not to look like she's choking?"

"Hermione, Harry says please don't look like you're choking," Luna dutifully repeated.

Hermione sat down where she stood. "Give me a minute," she said shakily. "I remember now. It's called astral travel, or out-of-body work. Muggle-born and half-blood wizards are usually better at it, and at dreamsculpting. Danger told me about it. But I wasn't expecting it."

"Nor was I," said Harry, sitting down beside his sister. "Wish I could tell you that myself..."

A thought came to him. Gently, he placed his hand atop hers.

The two meshed together, and Hermione shivered.

"Can you hear me?" Harry said aloud.

"Harry?" Hermione looked around. "It's like...Luna, is he talking to me?"

Luna nodded. "He's sitting right next to you," she said. "He has his hand in yours."

"In mine?" Hermione lifted her hand to look at it doubtfully.

"Well, not now," said Luna. "You moved."

"Sorry." Hermione quickly returned her hand to its place. "Now?"

"Yes."

"I wanted to tell you I wasn't expecting this either," Harry said aloud, letting his forearm merge

with Hermione's as well. "None of it. Not Umbridge trying to expel me, not Dumbledore helping me get away, not the flare-up, not climbing out of my body...this has probably been the craziest hour I've ever had in my life."

"I think I understood you, Harry," Hermione said, her eyes closed. "You said you didn't expect any of this, and it was crazy. Am I close?"

"Yes," Luna said. "He said more than that, but you understood most of it."

"How about me?" Draco asked, holding out a hand. "Think it will work?"

"Only one way to find out," Harry said. Pulling away from Hermione, he changed into Wolf and trotted towards Draco. *And now I know I can change in this form too. Good things to know, all of them.*

Draco, too, could hear a vague echo of Harry's voice when Harry was partly merged with him. "It's not exact," he said. "More like talking when we're all in form. You get the basic ideas of things, but not too much else."

"That'll do," Harry said. "Now, what's going on in the rest of the castle?"

"The teachers are all looking for you, but most of them aren't looking too hard," Draco said. "Umbridge is tearing the place apart—she's pissed at Dumbledore, but she can't prove he had anything to do with you disappearing. How did that happen, anyway?"

"The entrance to the Den in the bathroom," Harry said, Luna echoing him. "It comes down from Dumbledore's office." He grinned. "The bathtub fills up to break your fall."

Hermione laughed when Luna relayed this. "That sounds like Helga," she said. "You know how she's always threatening to throw Paul and Adam in the lake if they call her 'Gaga' again." Her face turned awed. "Oh my. I just realized what I said."

"What did you say?" Draco asked.

"I'm talking about one of the Founders of Hogwarts by her first name." Hermione shook her head. "Talking to my brother who is, to look at him, asleep over there with one of my best friends curled up against him wearing fur. And I'm sitting in a place that shouldn't exist."

"Two places," Luna put in. "Muggles think Hogwarts doesn't exist, and wizards don't know about the Den."

"Hermione Granger-Lupin," Harry said in his best announcer voice, "this is your life!"

Hermione glared through Harry. "If you just said what I think you just said, Harry Potter, I'm going to hit you when you wake up."

"Why wait?" Harry pulled away and darted out of reach, habit taking over before he remembered

she couldn't hit him in this form.

This is even better than I thought.

xXxXx

Ron, Meghan, and Neville arrived later, having been detailed to cover the Pride's tracks in Gryffindor Tower. Ron was laughing, Meghan couldn't seem to stop giggling, and Neville wore a broad grin.

"What is so funny?" Hermione asked, hugging her sister.

"You should have been there," said Ron, sitting down. "Umbridge tried to climb through the portrait hole and got stuck."

Draco doubled up laughing, and Luna covered her mouth.

"That's not funny," Hermione said sternly, but Harry could see her lips trying not to curve upwards. "She could have been hurt."

"She got unstuck," Neville said. "Then she sent Filch in to search Gryffindor Tower for Harry. He decided to start with the girls' dorms."

Meghan danced around her boyfriend. "And he didn't know about the stairs!" she sang out. "He didn't know, and he tried to go up, and he slid back down!"

Now Hermione did laugh.

"McGonagall eventually came in to check in the girls' dorms," Ron said. "Though she told Umbridge point-blank she didn't think there was any way you could be there. And Filch checked the boys', and they both looked through the bathrooms."

"Dumbledore's not telling anyone anything," Neville took over again. "He's just walking around smiling and looking mysterious. McGonagall knows, or I think she does—I saw her looking at the fireplace a few times, and she didn't seem really worried like she would be if a student was actually missing."

"That makes sense," said Hermione. "She's a Pack-friend, after all, so she deserves to know—oh, no!" She looked stricken. "No one's told the Pack-parents—they're going to think Harry's missing!"

"I'm sure Dumbledore took care of it, Hermione," Harry said, forgetting she couldn't hear him. "He wouldn't forget something like that."

Luna repeated this, and Hermione's panicked look subsided.

"Besides, Percy sent me a note the night before we left for school," Ron added. "He said not to

write anything in our letters home we didn't want the Ministry to read, and not to try firecalling at all. They're watching our letters and the Floo Network."

Hermione smiled smugly. "Yes, but are they watching these?" She dug in her pocket and pulled out her Zippophone.

"I don't know," said Ron, holding out his hand. "Can I see that?"

"Don't break it," Hermione warned, handing it over. "It was a gift."

"I know." Ron carefully pried the back off the Zippophone and bent over it. "This goes here," he muttered, "and that goes there, and this goes back and forth here..." He looked up. "I think it should be safe," he said, sliding the back into place again. "It looks like it makes a direct connection to whatever fire you're talking to."

"So we'll just call one of the Pack-parents' Zippos," said Draco, taking back the Zippophone and handing it to Hermione. "We shouldn't call the main fire in Headquarters—it's on the Floo Network, even if it is under Fidelius right now. No reason to push our luck."

Hermione flipped the lighter open, engaged the catch, and spoke into it. "Remus Lupin."

A moment, then Moony's voice spoke from within the flame. "Lupin here."

"Moony, it's Hermione."

"Hello, Kitten, is something wrong?"

"Not exactly..."

"Spit it out, Hermione," said Danger's voice.

Hermione sighed. "Have you heard anything about Harry?"

"No, we haven't heard anything about Harry," said Moony, "unless you're calling to tell us something about Harry. Where is he?"

"He's here. He's all right, he just had a flare-up earlier today. He's sleeping now, sort of."

"Sort of?" Danger repeated.

"He's practicing that thing you told him about," Draco said. "Astral travel, was it?"

"Playing ghost, is he?" Moony sounded amused. "Tell him to have fun."

"He heard you," Luna called, smiling at Harry's broad grin and thumbs up. "He says he is."

"Of course," said Moony under his breath. "But that's not everything you called about, is it?"

“No...” Hermione looked around doubtfully. “I don’t even know what really happened,” she said. “Do any of you?”

Harry sighed. “Tell them to hold on a moment?” he said to Luna. “I don’t know how long this will take.”

“Harry’s going to try to go back into his body,” Luna said aloud. “He doesn’t know how long it will take, but he’ll try to be quick about it.”

Harry lay down overlapping his own body, drew a deep breath, and concentrated on merging.

He was sinking, falling, being drawn into something too heavy and too hot for him—

No, this is right. This is where I belong.

His eyelids were heavy, but they opened at his command, and he gently scooted Lynx away from him. “I’m awake,” he croaked. “I’m all right.”

Meghan darted in to hug him, kissing his throat on the way. “You are,” she said thankfully. “It’s all gone back to where it was.”

“Harry?” Moony’s voice sounded half-worried, half-amused. “We’ve just had an owl here. Something about you being expelled...”

Harry groaned.

“This had better be good,” Padfoot’s voice put in. “James and I used to get suspended, but we never got expelled. What did you do?”

“I said I wouldn’t write lines for Umbridge.” Harry sat up, let the room stop spinning around him, and accepted the Zippo from Hermione.

“What happened to behaving well this year?” Letha asked acerbically.

“She wanted me to use a Contract Quill.”

The Pride stared at him. Harry had no doubt that on the other end of the connection, the Pack-parents were staring at the Zippo.

“She wanted you to write lines in *blood*?” Padfoot blurted finally.

“I’ve got the line on my hand where I tried it out,” said Harry, holding up his hand so the Pride could see. “And she said I didn’t need any ink, and gave me another night’s detention when I asked why not.”

“Did you tell Albus that?” Danger asked.

“I didn’t get a chance, but I didn’t need to.” Harry grinned. “You won’t believe what he helped me do.”

“Will we want to?” asked Letha.

“Probably. It’s a good thing.”

“I can deal with a good thing after this, I think.” Moony chuckled. “Go on, tell us.”

xXxXx

When everything had been explained and everyone had stopped laughing, the Pack-parents had some advice for Harry. “Just sit tight,” Danger said. “I know you won’t like it, but you’re safer there in the Den than you are even here at Headquarters.”

“And now that you can step out, you could go to classes,” Letha put in. “You couldn’t take notes, or practice the spells, but you’ll be there.”

“He never takes notes anyway,” said Hermione. “He just copies mine later.”

“And we can help him practice the spells,” Draco said. “We can come down here and do our homework, and we’ll work together.”

“Now, for the other side of it.” Padfoot chortled. “Harry, you do realize what an opportunity you’ve got here, don’t you?”

“You mean to spread mayhem and chaos?” Harry said innocently. “No, I never thought of it.”

Everyone laughed. “That’s my boy,” said Padfoot. “You’re officially missing, you’ve got an Invisibility Cloak, and you can turn into Wolf if you need to. You could do *anything*, Harry. *Anything.*”

“We’ve got lots of Fred and George’s stuff, too,” Ron added. “Harry can use anything of mine he wants.”

“Mine, too,” said Neville, a second before the general chorus.

“Just don’t get caught,” Moony warned. “If you do, there’s no telling what Umbridge will do. She’s a vengeful woman, and she has a lot of power there.”

“I won’t,” Harry promised. “And I have an idea for the first thing I’ll do.”

Moony sighed. “Do I want to know about it?”

“Probably not.”

“Then don’t tell me. Just do it, and don’t get hurt.”

“I won’t.”

After goodbyes all around, Hermione shut the lid on her Zippo. “So what are you going to do?” she asked, looking at Harry.

“I’ll tell you in a minute.” Harry stood up and stretched, carefully not looking at Ginny, who had resumed human form at some point during the conversation. “Neville, can you cover me for a few minutes?”

“Where are you going?”

“Dumbledore’s office. I need to borrow something from him.”

xXxXx

Dolores Jane Umbridge marched through the halls of Hogwarts, her arms folded across her chest. How dared that wretched boy escape her? How dared he run from his just fate? She would find him, and when she did, he would know what it meant to defy her...

A sudden flare of light behind her made her whirl.

He was there. Standing before her, holding a naked sword in his hand, a sword which flickered with flames as red as the jewels in its hilt. “Beware,” he said coldly. “You are not wanted here, and I will not let you stay.”

Dolores quavered, then found control of herself. “You have no power over me,” she said, reaching for her wand. “You have no—”

The boy in front of her made no motion, but her wand flew from her hand and clattered against the wall.

“You are not welcome,” Harry Potter repeated, raising the sword higher. “You are not wanted. And by this sword of my ancestor Godric Gryffindor, I will drive you out of this castle!”

And he vanished, as suddenly and thoroughly as though a cloak had been thrown over him.

Dolores stood trembling in her place.

Things had just taken a turn she hadn’t anticipated.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 10: Trapped (Year 5)

Chapter 10: Trapped

“Why did you say that?” Hermione demanded in the Den the next day. “No one’s supposed to know you’re the Heir of Gryffindor!”

Harry shrugged sheepishly. “I got carried away. Besides, she thinks I’m a liar anyway. She’ll probably think I just made that up to sound more powerful and mysterious.”

“How is she going to explain you making the sword flame?” Ron asked.

“Something I got from the twins, or thought up myself. Maybe a potion that flames if you expose it to air too long, or I had my wand up my sleeve, or I had somebody else nearby.”

“You did, but not for that,” Neville pointed out. “Though it was funny to see her face when you held up the sword.”

“What did she look like again?” Ron asked.

Neville frowned in concentration, then leaned back, shaking. His hands rose as if to ward off an attacker, his eyes widened fearfully, and his lips trembled and parted. “Go away,” he falsettoed. “Go away!”

The rest of the Pride fell about laughing.

Harry shook his head. “She didn’t say that.”

“Only because she was too scared to say anything,” said Neville, dropping his character. “And now she’s been tearing the school apart looking for you for the last day or so.”

“Let her look,” said Hermione. “She won’t find anything.”

“Though maybe she should find some traps every now and then,” said Ginny. “Just to make her think she’s getting close.”

“And to annoy her,” said Luna.

“That goes without saying.”

“Are you going to keep showing up where she doesn’t expect you?” Neville asked Harry.

“No, then she’ll get to expecting that.” Harry got to his feet and started pacing the outside of the room restlessly. “We need to keep her on her toes. Make sure she never knows what’s going to happen one day to the next. She’s not welcome here, and we’re not going to let her stay—”

“That’s it!” Hermione burst out. “Danger’s prophecy!”

“What?” “What is it?” “Which part?”

“The questioner unwelcomed/ May soon depart to clear her head, ” Hermione recited. *“But left alone, she will remain/ And undeserved places gain. ”*

Ginny nodded. “An Inquisitor is a questioner, and this one is a ‘she’. It has to mean Umbridge.”

“So if we let her know she’s not welcome,” said Draco, “she’ll leave. But if we don’t...”

“She’ll stay and take what she doesn’t deserve,” Meghan said, scowling. “She tried already.”

“How d’you figure?” Ron asked.

“She doesn’t deserve to be able to take Harry out of school. But she tried that.”

“And she thought she could prove something on Dumbledore by it,” said Harry, recalling how his thoughts in the Headmaster’s office had run. “If he tried to defend me, she could call him on it, and maybe even get him fired—”

“And then she’d be Headmistress,” said Luna, “and she doesn’t deserve that at all.”

Draco gagged quietly. “Only if we lock her in the office and let the portraits drive her batty,” he said. “I’d take Snape for Head over her.”

“Me too,” said Ron. “With Snape, you know where you are.”

“Squished on the bottom of his shoe?” Ginny suggested. “But that doesn’t matter. Harry, you said we have to let Umbridge know she’s not welcome. If we do that, and do it right, the prophecy says we could get rid of her, and soon. I think it’s worth a shot.”

“Yes, but how soon is soon?” Harry sat down again. “Remember, this was written by people who’ve been dead a thousand years. They’ve got a different attitude towards time than we do.”

“They still remember what it was like being alive,” said Neville. “They wouldn’t say soon unless it really was soon. Maybe not soon enough for us, but that depends on what we do, I think.”

Ron grinned. “So, all-out attack?”

“You’re the strategist,” said Hermione, summoning parchment, quill, and ink with a flick of her wand. “We’ll listen to you. Table, please, and chairs.”

A chair rose out of the floor directly under her, making her squeak. The boys all hid smiles or snickers.

Hermione swatted her quill at Draco, who was nearest. “Stop that. You’d do the same.”

“Would noooo—” Draco’s voice rose into a yelp as a chair sprouted from the floor under him, lifting him up.

“Would so,” said Hermione smugly, uncapping her ink.

It was the girls’ turn to giggle this time.

Later that night, as the Pride argued companionably over the exact wording of their first note to Umbridge, Harry’s pocket buzzed. He pulled out his Zippophone and flicked it open. “Hogwarts Hideout, Expellee Number One speaking.”

“Consider yourself smacked,” said Danger’s voice. “That was worse than usual.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “Is everything all right?”

“We’re fine, but we spent a little time researching astral travel here. Has Hermione done anything like that yet?”

“I haven’t had time,” Hermione called out. “We’re...doing something else.”

“Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know,” Danger said hastily. “Anyway, Harry, listen carefully. You can check this for yourself later, or you can ask Hermione to do it for you—”

“Second one,” said four people at once.

Danger sighed. “I should have known. Just listen.”

“Hold on.” Harry handed the Zippo to Ginny, who was sitting next to him, tore a piece off the bottom of the scroll Hermione was recording on, and held out his hand. Hermione sighed and handed over her quill, and Ron pushed the ink closer to Harry, who dipped the quill and set it down. “Go ahead,” he said to the green flame.

“Nothing’s free,” Luna said practically later, as the Pride looked over the rules Danger had set down for Harry’s astral work. “Even magic isn’t quite like magic.”

Everyone thought about this for a moment before Hermione’s face cleared. “It takes time and effort to learn magic, and do it properly,” she said. “You can’t just snap your fingers and get anything you want.”

Luna nodded. “Magic is easier than doing the work by hand,” she said. “But so are a lot of Muggle things that make life easier.”

“And sometimes magic lets you do things you couldn’t do any other way,” said Meghan. “Like Harry can’t come out to go to class, but he will be able to with magic.”

“But I won’t be able to do much else,” Harry said. “It’s not safe for me to be away from my body for too long.” That had been Danger’s first caution.

“So you can only go out for two hours at a time,” Ron said, reading from the parchment. “That’s long enough for even a double period, though I’d skip History of Magic if I were you.”

“Planning on it, thanks. And Potions—if I can’t brew, what’s the point?”

“The point is to listen to the lecture, and see how the potion should look, and the sorts of things you can’t do just from descriptions with words,” said Hermione swiftly. “And you will come to Potions, or I won’t share my notes with you.”

“All right, all right, I’ll come to Potions.” Harry held up his hands in surrender. “But how will I get my grades for it? Half the points Snape gives are for what we do in class, and I won’t be there.”

“You can brew here, by yourself,” said Meghan. “We can help you. And then somebody can take Professor Snape your potion later. He never grades until that night anyway—he doesn’t have time. And you can do your essays here, and that’s the other half of your grade.”

“Thanks, Pearl, you’re a big help,” Harry muttered.

“If you’d just stop trying to get out of your work—”

Neville’s hand brushed against Meghan’s arm, as if by accident, but her flow of words stopped midstream.

“Transfiguration will be a problem,” said Draco. “And Charms. You can’t exactly show up to those classes and show what you can do.”

“We’ll work something out,” said Hermione. “Arithmancy won’t be too bad, that’s all essays and bookwork, and you’ll just have to show in your writing that you know what you’re doing for Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures.”

“I could sneak out for Magical Creatures,” said Harry. “Hagrid wouldn’t give me away.”

“But Hagrid’s not here,” Neville pointed out. “We’ll have a substitute until he gets back.”

“And even when he does get back, what if Umbridge shows up and he gets flustered and blows your cover?” Ron asked. “Or something goes wrong with one of those massive animals he loves showing us and you get hurt?”

Harry stared at his friend. “Are you telling me to be careful?”

“Just not to be stupid.” Ron rounded on Ginny, who had both hands over her mouth. “Don’t start.”

Ginny took one hand away to point at herself, batting her eyelashes.

“Draco does that better,” Luna remarked.

At this point, no one could keep a straight face. Most people didn’t even try.

On Wednesday morning, Harry was up early. He made himself breakfast and ate it, cleaned up, then checked his appearance in the bathroom mirror.

Why do I care how I look? No one’s going to see me. Except Luna, and she won’t be in any of my classes.

Still, he made sure his hair was in the closest thing to order it could achieve before he fetched the potion Meghan had filched for him and lay down in his chosen corner of the main room. One of the things the Pack and Pride had worked out together the night before was a way Harry could train himself to fall asleep on cue.

“I’m going to sleep now,” Harry said aloud, looking up at the ceiling. “I won’t have any trouble falling asleep, and my spirit will come out as soon as my body is all the way asleep. I’m going to sleep as soon as I say the magic words. The magic words will make me fall asleep.”

I feel stupid doing this, but there’s no one around to see, and I have to believe this for it to work...

“Ride a winged horse to Banbury Cross, to see a fine lady upon a white horse,” he chanted under his breath. *Not quite the original, but I don’t want to be falling asleep if I just happen to walk by a little kid at the wrong moment.*

Popping the top off the potion bottle, he drank it down, then continued, yawning over it. “With rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, she shall have music...” Another yawn. “Wherever she...” Another. “...goes...”

“Did it work?” Meghan asked before she’d caught her breath from the ride down to the red bedroom. “Harry, did it work, did it work?”

“It worked,” Harry told her, flicking a braid and hugging her around her shoulders. “I went straight to sleep all four times. Even when I used the potion that wasn’t as strong, the fourth time.”

“Good.” Meghan nodded. “If you keep using less and less strong potions, pretty soon, you’ll be so used to falling asleep when you say those words that you’ll do it even without the potion.”

“That’s the theory, anyway,” said Neville, sliding off the bed. “How did you do drawing the bowtruckle?”

“Not perfect, but not terrible either.” Harry opened the door to the main room. “Besides, I can’t hand that in. Professor Grubbly-Plank isn’t bad, but she’d get confused if she started getting homework from me. The other professors understand—I think Dumbledore told them not to act funny if they keep getting my work.”

“Professor Vector didn’t even blink when she saw your name on that essay, Harry,” Hermione called from the bed, where she was just getting off. “She made sure mine was underneath it, then nodded at me and put them with the others.”

“Is it just me, or are we getting more homework this year?” Harry asked as Neville and Meghan stepped past him into the main room.

Ron dropped onto the bed and used his recoil to bounce off and land on his feet. “O.W.L.s,” he said, shaking his head from the shock of the landing. “Fred and George say it happens every fifth year—the professors realize there’s loads we don’t know yet, and they have to get it in, so we end up with more work because they didn’t do their jobs right.”

Hermione seemed about to bristle, then cracked a smile instead. “Or maybe we didn’t do our jobs right,” she said. “Instead of learning, we were busy making trouble and saving the world.”

“Trying to save the world,” Harry corrected. “Not doing such a good job yet.”

Ginny bounced twice on the bed and sat up. “We’ll get better,” she said. “You watch.”

“Watch,” muttered Harry. “That’s all I can do, right now.”

“Oh, stop it,” Ginny snapped. “Would you rather be stuck down here, or really expelled and stuck at home? Or maybe you’d like to be stuck down here without being able to go walking and get to class, even if you can’t do anything. You’re too big to whine, so stop it right now.”

“Make me,” Harry snapped back.

Ginny covered the three steps’ distance between them and slapped him across the face.

Harry’s hand flew up to his face. “What—”

“You are the most ungrateful little twit ever,” Ginny informed him tartly. “Maybe you should have listened a little more to what Professor Dumbledore told you the other day. He wasn’t just telling you how to get away. You need to be a little more grateful for what you have, and what you can do. It didn’t have to be this way. You could be stuck at Headquarters right now. Or even in custody at the Ministry, if Umbridge was in a really bad mood with you.”

“Ginny,” said Ron tentatively, “you’re taking this a little far—”

“Am I?” Ginny turned on her brother. “Or are you just being too easy on him?” She whipped back towards Harry. “The more you think about everything you don’t have, the easier it’s going to be to play the ‘Oh poor me’ game. Think about what you do have, and you won’t. It’s as simple as that.”

Harry rubbed his cheek. “Have you been taking bossy lessons from Hermione?” he asked.

“No.” Ginny planted her hands on her hips in a familiar manner. “From Mum.”

Behind her, Ron gulped and drew a finger across his neck.

“I surrender,” Harry said, raising his hands. “I surrender. Don’t hurt me.”

Ginny’s hands didn’t move. “Only if you promise not to wallow in self-pity anymore.”

Harry made a sad face. “Not even a little?”

“Not one tiny smidgen.” Ginny’s tone turned as acerbic as Letha’s when she was particularly displeased with something. “You have to be a hero, a leader, a role model. Heroes don’t complain.”

“Yes, they do,” said Luna, who had arrived with Draco while Ginny was scolding Harry. “They just do it heroically. They talk about how they’re not going to complain about something, and complain about it that way.”

“I’m not going to mention the way it’s been raining for three weeks,” Draco moaned, “or how the bugs keep biting me all over, or the fact that the food ran out yesterday and we’re eating our shoes...”

“Exactly,” Luna said, nodding in satisfaction.

Harry had to laugh. “You win,” he said. “All of you. You win.”

“That’s right,” said Ginny, starting for the main room. “We do.”

Harry stepped over to make sure the door was open enough, and unaccountably bumped into Ginny in the doorway.

“Oops.”

“Sorry.”

“You go first.”

“No, you.”

Neither of them saw the smirks being exchanged by the rest of the Pride.

The fifth years had Defense Against the Dark Arts again on Thursday. Harry was in the same seat he'd used on Monday when the bell rang. Professor Longbottom looked up through her glasses —*did she wear glasses on Monday?*—and surveyed her class.

“All here,” she said. “Good. I have an announcement.” Her tone was cool, as though she didn't care for what she'd be saying. “You'll recall the subject of class on Monday...”

Harry did, very well. They'd been told stories of the reality of life as an Auror, stories that bore some resemblance to those Professor Moody had told last year, only Professor Longbottom had demonstrated the spells she talked about on small targets, pointing out especially the ones she'd be teaching them this year.

“I'm afraid I'll have to renege on a certain portion of my promises from last class,” Professor Longbottom went on. “I will no longer be teaching you any of the spells I displayed.”

The class groaned. “Why not?” two or three voices spoke up.

Professor Longbottom raised her hand for silence. “The administration feels that a proper theoretical background is more important in preparing you for the O.W.L.s than is simple, rote spell practice,” she said, spitting the last four words.

The groans were louder this time.

“However, I will try to make the theory as interesting as possible,” Professor Longbottom added. “I will still be demonstrating the spells I have used in the course of my work as an Auror. My long time away from work, though, will mean I have to cast the spells very slowly at first, then several times at full speed to make sure my skills have returned.”

Harry sat up straighter. *She's going to show us exactly how to do the spells, then do it over and over so she's sure we can get it right when we try it on our own. But where can we try it? How can we make sure we all get a chance? There ought to be a way...*

“So if you will all get out parchment and ink, we can get started on today's lesson. A small skirmish near the end of the war with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named...”

Harry snorted. Professor Longbottom's eyebrow quirked for a second in his direction before she got up to start diagramming on the board.

That's funny. It was almost like she could hear me. Or see me.

And she didn't have glasses on Monday. I wonder...

An overhead view of a three-story building was now sketched on the board, along with X's to mark Aurors, O's to mark their opponents, and I's for bystanders. A wave of Professor Longbottom's wand animated the picture, and the X's slowly approached the building. "My team was called to a Muggle office building where there had been reports of spell fire. We entered by the main door in the standard formation, having Disillusioned ourselves for cover..."

Neville let his scroll roll up and slid it back into his bag as the bell rang. "Longbottom, a moment, please?" Mum called over the noise of the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs packing up.

Neville nodded and hurried up to her desk. "Yes, Professor?"

"Here." She handed him the glasses in a black velvet case and a small scroll, of the kind the teachers used to send each other notes. "Give these to Professor Snape when you get to Potions, please. The scroll first, it's an explanation."

"But it's not sealed, Professor," Neville pointed out. "Anyone could read what's in here."

"How absent-minded of me." Mum took Neville's hand and firmly slid his finger under the flap of the scroll. "It will seal itself when you run your finger along its upper edge."

"But..."

Mum fixed him with a steady look.

Neville stopped. "Yes, Professor," he said, trying not to laugh.

Is this what it's like for Meghan, or Harry, all the time? With their parents not just letting them get away with things, but helping them?

He put the glasses carefully in an outer pocket of his bag and started for the door.

"Longbottom," Mum's voice arrested him. He turned back. She was smiling. "Tell your semi-present friend his technique is good."

"Yes, Professor."

That answers what the glasses are for, I suppose.

The rest of the Pride was waiting outside the door. "What did she want?" Ron asked.

"She had something she wanted me to take down to Snape for her." Neville pointed to his eyes, then scanned his hand around.

"Well, she's allowed to send messages just like any other teacher," said Hermione, letting her

fingers walk across the back of her hand and licking her lips.

“I wish we didn’t spend the whole morning away from the girls,” said Draco, starting in the direction of the nearest stairs down.

“Excuse me?”

“You know what I mean, Hermione. The other girls.”

“No snogging in public,” said Ron. “Please.”

“When have we ever?”

Ron snorted. “If I started listing that, I’d be Head Boy by the time I finished.”

“You? Head Boy? We have done it a lot, haven’t we?”

Ron buffed his prefect badge with a sleeve. “Don’t make me give you detention.”

“Just try it.” Draco looked at Hermione confidently.

“I’ll double whatever he gives you,” Hermione said, hefting her schoolbag a little higher on her shoulder. “You deserve it.”

“I can’t win,” Draco complained.

Neville smiled to himself. *One thing about being friends with the Pride, I’m never short of entertainment.*

On their way downstairs, the Pride passed Filch and Mrs. Norris, both of whom eyed them suspiciously but let them pass. Mrs. Norris, in particular, seemed very interested in a patch of air near Hermione’s heels, sniffing at it for several seconds before yowling uneasily and settling down on her haunches to stare at it.

Hermione and Draco exchanged glances. *Do you think Harry’s there?* Hermione signed, her hands flickering.

Could be. Draco shrugged. *Who knows?*

They made it to the kitchens without further incident, and Draco summoned two house-elves and sent them off to find Ginny, Luna, and Meghan. Neville pulled the black-framed glasses Professor Longbottom had been wearing from his bag and put them on his nose. “Thought so,” he said in satisfaction. “I see you.” He pointed at a spot behind Ron.

“Of course you see me, I’m right here,” said Ron, in a tone which clearly suggested Neville was losing it.

“Not you. Harry.” Neville handed the glasses over. “Have a look.”

Ron put the glasses on dubiously, looked up, and his expression cleared. “All right, mate?” he said, grinning. After a moment, he pulled them off and extended them to Hermione. “They must be charmed to let you see invisible things,” he said. “Either that or spirits. Maybe we could see Peeves when he’s invisible with these.”

Hermione slid the glasses on, and felt Draco’s hand on her arm. **Want to look with me?** she asked.

It’ll make things easier.

True. Oh, there he is. Harry, translucent and rendered in washed-out color, was experimenting with walking up the wall. “Stop that,” Hermione scolded aloud. “You’re close to two hours—go get back where you belong and come out for some tea with us. The house-elves will warn us if anyone’s coming, and you can be back in hiding in three seconds.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mum,” he said in a voice somewhat thin but audible. “Coming, Mum.” He darted across the floor to the fireplace almost faster than her eye could follow, shouted “ThankyouGodric,” and was gone into the wall.

“He still has to use the password to get into the Den?” Draco asked, taking his hand away.

“Probably magical wards,” said Ron. “Same ones that keep...*Voldemort* out.”

“You’re getting better at that,” Hermione said admiringly, handing the glasses back to Neville, who put them away.

“Thanks.”

The door of the kitchen opened, and in came Ginny and Luna, Meghan only a few steps behind them. “Are we having morning tea?” Luna asked, setting her bag aside.

Five or six house-elves perked up and sped off in different directions.

“I suppose we are now,” said Hermione. “Harry’s joining us.”

“Good,” said Meghan. “He needs to get out in his body as much as he can, or he’ll start forgetting that’s where he belongs.” That had been in Danger’s instructions as well. “Maybe tonight, after I practice my Animagus spell, we can go running.”

“Spell?” said Ron. “Are you down to just one?”

Meghan nodded, her face alight. “Just my head left to do,” she said. “Then I can write my

incantation, take the potion, and I'll be the youngest Animagus ever."

"That we know about," said Hermione. "There might have been one somewhere else."

"If we don't know about it, it doesn't count," said Meghan with her nose in the air.

Hermione hid a smile behind the cup of tea a house-elf had just handed her.

"I did think she could see me," Harry said, examining the glasses Neville had handed him. "Do you have that note?"

"Here," said Ron, passing it over.

Harry unrolled it. "It's in Dumbledore's handwriting," he said before beginning to read. "These glasses will allow you to see certain things which are not easily apparent. Do not allow them to fall into sad hands."

"Sad hands?" asked Draco.

"Umbridge," said Hermione. "Dolores means sad."

Harry sighed. "I'd hoped the teachers wouldn't be able to see me either," he said. "I guess nothing's perfect."

"What were you planning on doing to Snape?" Ginny asked.

"Bunny ears."

Ron snorted into his tea.

"So how are the pranks coming?" Harry asked, giving glasses and note back to Neville.

"Pretty well," said Meghan, pulling a small, grubby list from her pocket. "We trapped a couple of secret passages with fireworks and told Fred and George about them—of course, they ought to know how to deal with that, it's their fireworks—and we sent Pigwidgeon in through her window with a rude note..."

"So I was thinking in Defense this morning," said Harry later that night on the indoor Quidditch pitch, tossing the Quaffle to Ron. "And don't even start," he shot at Draco, who immediately looked innocent. "Anyway, I was thinking, we'll know how to do the spells we need for Defense

from classes, or at least what they look like and sound like. But we'll have to practice on our own."

"We're not allowed to do magic outside class," said Ginny, looping around the boys. "We'd have to sneak."

"Us? Sneak?" Draco gasped. "Perish the thought..."

Ron bopped him with the Quaffle.

"Ow!"

"Learn to catch, then," said Ginny, swooping to retrieve the Quaffle. "Honestly, you call yourself a Chaser..."

"I call myself a Seeker, if we can't get rid of Umbridge before November," Draco retorted. "It's either me or you, we're the best the team has."

"I suppose neither of you would be willing to let me use Polyjuice," Harry said wistfully.

Several people snickered.

"Do you really want to?" Ginny asked, flying up to Harry's height, then a foot higher, the Quaffle held against her belly, pulling her robes tight. "Do you really want to turn into me?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Harry looked up at her.

His brain clogged, and his eyes couldn't seem to move—they were stuck just above the level of the Quaffle—

Which was coming right at him—

He flung up his hands and caught it just in time.

"There, now that's a catch!" yelled Ron, apparently unaware of what had been going on in Harry's head. "Try that on for size, Black!"

"Do you really want me to?" asked Draco snidely.

"If Harry ever gets out from behind the ball—oi, mate, planning on passing any time soon?"

Harry got his breath back, told his face it had no business picking up the color of the Quaffle, and passed to Ron, keeping his eyes resolutely away from Ginny.

I think she did that on purpose.

“You did that on purpose,” said Luna as Ginny landed.

“Yes, I did.”

“Good for you. I do it to Draco sometimes.”

“Yes, but you can do it openly. I have to be careful.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to be careful for too much longer.” Luna watched the three boys throwing the Quaffle around. “Unless you want to get him interested and then drive him crazy.”

Ginny considered this, but shook her head. “Once I have him, I want him,” she said. “I’m not going to play hard to get. I’ve wanted this too long.”

“You’ll be good for each other,” said Luna. “I hope it is soon.”

“Me too.” Ginny straddled her broom again and took off. “I’m in!” she shouted. “Weasleys versus Pack!”

Luna reclined on the grass, casting a glance out the door, where Hermione and Meghan worked on one of Meghan’s new Charms lessons.

There are other people who’ll be good for each other too. I hope they figure that out soon.

It would make Draco feel good to see his twin happy before he has to go.

“What I was saying earlier,” Harry said when the Quidditch game had ended. “About learning the spells. We’ll need somewhere to practice, and we have the Den. But no one else can get in here. Where does that leave them?”

“Stuck,” said Ron. “O.W.L. year too...”

“You’re not suggesting we let people use the Den to practice spells?” said Hermione.

“No, of course not. But there has to be somewhere else in the school no one knows about, or not a lot of people. Someplace we can go and practice what Professor Longbottom’s teaching us—and she’s probably not supposed to be, either. What do you want to bet Umbridge is behind this?”

“I don’t take sucker bets,” said Draco. “And Umbridge was the one Fudge wanted to be the DADA professor—can you imagine?”

“We’d sit in class and read the book all period,” said Luna thoughtfully. “And it would be all

about how to run away and give up.”

“Good to know,” said Ginny. “Move to keep Professor Longbottom where she is.”

“Second,” said Neville and Ron at the same moment.

“All in favor?” said Harry.

“Aye,” chorused the Pride.

“So what will we need for that?” asked Meghan, sipping her hot chocolate.

“We need a place and time to practice the spells by ourselves,” said Hermione. “Ideally, we need a way to learn them ourselves, so Professor Longbottom won’t get in trouble for teaching us. But we probably couldn’t do that, or it would be very hard.”

“What, we couldn’t do it with a good book?” Ron said slyly.

“Books are wonderful, Ron, but they can’t show you how to do something, not like a person can.”

“You all hear this?” Ron asked, looking around. “Remember it. I want to have witnesses someday.”

“Oh, stop.” Hermione threw a cookie at him, bouncing it off his nose. “Eat something and fill up that big mouth of yours.”

Ron stuffed the whole cookie in his mouth and grinned at Hermione.

“That’s disgusting,” said Hermione with dignity.

“Oo ol’ ee oo oo ih,” Ron protested.

“I don’t even want to know what that means.”

Ron chewed and swallowed. “You told me to do it,” he repeated.

Hermione ignored this. “So we have to find a place in the castle where we can go and not be interrupted,” she said. “We can’t use classrooms, because anyone can walk in there, and even if we had sentries and changed where we held it every time, someone would figure it out eventually. And we can’t use dormitories, because they’re too small, and no one’s going to let people from other Houses into their dorms.”

“Wait, how many people were you thinking, here?” said Harry, frowning.

“As many as will come, Harry,” said Hermione. “Fifth and seventh years especially, but anyone. We all need the practice, now more than ever.”

“People from other Houses?” said Ron dubiously. “Even Slytherin?”

“There are good Slytherins!” Meghan protested.

“Not many,” said Draco. “We’d have to double-check all of them with someone we knew we could trust.”

Meghan sighed heavily. “I wish Graham was here,” she said. “He could tell us. He knew everyone.”

“I can ask Blaise,” said Hermione. “He’ll know. But what I’m getting at is, we need a place like the Den—somewhere public, somewhere easy to get to, but somewhere no one can find unless we let them.”

“Come on, Hermione,” said Draco, “how likely is it there’d be two places like this in one castle?”

“In Hogwarts, there could be,” said Meghan loyally.

“She’s right,” said Neville. “And I know who we can ask.”

“Who?” asked seven voices.

Neville raised his own voice. “House-elf, please!”

On Friday, the Gryffindor fifth years had a free period before dinner. Most of the Pride was busy with homework, so Harry decided to stretch his legs, metaphorically speaking, and drifted off in the direction of the outdoors.

So we have our safe place to practice. Kady, who had answered Neville’s call, had been able to tell them all about the Room of Requirement, and Harry had recalled Dumbledore’s story at the Yule Ball about a room filled with chamber pots, which seemed to bear this out. They had directions and instructions on how to get in, and Ron and Draco planned to check on the Room tomorrow, which was part of the reason they were so busy with their homework today.

The other part being that there’s a lot of it. Harry thought grumpily of the large pile stacked not far from his body back in the Hogwarts Den. *I thought they were supposed to get us ready for the tests, not give them to us first thing.*

He’d work over the first Hogsmeade weekend, Harry decided, instead of going out. That would even things up. In the meantime, in the interest of sanity, he was putting aside the homework for a little while and getting out of the castle. He was starting to feel a little trapped in the Den, and the open road beckoned...

As open as it can be when I know exactly where it goes.

But known or not, it wasn't the same four walls—or rather, eight—and Harry welcomed the sight of Hogsmeade village.

Time to do some heavy-duty prowling.

He walked around all the shops, drooling a little over the selection in Honeydukes, comparing the stock unfavorably to the twins' products in Zonko's, and scaring all the owls in the post office when he poked his nose inside.

I guess they can see me. Or sense me or something. Crookshanks had hissed at the place where Harry wasn't when he'd come out in the common room, come to think of it, and Mrs. Norris had yowled at him that one day in the hall. *Wonder if Trevor could see me?*

Harry laughed at the thought of Trevor hopping away as fast as he could, croaking in alarm. *Wonder what's toad for "ghost"? Or do toads even have ghosts?*

"I am dead-in-life," he said sibilantly.

Weird...guess snakes believe in ghosts...

His feet had kept walking while he was thinking about this, making random turns here and there, and now Harry looked up and realized he was lost.

Never mind. I'll just get up on somebody's roof and look for Hogwarts.

He grabbed hold of a handful of the nearby wall and began to climb—a trick he'd discovered on Wednesday was that the solid-but-soft stuff that walls and floors seemed to be made of could be manipulated to some degree. He probably couldn't dig himself a hole through a floor to get to the next level, but he could bunch up the material of the wall enough to make handholds and footholds.

And then I can climb it. Not quite a superhero, but close enough.

Five minutes later, he was standing on top of the roof, admiring the view. *You can see everything from up here. Mountains, forest, and yes, a castle. That way.*

Then he felt rather silly. *You know, I could have just followed my connection back.* The silver cord joining his body and soul was still looped around his left wrist.

But I got to have some fun.

He stepped to the edge of the roof, ready to jump down, then stopped.

Somebody else had the same idea.

A few rooftops away, a dark-haired boy had hoisted himself with his arms onto the top of a high, thick parapet, so that his upper body rested on it and his legs dangled behind. All Harry could see

was the back of his head, but as far as he could tell, the boy was staring towards Hogwarts.

Maybe his parents won't let him go to school. Think it's too dangerous, that I'll eat him. He growled under his breath. *Where did I hear that recently? Oh, yeah, Meghan's friend...*

He stopped.

No way. They wouldn't be that stupid.

He backed up a few steps. *Get a running start...*

For the first time in his life, Harry flew without a broom, though the flight was much shorter than his usual ones and ended more abruptly.

That would have hurt a lot more in my body.

He pulled his face out of the wall and sneezed.

Note to self—jump harder next time.

Luckily, the top of the roof was within grabbing distance. Harry hauled himself up with little trouble, and tried another leap, this one shorter. A few more jumps brought him to the same rooftop as the boy.

He's about Meghan's age. And he looks familiar from the back...

A door opened in the wall below Harry's feet. "Graham!" snapped a woman's voice.

The other boy started violently and slid backwards onto the roof.

"That's better." The woman came forward and pulled the boy to his feet, dusting off his robes. "Climbing up there like that, putting yourself in danger—what if you'd gone forward instead of back when I called you? What if it had rained and the stone had turned slippery?"

"What if someone had seen me who wasn't supposed to?" Graham Pritchard muttered.

"Exactly!" The woman took his arm and started marching him back towards the door she'd come out of. "Now it's inside for you, my lad, for a full day and more, until I'm sure I can trust you out here again!"

Harry jumped down from the parapet, his heart racing. *I could help him. I know where he is now. I just have to see what it's like inside...*

He slipped in as the door was closing and started down the stairs, sliding through Graham to do so. The other boy shivered.

"Cold?" the woman asked briskly. "That's what happens when you go climbing on things, you see,

you get chills—I think you should stay in bed for the rest of today, no sense in letting you get sick...”

“Sorry,” Harry said aloud, moving quickly down the stairs ahead of the two. “I’ll try to make it up to you...”

I’ll try to get you out of here.

He scouted the house, making sure he spent a few minutes in every room. It was small, dark, and narrow, with windows only in the front and back, and looked as though it had once been a small store with the owner living over it. The room where Graham slept had probably been converted from a storage room, as it had no windows at all. Harry found the younger boy already there when he entered, sitting in bed, legs pulled up to his chest, staring at the door.

I have to tell him. I can’t leave him like this.

Remembering how he’d been able to talk to Hermione and Draco, Harry sat down on the edge of Graham’s bed and laid his hand inside the other boy’s. “I’m going to help you,” he said aloud.

Graham shivered and pulled away. “I don’t need to imagine things,” he muttered. “I’ll be all right. They’ll let me go home soon.”

Harry felt a rush of sympathy for the other boy. *He has to know I’m not his imagination. I’m real, just not really here...*

He held his breath and moved up along Graham’s bed, superimposing most of their bodies. Graham gasped.

“I know you’re here,” Harry said quickly. “I’m going to help you.”

“Who are you?”

“A friend of Meghan’s.”

“I’m making you up.” Graham’s teeth were clenched, he was speaking through them. “I just want someone to find me, so I’m making you up...”

Harry had a brainwave. “We’ll send you an owl tomorrow,” he said quickly. “No letter, just an owl. Watch for it. You’ll know I was real when it comes.”

“All right.” Graham was shivering hard now. “I understand.”

Harry jumped up and moved away, watching as Graham lay down and pulled the covers up around himself. “Somebody knows,” the younger boy whispered, his fist against his lips as though stifling a cry. “Somebody knows...”

Different curses came to Harry’s mind. He started with the rudest one he could think of and

continued from there as he ran out the door and down the stairs on his way home.

This is so wrong. This is so effing wrong.

Albus Dumbledore found a house-elf waiting for him when he came down from his quarters the next morning. “Master said to give this directly to Professor Dumbledore,” she said, holding it out.

“Thank you, Kady.” Dumbledore took the note and opened it.

Professor—

I know where Graham Pritchard is. Can you meet me where I am?

It was not signed, but the handwriting was unmistakable.

Dumbledore chuckled, his eyes seeking a small portrait placed high upon the wall. “I believe someone is trying to trick me into a second bath this morning,” he said.

“You could always use one,” said the yellow-robed occupant of that portrait, hands on her hips. “As polite and civilized as you are, you’re still a man.”

“And one ever at your service,” said Dumbledore, bowing.

Now to work out how I can get to where Harry is without ducking myself into a bathtub...

Idly, he handed the note to Fawkes, who disposed of it.

No sense in leaving evidence around. Dolores may have subverted some of the house-elves.

He stopped.

One, in particular, would be easily brought under her thumb. One with no reason to love Harry Potter, or any of his family.

I wonder if a safer place for Kreacher can be found?

Harry was pacing up and down the main room of the Hogwarts Den when he heard the noise from the bathroom that meant a door opening. He ran towards the yellow banner and pulled the door open—

Only to see Professor Dumbledore standing on a conjured pedestal, which was gradually lowering him to the ground.

“That’s cheating, sir,” Harry said boldly.

“I am not dressed for swimming,” said Dumbledore mildly, stepping off the pedestal onto the floor of the bathroom. “And it is not a sight I would inflict upon you in any case.”

Harry coughed politely and stood aside from the door into the main room, which he’d transformed back into its original appearance with the large table and twelve chairs.

“So, I find you well?” Dumbledore said, taking a seat in one of the red chairs.

“Yes, sir.” Harry sat down beside the Headmaster. “I’ve been going to classes...”

“So the professors inform me. Some with more aplomb than others.” Dumbledore’s face was quite bland, but his tone was evocative. “Severus, in particular, was none too pleased with the new arrangement, and has informed me that he will not grade any of the potions you make while you are away.”

“That’s not fair!” Harry burst out.

“No, it is not,” Dumbledore agreed. “I have informed him that such is his right, but it is my right to tell him that rather than giving you zeros, which may or may not have been his intent, he will simply take those grades out of your reckoning altogether, so that only those potions you do brew for him when you return to class in the flesh will count towards your grade. He will be accepting your essays as usual.”

Harry shrugged.

“I would suggest brewing the potions in any case, for the practice,” Dumbledore finished. “Now, to your note...”

“I was out in Hogsmeade,” Harry said. “Walking. You know.”

“Yes, walking.” Dumbledore chuckled. “That seems a good way to put it. What did you see exactly?”

Harry related his adventure, starting with spotting the boy on the rooftop, moving through identifying him and investigating the house where he was being kept, and finishing with the promise he’d made. “We could send Ron’s owl,” he said. “Morpheus. He’s a chameleon owl, he changes all the time, so no one would know the same owl kept going to the same house. And we don’t have to send a letter or anything that would get him in trouble—just the owl, to let him know he wasn’t making things up...”

Dumbledore held up a hand. “You do not need to convince me, Harry,” he said. “I agree with you that sending the young man a message is not only compassionate but advisable. He will be less

likely to try something which will get him hurt if he feels that he has not been abandoned. But I must caution you that rescuing him will not be easy.”

“Why not?” Harry asked. “We know where he is, and we know how to get in and out. Why wouldn’t it be easy just to go and get him?”

“Because I have been watching the building you describe—if we are thinking of the same building indeed—for quite some time,” said Dumbledore. “With an eye to it being a planning outpost for the Death Eaters. I had no idea that Graham Pritchard was being kept there, and it worries me a great deal.”

“Why?” Harry had a sense of a vast puzzle fitting together inside his head, though he was still missing too many pieces for it to make sense. It was important, he sensed, for him to learn to think the way Dumbledore did, to get every implication from a fact, to see all its angles and corners and know it by heart...

“If they have placed him in a location where he can hear some of their plans,” Dumbledore said soberly, “they likely do not intend to let him live long enough to tell those plans. And he will know this, and be doing his best to keep out of the way, and he will know that even that is not enough.”

Harry growled in his throat, for once in complete agreement with Wolf, who was disgusted by this. *Kill a cub, simply for hearing what he should not? Why do they speak in front of him if they do not wish him to hear?*

Dumbledore sighed. “Besides the obvious danger of Death Eaters, there is also the factor of my being seen as dangerous by the Ministry,” he said. “If anyone associated with me were to be caught breaking into a building, they would likely receive a much harsher sentence than they would in another case, and I might be forced from my place here. And you are quite aware of who would take over in that instance.”

Harry nodded. His throat was unaccountably tight. *I barely even know Graham Pritchard—*

But he’s Meghan’s friend. And he’s twelve years old. And he’s trapped with people who’ll kill him as soon as he’s not valuable to them anymore.

And we can’t do anything to help him.

“However,” Dumbledore said, in a tone that drew all Harry’s attention. “Simply because my hands are tied, and the Order’s, does not mean that no help can be brought to this young man. It will take time, and good planning, and some degree of luck, but I believe that a certain group of my acquaintance could indeed help him.”

“Good,” Harry said. “That’s great. Who would it be?”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. It was a familiar expression, though Harry usually saw it on

someone else.

I wonder if Moony knows where he got that?

Belatedly, the meaning of the expression kicked in. Dumbledore thought Harry should know the answer to his own question—in fact, thought it should be obvious—thought he was looking right at it—

“No,” Harry said in shock.

Dumbledore’s other eyebrow joined its friend. “You would refuse?”

“No!” Harry blinked several times and shook his head. “Professor—really?”

“I do not look forward to convincing the various parents and guardians involved,” Dumbledore said dryly, “but yes. If time and training coincide, you and your Pride may well be the ones who rescue Graham Pritchard.”

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Facing Danger

Chapter 11: Breakfast and Beginnings (Year 5)

Chapter 11: Breakfast and Beginnings

Dolores Umbridge crept out of her quarters cautiously on Sunday morning, clutching her wand close.

I was just imagining Potter that day, she told herself. He can't actually have appeared to me with a flaming sword. It was my imagination. He can't be in the castle any more—Argus and I have searched everywhere, and there's no sign of him.

Odd how blasé his parents seemed to be about the whole thing. They'd been contacted, of course, about his expulsion and his going missing, but hadn't responded as Dolores had half-thought they would, judging by past experience. A bland letter with the general tone of 'oh, that's a shame, find him if you can' had arrived the next day, and nothing more had been heard from them.

The bright morning sunlight streaming in through the windows began to calm Dolores' nerves. *Who drove Harry Potter out of school with hardly any trouble? Who has him excoriated in the press as a mad fool who's deserted the safest place for him? Why, that would be myself.*

The thought buoyed her so much that she stopped looking around every corner and searching every cross-corridor, and in fact began to strut down the halls as though she owned the castle.

Which I do. Or will within a short period of time. Dumbledore is fading fast. It won't be long before I can catch him in a mistake from which there will be no extracting himself, and then I will be Headmistress, and the castle will be mine.

Her good mood lasted down the stairs and into the Great Hall, up to the staff table and through cereal and toast.

Then the doors of the Great Hall burst open with a very dramatic chord.

Three hundred heads turned as one.

"Nobody expects the Hogwarts Inquisition!" shouted a small, plump, heavily-made-up figure in hot pink robes, swishing into the Hall. "Our main weapon is surprise, surprise and double-talk—two, our two main weapons are double-talk and surprise, surprise and double-talk, and an almost fanatical devotion to the current administration—three, our three main weapons are surprise, double-talk, an almost fanatical devotion to the current administration, and our pretty pink Alice bands—ah spit."

It turned and sashayed out of the Hall, and the doors slammed shut behind it.

Silence reigned for an instant. Then laughter erupted simultaneously at four or five different points. It spread like dragon pox through the room, until it seemed that all the students were

laughing. Even some of the teachers were hiding smiles.

Laughing. Smiling. At me.

“Quiet!” Dolores shouted. “Be quiet!”

The laughter continued.

Dumbledore got to his feet and waved his wand once. A lion’s roar stopped the noise instantly. “Thank you,” he said into the silence. “Now, if I might—”

“Headmaster, I demand that the doors be locked!” Dolores shouted, jumping to her feet. “Lock the doors, and count the students. The one who is not here is the one behind this, this *insult* !”

“A fair request,” Dumbledore said gravely. “Argus, Minerva, Severus, if you would.”

Dolores seated herself, trembling with rage and anticipation.

Whoever that was, they will pay for this. And if no student is absent, then I have proof positive that Harry Potter has not left Hogwarts, and that he is quite mad. What other reason could he have for baiting me thus?

xXxXx

Minerva moved slowly up the Hall along the Gryffindor table, ticking names off her mental list as she went. *Jordan, Jordan, Weasley, Weasley, Weasley, Weasley* —though Ginny Weasley seemed to be asleep against Neville Longbottom’s shoulder—*Longbottom, Black, Black, Granger-Lupin, Lovegood, Brown, Finnegan, Patil, Thomas...*

She reached the end of the table and stepped up to the dais. “All present and accounted for, Albus, except for our one missing.”

“Who is that?” Umbridge demanded greedily, leaning forward. “Who?”

“Harry Potter,” Minerva said, feeling an unaccountable urge to laugh in the woman’s face. “As you undoubtedly know, Dolores, he has been missing for several days.”

“Well, then—”

“However,” Minerva cut the other woman off, “I frankly doubt he was our mysterious prankster. For one thing, where would he have found the supplies he needed? For another, if he is safely in hiding, why would he risk himself by emerging for such a silly stunt?”

And for a third, that was not Harry’s voice. Not even Harry’s voice when he is playacting. She had happened across the Pride several times while they were entertaining themselves, and Harry, though quite capable of throwing his voice into the upper register, could never have managed the shrill tones this prankster had used.

“Are all your students present?” Albus asked Severus, Pomona, and Filius.

“Of course.” “I counted them twice.” “Yes indeed.”

“Dolores, I do not know what to tell you,” Albus said solemnly. “It seems your persecutor has somehow evaded our grasp.”

“Harry Potter did this,” Dolores said certainly. “He is trying to discredit me, to make me look like a fool in front of the school—I won’t have it, I tell you, I won’t have it!”

Why should Harry bother to make you look like a fool, Minerva wondered sardonically, when you do such a good job on your own?

Severus covered a cough with one hand. Startled, Minerva looked over and caught half a smile on his usually dour face.

Dear heavens. Something we agree on. I never thought I would see the day.

But that still leaves a question unanswered.

Who was that mysterious woman, anyway?

xXxXx

One of the kitchen cabinets in the Hogwarts Den opened, and Ginny Weasley tumbled out of it, red-faced under her makeup and laughing. Harry jumped up to help her to her feet. “How did it go?” he asked.

“Perfectly.” Ginny half-fell into the chair Harry had vacated, fanning herself with the edge of the pink robes. “No one knew who I was, and Umbridge was turning interesting colors before I’d even got to the bit about fanatical devotion to the current administration. Help me out of these? They’re awfully hot.”

“Of course.” Harry undid the back of the padded robes and pulled them forward, letting Ginny slip her arms out of the holes cut for them. “What happened next?”

“I heard people laughing, but I didn’t stay to hear anything else. I’d imagine they took a nose count, though.” Ginny smiled, her eyes shut. “It’s a good thing Neville can make people think I’m there when I’m not.”

“Yes. Good thing.” Harry set aside the padded robes and busied himself at the stove, rather than paying attention to Ginny, who was wearing only a T-shirt and thin leggings. *She can take care of herself. And she’ll want something to drink. And I shouldn’t be staring. I shouldn’t even want to be staring—I like Cho, remember?*

The thought of Cho gave him his usual jolt of excitement, but it quickly dulled. *Cho probably thinks I’m as mad as Umbridge says I am. I didn’t even get a chance to see her before I had to hide*

down here. I wonder if she'd keep my secret if I came out and told her where I am? I wonder if she'd like the Den?

“You don’t have water hot for tea by any chance, do you?” Ginny murmured

“It’s almost up. Just wait a second.” Harry turned the burner under the teakettle higher and pursued his last train of thought, which had chugged off without him. *Cho in the Den. Why does that seem wrong somehow? Why do I think she wouldn’t care for it?*

Cho’s a very lawful person. She likes things to work by the rules. And me hiding off in the Den like this is very much outside the rules. Harry rummaged in the cupboard for a pair of teacups and saucers and some tea bags. *There even being a Den is outside the rules. She wouldn’t like it at all.*

The kettle whistled. Harry picked it up and filled the cups. “Here you are,” he said, carrying the cups to the table by their saucers. “Take your pick.”

“Well...” Ginny opened her eyes and grinned at him. “I’m not a great fool,” she said in a nasal voice, “so I can clearly not choose the tea in front of you. But you must have known I was not a great fool; you would have counted on it, so I can clearly not choose the tea in front of me...”

Harry laughed. “Just don’t chase me around going ‘Umbridge, Umbridge, Umbridge’,” he said, setting down one of the teacups in front of her.

“Don’t worry, I won’t.” Ginny picked up her tea and blew on it. “You’re not Miracle Max anyway.”

“Who am I, then? Westley?”

“Maybe. Or maybe you’re Inigo Montoya.”

Harry laughed. “I can see it now,” he said. “I walk up to Voldemort, and...” He set down his tea and stood up, adopting a Spanish accent and a heroic pose. “Hello. My name is Harry Potter. You killed my father. And my mother. Prepare to die.”

Ginny almost fell out of her chair laughing. “Dare you to do it,” she got out through her giggles. “Next time you meet him.”

“I’ll think about it.” Harry sighed, abruptly sobered by the very real thought of Voldemort. “I don’t know, Ginny. I just don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?” Ginny took a deep breath to get herself under control and dipped her tea bag up and down a few times.

“I don’t know if I can do this. Any of this. I don’t even know if I can make it through today—who am I to be the ‘hope of the wizarding world’?” Harry sat down. “I have no idea what I’m doing. At all.”

“I don’t think anyone does, really,” Ginny said contemplatively, taking the tea bag out of her cup and setting it on the saucer. “Mum always says life is what happens in the meantime, in between the big important things. So this is life, right here, right now.” She took a sip of her tea. “And I rather like it.”

Harry removed his own teabag. “You’re right,” he said. “Your mum’s right.”

“She usually is. It gets annoying.” Ginny drew her wand and aimed it at herself, murmuring a charm to remove her thick makeup. “There. Much better.”

Harry pulled out his own wand to Summon the plate of tea cakes he’d made the night before. “Have one?” he asked. “I know you missed breakfast.”

“They look delicious.” Ginny picked one up and took a bite. “Taste good, too,” she said around it.

“Thank you.” Harry broke a cake in half, just to be companionable. *I can’t let myself get into the habit of eating too much when I get bored. I’ll lose my edge.*

“So Ron says the Room of Requirement seems like exactly what we need,” said Ginny, breaking the silence. “When do you think we should first meet?”

“Why are you asking me? Never mind, I know.” Harry held up a hand to forestall Ginny’s answer. “I’m the alpha. I’m in charge. But I was ten when I said I’d do that, and a lot’s changed since then...”

“Not you,” said Ginny. “Or you have, but not in a way that would make you a bad leader.”

“It might help if the leader had some idea where he was going.”

“To the end of the war. To beating Voldemort and the Death Eaters and letting everyone live normally again.”

“Normally.” Harry looked into his tea, halfheartedly wishing he’d taken Divination so he could see his future in the patterns of his tea leaves. *Of course, it would help if I hadn’t used tea bags.* “Do you ever wonder what it would be like to live normally? If there was no Pride, no war, no Voldemort, and we’d both grown up and gone off to Hogwarts that way?”

“We might not ever have met, then,” Ginny said. “I’m sure we wouldn’t be as good of friends. We’d probably know each other through Ron, and maybe through Quidditch, but we wouldn’t be able to sit and talk like this.”

“That’s true.” Harry looked up and smiled at her. “And I like this.”

An odd and familiar feeling tried to rise within him. Hurriedly, he sat on it. *No you don’t. She’s my Pridemate, nothing more.*

“I like it too.” Ginny rested her elbows on the edge of the table and put her chin in her hands. “But

you got off the question. When should we have our first meeting of the Anti-Umbridge League?"

Harry laughed. "First things first. We can't call it that."

"Aww." Ginny pouted. "Why not?"

"Unless you lot want to get kicked out of school too."

"And spend all day down here with you?" Ginny batted her eyelashes outrageously. "What a terrible fate."

"I'd chase you around the Quidditch pitch all day if you did," Harry said without thinking about how it sounded.

Ginny's eyes widened. "Harry!"

"Not like that—agh!" Harry pressed his hands against his burning cheeks. "Don't do that to me!"

"Don't do it to your own self," Ginny retorted. "What were you saying about not being able to call it the Anti-Umbridge League?"

"We need a real name for it." Harry stood up and started pacing around the kitchen, concentrating on his feet rather than his face. "Something we can say in casual conversation—well, not me, but the rest of you. A name you can mention without Umbridge knowing right off the bat that you're up to no good. Because you just know that if she gets wind of this, she'll do whatever she can to stop it."

"Right." Ginny took another bite of tea cake. "It's all about Defense Against the Dark Arts. Why not call it something about Defense?"

"The Defense Association," Harry said. "Or just the DA for short. She can't know anything's wrong from just two letters."

"Why the DA?" Ginny asked curiously. "Something special about that?"

Harry grinned. "Because it could stand for something else, too. I went walking last night and heard Umbridge talking to herself. Do you know why she's here?"

"Because Fudge wants to keep an eye on Dumbledore?"

"Yes, but why does he?"

Ginny shrugged. "I don't know, why does he?"

"Because he's afraid of us," Harry said, flinging his arms out wide. "He's afraid we'll turn into an army."

“We will,” said Ginny in a ‘you’re being rather thick’ tone. “Eventually. Against Voldemort.”

“But Fudge doesn’t believe Voldemort’s back. He thinks we’ll be coming for *him* .”

Ginny snorted. “Why would we bother?”

“Good question. But he thinks he’s important, so he’s afraid of Dumbledore’s army...” Harry let the last word trail off suggestively.

“Oh.” Ginny traced the two letters on the tabletop. “DA. I like that.”

“Thanks. And I think we should have our first meeting...what about tomorrow after dinner? Is that too soon?”

Ginny frowned, thinking about it. “We’ll have to hustle to tell everyone, but I think we could manage it.”

“Good.” Harry took another bite of tea cake, and got a whiff of curiosity from Ginny’s direction. “People won’t have too much homework yet for the week,” he explained through his mouthful, “and I don’t think any of the Quidditch teams have practice.” He swallowed and scowled. “Not that I’d know.”

“Don’t make me come over there.”

“You couldn’t even catch me.”

Ginny shoved her chair back, and Harry’s eyes widened. Wolf dashed out the kitchen door yelping in alarm, Lynx hot on his trail.

xXxXx

“I feel sorry for Minister Fudge,” said Luna as she, Draco, and Meghan walked up the stairs towards the seventh floor.

“Why?” Meghan asked, dancing backward a few steps with excitement.

“Because one person couldn’t possibly be as horrible as he is on purpose. You know how he keeps trying to have the goblin leaders assassinated so he can take over Gringotts, or how he’s secretly paying centaurs to tip their arrows with Love Potions so that people will be too busy plotting against each other to pay attention to him?”

“Now we do,” Draco said diplomatically. “What about it?”

“Well, I think he’s been infested.” Luna peered around, then lowered her voice. “With Polyticks.”

Meghan looked suitably impressed. “What’re those?”

“They’re swarms of little bloodsucking insects. Once they latch onto you, they bite you and inject their venom so they can keep sucking out your blood forever. The venom makes you want to talk for a long time without saying anything, and get power over other people by making everything so complicated they don’t know what to do, and do almost anything, even really terrible things, to keep your power.”

“Fudge isn’t the only one, then,” Draco said as they came abreast of the tapestry featuring the tutu-wearing trolls. “I think Umbridge has them even worse. Is there any way to get them off?”

“I’ll have to write Daddy and ask. Maybe he knows.” Luna began to pace back and forth. “We want to be in the room where Harry’s waiting,” she murmured. “We want to get in to be with Harry and learn how to fight.”

“There!” Meghan dashed across the hall and pulled open the door which had appeared. “Here we are!” she cried happily, darting into the room. “Here we are, here we are!”

“Here you are, here you are,” Harry teased, intercepting her running hug. “Aren’t I the wrong one to be hugging that way?”

“No.” Meghan grinned cheekily. “I hug you like that. I hug *him* like *this* .” She turned to Neville, who had been sitting beside Hermione listening to her read aloud, and plopped herself onto his lap, insinuating her arms under his and laying her head against his shoulder.

“She’s not twelve,” Harry said to Ron. “Not even close.”

“Twelve going on twenty-two?” Ron suggested.

“Probably.”

“You’re just jealous,” Neville said complacently, adjusting Meghan’s weight on his lap.

“Jealous?” Harry sputtered slightly. “That’s my sister!”

The rest of the Pride laughed. Luna, nearest the door, blinked halfway through a giggle. “More people,” she announced. “Harry, hide.”

Harry slid into a convenient corner just as the door opened, revealing Ginny. Behind her came Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, Colleen Lamb, Fred and George, Angelina, Alicia, and Katie, the Creevey brothers both wide eyed with excitement, Natalie McDonald (who ran straight to Meghan), Lee Jordan, a younger female version of him hand in hand with Dean Thomas, and a sixth year girl Draco knew only on sight. She had honey-colored skin and a mass of dark hair cascading around anxious almond-shaped brown eyes, and she reminded him slightly of someone, but he couldn’t think who.

“Hi,” she said a little nervously, coming over to him. “I’m Maya Pritchard. You’re Draco Black, aren’t you?”

“That’s me.” Draco shook her hand. “Pritchard—any relation to—”

“Graham’s my cousin. Our dads are brothers.” Maya made a face. “I wish I was his sister instead. Why I had to get stuck with the snob-act branch of the family...”

“Family doesn’t have to define you forever. Trust me on this.”

Maya laughed a little. “I suppose you would know.”

“Dean, who’s the girl?” Ron was saying behind them.

“Lindsey Jordan, Lee’s sister,” Dean introduced her. “She’s Ginny’s year, I thought you might know her already.”

“We tend to keep ourselves to ourselves,” said Ginny, shutting the door. “And Ron wouldn’t know a fork from a spoon unless they were right under his nose.”

“Oi!”

Lindsey laughed. “This from the girl who can’t recall where she left her Potions notes,” she said. “Call me Lindz, everybody does.”

“How come we’ve never seen you two together before?” Hermione asked with interest.

Dean looked as though he’d like to shrink. “We’re just friends, really we are...”

Ron gave a loud false cough.

“As though you’re any better, Ronniekins,” said Fred, turning from examining one of the bookshelves.

“It’s not for lack of interest, either,” George added, grinning.

“There are loads of girls eyeing you. Weasleys are irresistible.”

“Now if you’d just get off your duff and notice them...”

“Weasleys are irresistible, really now?” said Angelina smoothly. “Is that why you broke up with George, Alicia?”

“We were never really together in the first place,” Alicia said, shaking her head. “I went with him to the Yule Ball out of pity, because he couldn’t get a date to save his life. What about you and Fred?”

Angelina looked over the twins, who were visibly cringing now as the rest of the room snickered. “It’s always a little disconcerting not to know exactly who you’re kissing,” she said. “And it’s not as if he was particularly good at it, anyway.”

Snickers increased to chuckles and guffaws. George covered his face with his hands and moaned. Fred leaned against the wall—

And disappeared into it with a yelp.

Ron recovered enough from his laughing fit to reach in and haul his brother back out. “Have to be careful,” he warned when he could get enough breath to speak. “This room gives you whatever you think you need.”

“No kidding,” said Lee, grabbing George by his shoulder and hauling him up out of the floor, where he had begun to sink. “Lay off them for right now, how about.”

A knock sounded on the door, and Parvati, who was closest, opened it. “Padma!” she squeaked happily. “You came!”

“And I brought friends,” Parvati’s twin answered from outside. “Is there enough room in there?”

“There will be,” said Luna, stepping back from the door. “Everyone come in.”

Draco backed up to the wall, watching Ravenclaws flood into the room. “Are you sure about this?” he asked out the side of his mouth. “There’s a lot of people here—”

“Don’t have much choice now, do I?” Harry answered. “Everyone here is another person who might not think I’m mad. Another person who might be able to fight with us when the fighting starts.”

“You’re right.” Draco turned back to the room and started counting. The Pride was eight, and fifteen other Gryffindors had shown up, so that made—

“Twenty-three.”

“Was I talking aloud again?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry.” Now Padma Patil had arrived, accompanied by Terry Boot and two of his friends, a tall blonde girl at whom both the twins were staring appreciatively, a redhead with a confident air, a small Asian girl who looked somewhat familiar, and right behind her—

“Harry, stay where you are, but Cho Chang’s here. And she brought a friend.” A curly-haired girl who looked apprehensive had entered the room behind Cho. “That’s nine Ravenclaws. Thirty-two already, and we’ve only had two Houses show.”

“Thanks,” Harry said sarcastically. “I could never have added twenty-three and nine on my own. And I’m going to leap right out into the middle of the room because you told me Cho Chang’s here. Who cares about Cho Chang?”

“You do. Or have you finally got your head on straight?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, nothing—” Draco smiled charmingly at the small Asian girl, who had fixed him with a piercing stare. “I have to shut up now,” he hissed without moving his lips. “Someone’s noticing. I’ll be back.”

He started towards the middle of the room, catching introductions as he went—the tall blonde was Danielle, the redhead was Amanda, Cho’s friend was Marietta, Boot’s mates were Anthony Goldstein and Michael Corner—*probably just as well Harry can’t see the way he’s looking at Ginny, he’d have a fit for all he claims he’s still interested in Cho*— and the girl who’d noticed him talking to Harry was Su Li.

“I met Harry Potter on the platform coming to school,” she said, shaking his hand politely. “My brother introduced us. I think you know him too. Brian Li.”

“Of course.”

“Between you and me, some of this lot don’t want to be here,” Su said quietly, nodding over her shoulder at her Housemates. “Corner’s just here because he knew Ginny Weasley would be, and he’s been trying to figure out how to get her interested in him ever since the play last year. And Marietta only came because Cho didn’t want to come alone.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“Who were you talking to up there?”

Draco smiled nonchalantly. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

Another knock sounded on the door. “Maybe in a minute,” Draco said thankfully, turning to see who this was.

“Are we too late?” said Ernie Macmillan, sticking his head around the door.

“No, you’re just on time,” said Hermione, smiling and beckoning him in. “We didn’t have any set starting time, we’re not really organized yet...”

Draco clenched a fist inside his pocket as Zacharias Smith followed Ernie into the room. *Insult me again, I dare you...*

Justin Finch-Fletchley was next, a blonde girl a year or so younger than him on his arm. “This is Heidi,” he said, nodding to her. “She’s only a fourth year; I hope that’s all right.”

Ginny turned at this. “It had better be!” she called over the crowd noise.

“I told you so,” Heidi said to Justin. “You shouldn’t worry so much.”

Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott slipped through the door together, clinging to each other’s hands, with a smaller girl bouncing behind them. “Hi, hi, hi everyone,” she said, grinning brightly. “I’m Tessa, Tessa Mallory, I’m a second year—hi Meghan, hi Dennis!”

“Hi Tessa!” Dennis Creevey ran over to the girl, grinning. “You came!”

“Yeah, I did—wow, there’s a lot of people here—”

Draco and Ron exchanged a look, for once totally in agreement over something.

This will not be fun.

“That’s everyone, isn’t it?” said Neville, standing up (Meghan and Natalie immediately claimed his place). “Should we get started?”

“No, there are a few more people coming,” said the redheaded Ravenclaw, Amanda, drawing all eyes to herself. “My brother—he’s only a second year, but he really wants to fight. One of his friends is missing, and he thinks it’s something to do with the war.”

“And a friend of mine is coming too,” Colleen added softly. “Just—please let him come and don’t shout at him?”

“Him?” said Lavender, orienting on her dormmate. “Your boyfriend?”

“What’s your brother’s friend’s name?” Meghan asked Amanda.

Before either of these questions could be answered, one more knock landed on the door.

Draco retreated back to his position by the wall. “You’re not going to believe this,” he muttered. “Guess who’s here.”

“Erm, Umbridge.”

“Nope.”

“Filch.”

“Nope.”

“Slytherins.”

“Third time lucky.”

Blaise Zabini stepped into the room, shoulders up, face set and neutral.

He expects us to tell him to go away, Draco realized. He doesn’t think we’ll let him stay. And Ron

was pushing through the crowd, ready to tell him just that—

“You here for the Defense Association, Zabini?” Draco asked casually, drawing all eyes to him. *Just like on stage. Get their attention, then keep it.* “Bring your wand?”

Blaise nodded. “So did they,” he said, moving aside to allow the people behind him entrance. A small, dark-haired boy who looked a bit like Harry was first into the room, his eyes immediately fixing on Amanda. A girl about his age followed him in, her blonde hair hanging around her face as if to veil it. Last into the room was a slim, proud-faced girl with an Asian cast to her features, though not as strongly as Su or Cho.

“Matt Smythe, Elayne Kreger, and Selena Moon,” Blaise said, nodding to each of his Housemates in turn. “We’re here for the same reason as you.”

“Who said you could come?” asked Fred.

“Who said they couldn’t?” countered Danielle, the tall blonde Ravenclaw. “They’ve got a right to be here.”

“Any of them could be reporting to Umbridge,” said George. “I might not want to stay in school that much, but I’d rather not get kicked out.”

“Any of you could be reporting to Umbridge too,” Amanda Smythe shot back, her hands on her brother Matt’s shoulders. “Slytherins aren’t always bad.”

“Who says?” Ron demanded.

“I do!” shouted Colleen, startling everyone, not least herself. “If they can’t stay, then neither will I!”

Blaise moved quickly to her side and took her hand. “Thank you,” he said quietly, then turned to face the crowd. “If you want us to leave, we will,” he said. “But we want to fight.”

Hermione stepped to the front of the group. “On which side?” she asked, her own voice as neutral as his.

Blaise met her eyes. “We’re with you,” he said. “Against...” A long pause. “Against Voldemort.”

Gasps and squeaks rippled through the room.

“’Scuse me,” Harry said under his breath. “Need to come out now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Trust me.”

Draco bit back his automatic smart-mouth rejoinder and stepped aside.

Blaise's eyes widened and Colleen gasped as they saw Harry apparently materialize from the wall. The other students turned and likewise gaped. Harry seemed not to notice, walking across the room as though it were empty.

And for him, it might as well be. He's got to teach me that trick sometime. Harry seemed to be parting the crowd by sheer force of personality—*though maybe it's just 'Oh my God he's here' and 'Is he going to attack me?'*

For whatever reason, a clear aisle had formed between Harry and Blaise, and Harry took full advantage, walking up to Blaise and stopping directly in front of him.

"Anyone who's against Voldemort," Harry said clearly, disregarding the second round of gasps and shudders, "is welcome here." He held out his hand. "Glad to have you."

Blaise met the hand with his own. "Glad to be here," he said.

Harry nodded to him, then turned away. "Have a seat, everyone," he said, walking back towards Draco's side of the room. "This may take a little while to explain."

Girls made small sounds of wonder as silk puffs materialized underneath them. Boys nodded in appreciation as chairs and beanbags appeared. "How'd you do that, Potter?" Lindsey Jordan asked.

"We're in the Room of Requirement," Harry explained. "It provides whatever we need. A place to practice, equipment to do it with—I don't think it will give you another wand if you forget yours, though, so don't do that."

A slightly nervous chuckle ran around the room.

Harry sat down on the edge of a table that had appeared behind him. "Just to get a few things clear," he said conversationally, "I'm not mad, neither am I a criminal, and the worst thing I did to Professor Umbridge was tell her I wouldn't write lines with a Contract Quill."

"A what?" said Tessa, the Hufflepuff second year, and Dennis Creevey together.

"It cuts whatever you write into your hand," Colin whispered loudly to them. "What did she want you to write, Harry? What was it?"

Harry opened his mouth to answer—

"I must not be pert," fluted Umbridge's voice.

Laughter and surprised comments floated around the room. "How'd you do that?" called Maya Pritchard. "You sounded just like her!"

"I didn't," Harry said. "Ginny Weasley, everyone."

Ginny inclined her head to the polite applause from where she was sitting to the side with the rest

of the Pride.

“That was you yesterday morning, wasn’t it?” said Matt Smythe. “How’d you get away with it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ginny said in Umbridge’s voice, causing more laughter. “Let’s all listen to Mr. Potter, now, he has important things to tell us.”

“Thanks a lot,” Harry said, laughing himself. “But yes, I do.” The laughter died out of his face, and it took on a tightness Draco recognized. “Why are you all here? Tell me that. Boot.” He pointed at Terry. “Why are you here?”

“I was curious,” Terry said. “There’s a lot going on I don’t understand. Besides, I don’t want to spend an entire year not learning any practical Defense. We have O.W.L.s to take.”

“I agree,” Ernie Macmillan cut in. “Professor Longbottom’s quite good, but I can’t learn everything just from listening. I need to be able to practice. Why we’re suddenly not allowed to try the spells in class—”

“The Ministry’s trying to handicap us!” shouted Luna, making Draco wince. *I knew I should be over there with her, this isn’t going to help us.* “They don’t want us to be able to fight!”

“Fight?” Michael Corner yelled back. “Fight who? A figment of his imagination?” He pointed at Harry. “You-Know-Who’s dead, has been for years—”

“That’s just what you think because you don’t know any better!” bellowed George, starting to his feet.

A free-for-all yelling match erupted. Draco glanced at Harry and was surprised to see his brother sitting quietly in his place, waiting. *What’re you doing? he signed. Shouldn’t you try to get them to quiet down?*

Harry shook his head. *I’m giving them enough rope, he signed back. Just watch.*

All right, Draco signed doubtfully.

As though he’d heard some secret signal, Harry put two fingers in his mouth and blew. The shrill whistle cut through the yelling like an Unforgiveable through a shield.

“Who was that you just mentioned?” Harry said, pointing at Zacharias Smith. “You said a name. Whose was it?”

“Cedric Diggory,” Smith said, glaring at Harry. “I think it’s a little fishy that you turned up at the end of the Triwizard Tournament with his dead body and some crazy story about You-Know-Who coming back—”

“You and a lot of other people,” Harry said, nodding matter-of-factly. Draco would have been surprised by Harry’s polite tone, but he was close enough to see the white knuckles where Harry

was holding onto the table and smell the anger Harry was holding in check. “Is that why you’re here? To hear the truth about that?”

“I think we deserve that much. Don’t you think so?” Smith appealed to the rest of the room. A subdued murmur answered him, some agreement, some unsure.

“Why would he lie?” Ginny asked angrily, standing up. “What’s in it for him?”

“Winning the Tournament—getting off on murder charges—”

“Quiet,” Harry said harshly, stilling the angry shouts from several corners of the room. Sliding off the table, he faced Smith directly. “Do you think I killed Cedric Diggory?” he asked, looking the other boy straight in the eye.

“Well, I...” Smith fidgeted. “I can’t...”

Harry’s gaze didn’t waver. “Do you think I killed Cedric Diggory?”

“I’m just saying it looks damned strange, all right?” Smith exploded. “How the hell should I know if you killed him or not?”

“You don’t know. But I want to know what you think.” The room was absolutely silent except for Harry’s voice. “Do you think I killed him?”

Smith slumped, looking away. “I don’t know what to think,” he said, staring at the floor. “Dad’s always putting things in the newspaper—never anything big, just little bits here and there—about how you’re crazy, you make up stories to make yourself look good, you’re dangerous and you shouldn’t be in school...”

“Why?” Harry asked quietly, the anger smell off him increasing. “Why does he do that?”

“How should I know? He doesn’t talk about work to me.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever met your dad,” said Harry, sitting back down on the table. “So it’s odd how he knows so much about me.”

“Well, what else are we supposed to think?” Smith demanded, looking back up. “That You-Know-Who popped out of a cauldron and killed Diggory for no reason?”

Harry shook his head. “Voldemort killed Cedric for a perfectly good reason,” he said, challenging the room with the name. “Good to him, at least. He likes killing. And he likes playing with people.” His voice was starting to shake. “He played with Cedric. He told Cedric to run. Cedric could have got away clean. He could have lived. But he stayed behind to help me. That’s why he died. Because he was a good person.”

Several girls had started to cry, Cho Chang and Meghan among them.

Harry stared into the distance, above everyone's heads. "I can't prove this," he said. "I can't prove any of it. And I wish I didn't have to." He looked down at the group. "I wish I could just make him go away by saying he wasn't back. But he is."

Blaise got to his feet. "My family was approached," he said. "By someone who claimed to be from the Dark Lord." The words dripped contempt. "No matter my parents' politics, I want nothing to do with a murderer."

"My cousin is missing," said Maya, standing up. "And I was told not to ask where he'd gone, or why."

"Dumbledore believes you, Harry," Ernie said, squaring his shoulders and rising. "That's enough for me. It's ridiculous, us being handicapped this way, and I won't stand for it."

"My brother believes in this," said Su, on her feet. "He's fighting. So will I."

"Will you sign to that?" Hermione asked, drawing all eyes to her. She was standing by the wall, a long scroll in one hand, a loaded quill in the other. "Will you sign to say you're with us?"

"Gladly." "Of course." "In a second." Blaise, Maya, and Su's answers overlapped.

"Well..." Ernie fidgeted slightly. "You'll be careful with that list, won't you, Hermione?" he said. "I mean, if Umbridge should get a look at it..."

Hermione crossed to Harry's side. He took the quill and signed his own name first on the list, then gave it to her to sign under his. "Does that answer your question?" he said, looking up. "It's our necks on the line first."

"Yes, but you can't get expelled again..."

Draco took the quill from Hermione and added his name. Meghan hurried up to take the quill next, with Neville and Ron behind her, and Luna and Ginny behind them, and the twins and Lee and Lindz behind them, forming a queue along one side of the room.

"But they can," Harry said, waving at the long line of people. "And I won't let them."

"Well... all right. If you'll promise to be careful," Ernie said to Hermione over everyone's heads.

"I promise," Hermione said, raising her right hand. "Harry, will you keep it for me?"

"Of course." Harry grinned. "No one's found me, no one will find it."

A few people laughed.

"So what are we actually going to do?" Tessa Mallory asked, bouncing on her toes after she'd signed her name. "Are we going to learn spells, or shields, or potions? What are we going to do?"

“Good question,” Draco muttered. “What *are* we going to do?”

“We’ll start with spells,” Harry said aloud as Hermione rolled up the parchment and gave it to him. “Since that’s what we can’t get in class. Everyone here should be able to do the first one; I learned it in second year myself. It’s the Disarming Charm, *Expelliarmus*. ”

“Will that really help us?” asked the second year Slytherin girl, Elayne, uncertainly. “I mean, against You-Know-Who?”

“Maybe not against him,” Harry admitted, “but you probably won’t be fighting him.” His fingers twitched in Draco’s direction. *Get your wand out*. “You’ll be fighting with his followers, Death Eaters.”

Draco pulled his wand from his pocket and started rubbing his fingers idly up and down its length.

“Death Eaters are people,” Harry told Elayne, “witches and wizards just like us. They’ll probably think we’re not dangerous because we’re young. And you can get anyone with a Disarmer if he’s not paying attention—” His wand was in his hand in an instant, pointed at Draco. “*Expelliarmus!* ”

The spell knocked Draco to the floor, and his wand soared out of his hand.

“You have to surprise them, though,” Harry said, catching Draco’s wand as the group laughed. “So some of what we’ll be practicing, along with spells, is hiding and sneaking. Thanks, Draco.”

“Anytime,” Draco said, sitting up and rubbing his shoulder. “I just love getting knocked down.”

Luna giggled from the other side of the room. *I know you do*, she signed to him.

“So welcome, everyone,” Harry said, his voice as sure and strong as Moony’s or Dumbledore’s. “Welcome to the Defense Association.”

“Also known as the Ministry’s worst nightmare,” Ginny added, making everyone laugh. “Dumbledore’s Army!”

“Dumbledore’s Army!” echoed the three male Weasleys in the room together.

“Dumbledore’s Army!” chorused the rest of the group, Gryffindors the loudest at first, but Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs getting louder by the moment, and even the Slytherins joining in. “Dumbledore’s Army!”

xXxXx

Outside the door, a being rubbed his hands together and began to shuffle away. “She will want to hear about this, the Mistress will,” he muttered to himself. “She will like to know about this...”

xXxXx

“Harry?”

Harry turned. “Hi, Cho.”

“I’ve been so worried since you disappeared,” Cho said, twisting a bit of her robes between her hands. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I have a safe place to stay, and I’m even keeping up with my classes. I won’t be able to play Quidditch, but at least I didn’t have to leave school.”

“Where are you hiding, though? Professor Umbridge searched everywhere, she even checked inside all our dorms—” Cho looked around. “Are you living in here?”

Harry shook his head. “It’s another secret place in Hogwarts, though,” he said. “I’m sure there are other ones, if we just knew where to look for them.”

“Does it have to be secret from everyone?” Cho asked wistfully. “I...” She trailed off.

“Do you want to meet somewhere tomorrow night?” Harry blurted.

“Tomorrow? Oh, I can’t—I have Quidditch—but what about Wednesday?”

“Wednesday’s fine.”

“Where?”

“Er, Quidditch pitch?”

“All right.”

They stared at each other for a minute.

“See you there,” Harry said finally.

“See you.” Cho hurried out the door, her curly-haired friend Marietta casting a nervous look Harry’s way before she followed Cho out. Harry didn’t care. His chest felt lighter than air, as though he might at any moment start flying without benefit of broom.

I’m going out with Cho Chang.

He barely even noticed Michael Corner talking earnestly with Ginny off to one side.

Wednesday is going to take a very long time to come.

xXxXx

“So much to tell, so much to say, oh yes, oh yes...” The being shuffled to a stop, noticing a sudden change in the patterns of shadow in front of him. Doubtfully, he looked up.

“So much to say?” queried his Master, arms folded. “And who were you going to go talk to?”

He growled, but the compulsion of blood pulled the answer out of him. “To Professor Umbridge.”

“And what were you going to tell her?”

“Was going to tell her about Harry Potter, about Harry Potter and his filthy unnatural friends and their little club and where it is...” He broke off with a squeak as his Master grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hoisted him up.

“You should be glad,” his Master said, staring him straight in the eye, “that I don’t like killing things for no reason. And that I found you when I did. If you’d gone to Dolores Umbridge with this, I’d have a reason to kill you. And I’d be glad to do it.”

“Be glad to have it done,” Kreacher spat. “Kreacher hates Master.”

“Well, Master’s not that fond of Kreacher either.” Master’s wand came up until it was pointed straight at Kreacher. “Which makes this a positive pleasure. *Stupefy!*”

Kreacher snarled once more before he dropped into darkness.

xXxXx

“Find him?” Remus asked as Sirius stepped out of the fire, one hand in his pocket.

“Oh yes.” Sirius tossed a small Muggle-style chess piece onto the kitchen table. “Here he is.”

“Transfigured?” Aletha said, peering at the pawn.

“Just to get him back here easier.” Sirius sat down heavily. “Honestly, I don’t know what we’re going to do with him. We can’t free him, we don’t want him around...”

“We owe Aunt Amy and Albus both some thanks,” Danger put in from the stove. “If it hadn’t been for them, we probably wouldn’t ever have thought about him.”

“And Dolores Umbridge would know what the cubs are up to.” Remus prodded the pawn with a fingertip. “What are the cubs up to?”

“Apparently, they’ve made a club. If I were a betting man—”

“Which you are,” Aletha pointed out.

Sirius ignored this with dignity. “I’d bet that it’s about Defense. They know how important that is, and they’re not getting it. We can ask Frank when we see him next.”

“Or we could just ask Harry,” Danger said, flicking her Zippophone open and shut. “He can tell us directly.”

Sirius pouted. “Oh, have a better idea than me, why don’t you.”

“Thank you, I will.”

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Facing Danger

Chapter 12: Help, I Need Somebody (Year 5)

Chapter 12: Help, I Need Somebody

“Pardon me,” said Percy Weasley, looking around the door into the kitchen where his mother was sitting and talking with Danger and Aletha.

“Oh, Percy!” Molly jumped up and ran to her third son. “It’s good to see you—can you stay for dinner?”

“Yes, I was just coming to ask if I might.”

“You’re always welcome, you know that,” Molly scolded him. “Have you been taking care of yourself?”

“Yes, Mother...”

Danger and Aletha glanced at each other, then got up and left the kitchen, nodding to Percy as they passed him.

Bartemius Crouch was standing in the front hall, regarding the scar where the portrait of Sirius’ mother had once hung. Aletha’s shoulders went back at the sight of him. “Stay quiet,” she said out the side of her mouth. “Maybe we can get upstairs...”

“Mrs. Freeman-Black,” Crouch acknowledged, turning to face them. “Mrs. Granger-Lupin.”

Danger nodded to the man. Aletha didn’t move.

“Do you have a moment?” Crouch asked. “I was hoping to speak with you, or with your husbands.”

“Of course,” Danger said, stepping on Aletha’s foot. “The front room, just there, will be fine. Be polite,” she hissed at Aletha as soon as Crouch was out of sight. “He’s part of the Order.”

“I don’t like him.”

“I thought you were growing Sirius up, not him dragging you down.” Danger rounded the side of the door and got her company smile in place. “Did you come with Percy?” she asked Crouch as she sat down.

“I did.” Crouch seated himself once Aletha had taken a seat next to Danger. “He’s spoken so often and so glowingly of his mother’s cooking that I hoped to get a sample. And he’s mentioned yours a few times as well, Mrs. Granger-Lupin. You and the Weasleys live near one another?”

“We do. Though they’ve lived there much longer. We only moved into our house in 1988.”

“What is it you were hoping to speak with us about?” Aletha asked bluntly, in a tone that indicated she was tired of small talk.

Crouch met her eyes openly. “You have no reason to like me,” he said. “I’ll admit that. But I’m a different man than the one who sent your husband to prison, Mrs. Freeman-Black. Please don’t blame me for that man’s mistakes. I’ve been through a lot since then, and I’d like to think it’s changed me for the better. I’m not asking for friendship, not even for forgiveness, but since we find ourselves fighting in the same war, perhaps I can ask for a cessation of hostilities.”

Aletha hadn’t moved during Crouch’s little speech, except to lean forward slightly. Now she smiled, a rueful expression. “Have I been so open about it?” she said. “I’d hoped I was concealing it a little better than that.”

“No, you’re quite good at hiding your feelings,” said Crouch. “But I know from experience how people act when they’re hiding something. Not to mention, your husband is singularly less gifted in that area than you are.”

Aletha laughed shortly. “True. Very true. Sirius can act, but only when he has his entire mind set on the goal that acting will gain him. For anything less, he wears his heart on his sleeve. I assume you’d like this ‘cessation of hostilities’ to include him, if possible?”

“I don’t ask for miracles, but yes.” Crouch fingered the embroidery on his chair. “My job hangs by a thread, my loyalties are questioned at every turn, and my sanity is being attacked. I can’t come here often, but it would be pleasant to spend my few hours with others who think as I do without wondering if I’m going to be shunned or cursed by the people who are supposedly my allies.”

“You have a point, Mr. Crouch.” Aletha inclined her head. “I am sorry for the way we’ve treated you. I thought I’d learned my lesson about letting go of the past, but it seems some things need to be learned and relearned.”

“How very true,” said Crouch, smiling. “Do you think I might have a chance of reaching your husband, or would you like to try it yourself?”

“Let me think about that for a while,” Aletha said. “In the meantime, why don’t we practice our cessation of hostilities?”

“I beg your pardon?” Crouch frowned.

Danger tried not to giggle. “She wants to talk to you,” she translated. “Try to be polite, if not friendly.”

“Ah. I can agree to that.” Crouch glanced toward the window. “I see the weather continues fine.”

Both women laughed at this.

Weather led to Quidditch, Quidditch led to Hogwarts, and Hogwarts led to Sirius’ expedition of yesterday. “You may not remember Kreacher the house-elf,” Aletha said. “He wasn’t here long.

He's not entirely sane, and he hates Sirius for running away and for marrying me. We can't free him; the shock would probably kill him. We can't let him stay here, because Sirius would kill him."

"And we tried sending him somewhere else," Danger took over. "Hogwarts. But apparently the orders Sirius gave him weren't good enough, and he was about to make trouble for our—" She caught herself just in time, coughed, and went on. "—children when Sirius found him and brought him back."

"Excellent timing," Crouch said. "Was there some warning, to tell you this trouble was coming?"

"Actually, yes," Aletha said, pulling her pendants from her robes. "These necklaces we wear are enchanted to tell us things about the people that these engravings represent. We were getting a very faint indication that Harry might be in trouble—"

"Harry?" Crouch interrupted. "I thought he'd run away from school?"

Danger shook her head. "He's still there," she said. "He knows it wouldn't be safe for him anywhere else, unless he came here. He's just hiding until *Professor* Umbridge decides she won't expel him on sight."

"I do wonder sometimes what Cornelius was thinking when he sent her to the school," Crouch said. "Is he actively trying to alienate the students and their parents?"

"If he is, he's doing a marvelous job," said Aletha. "I give it four weeks before the student body is in active rebellion."

"That I will want to see." Crouch smiled faintly. "But we talked ourselves out of your story. What became of this house-elf?"

"He's right here," Danger said, extracting the chess piece that was Kreacher from her pocket. "Sirius transfigured him to get him safely back here, and we've just left him transfigured for the moment while we try to figure out what to do with him."

"I see." Crouch held out his hand questioningly, and Danger leaned forward to give him carved bit of wood. "Owned by the Blacks," he said thoughtfully, rolling the pawn around on his palm. "And you mentioned it was furious that you'd become part of the family, Mrs. Freeman-Black?"

"Please, Aletha. And yes, Kreacher never liked me." Aletha shuddered. "The feeling was entirely mutual."

"So I would assume it's rather puritanical about blood purity."

"Very definitely," Danger said.

Crouch closed his hand around the chess piece. "I live alone," he said. "And I no longer have a house-elf, after certain...unfortunate circumstances caused me to dismiss mine. I know where she

is now, and I'm not sorry. She's better off. But I do need some help around the house. Would your husband possibly be willing to sell Kreach, Mrs...Aletha?"

Aletha looked over at Danger, her face bright. Danger grinned at her friend. *Sounds good to me,* she signed, rubbing her right ear.

"I think he might," Aletha said, looking back at Crouch. "I think he very well might."

xXxXx

Harry timed his steps carefully as he crossed the Great Hall under the Invisibility Cloak. Just because no one could see him didn't mean they couldn't hear him if he wasn't careful.

This probably isn't smart, going out in the middle of the day like this, but where else do I have to be? It was lunchtime, he was caught up on his homework, and he was bored. He'd been "walking" all morning; by Danger's rules, he should have a break of at least an hour and a half in his own body before he left it again. That was too long to make a meal stretch to cover it, and the Pride couldn't sneak off on daytime breaks as easily as they could after dinner, so Harry was on his own.

So why not go out to the Forest? As long as no one catches me on the way out or the way back in, I'm safe.

Out the doors and down the steps, Harry peered around himself, then decided to risk a bit of a run. Even if the Cloak flapped up a little to reveal his feet, people would either not see them or think they'd been imagining things.

Wizards aren't so different from Muggles that way.

He made it to the edge of the Forest and in among the trees. Once he could no longer see Hogwarts behind him, he pulled off the Cloak and wadded it up to stuff into a pocket.

I love how small this thing can get.

A moment later, Wolf lifted his nose and howled for sheer joy.

Time to run! Time to chase! Time to play!

But the joy was muted, because playing was really better with playmates. Especially one playmate, one not so much smaller than himself, with many sharp points which had to be dodged...

Harry shook his head sharply. *Stop that. Let's go find Sangre.*

Sangre . Yes. Wolf liked that idea. Sangre knew where the game laired.

Nose to the ground, he began to search for the trail he wanted.

xXxXx

Hermione looked up from studying the tiny lizard in her hands, froze, and elbowed Ron. “Don’t say anything,” she hissed out the side of her mouth. “Just look at the edge of the Forest.”

“What about—” Ron stopped abruptly. “He’s mad.”

Standing calmly between two trees behind Hagrid’s cabin, a large dark-furred wolf was regarding the Care of Magical Creatures class and its substitute teacher, a gray-haired witch with a prominent chin who’d told them to call her Professor Grubbly-Plank. Hermione was a little worried about Hagrid, but with both Madame Maxime and Norbert the dragon with him, he’d be safe.

I hope.

Ron had got Draco and Neville’s attention, and Draco was now staring at Wolf as well. Neville stroked his moke’s back for a moment, his eyes half-shut as in concentration, then looked up and nodded to Wolf. *It’s safe*, he hand-signed with the hand not holding the lizard. *You can come in.*

Wolf bounded towards the class and changed into Harry mid-leap. “I went out to see Sangre,” he said, stopping beside Draco and Neville’s table. “What are these things?”

Draco shook his head fractionally. “We can’t talk,” he said without moving his lips. “They’d see.”

“Would they?” Neville asked in a normal tone. “They’re called mokes, Harry. Watch—they shrink.” He held up his moke and flicked a finger at it. The moke immediately dwindled into insignificance on his palm. “It’s how they hide.”

“Can I hold it?”

Neville deposited his moke in Harry’s hand. “I hid this too,” he told Draco. “Anyone else who looks over here, or listens, will just see us talking about the mokes.”

“I’m stupid,” Draco said to his moke. “Did you know I was stupid?”

“Are you talking to the lizard, or to us?” Ron asked.

“The lizard. I’m not stupid enough to ask you that question.”

“Damn.”

xXxXx

Brian Li rounded the last corner. *The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix*, he recited mentally, *may be found at...*

The house began to appear before he’d even completed the phrase. He sighed in relief. *I could use a drink, and something to eat. Some healing potions. And then some sleep.* The half-healed bites on his arm itched, and he scratched at them absently. *Perhaps put the healing a little higher on the*

list.

The door opened before he had a chance to touch the knob. “You’re back,” said Corona, an uncertain smile on her face.

“Yes.” Brian stepped inside the house and let her shut the door. “Yes. I’m back.”

“Did it go well?”

“Well enough.” He slipped off his cloak and started for the closet, but he only got three steps before it was taken from his hands. “What—”

“Go and sit down,” Corona said, pointing firmly toward the front room with the hand not holding his cloak. “Now.”

Bemusedly, Brian obeyed, watching out of the corner of his eye as Corona hung his cloak on one of the hooks inside the closet, then disappeared down the hall for a moment before coming back around the corner. “Remus asked to be told when you arrived,” she said. “One of the house-elves will be up in a moment with something for you to eat and drink, and a potion for those.” She pointed at his arms. “And what happened? I thought you had taken the Wolfsbane with you.”

“I did.” Brian moved over slightly on the couch where he was sitting, not enough to be a direct invitation but making it clear Corona would be welcome if she joined him. “But I was near a werewolf settlement on the full moon, and one of the males decided my presence was unwelcome. He decided to evict me through direct action.”

“Oh, no,” Corona breathed, crossing to sit down next to him. “Did he—did you—”

“He lives,” Brian said quickly. “We both lived to see the morning.” He could not resist a smile. “Though he was less happy about it than I. Having both a human mind and some knowledge of where and how an attacker may be best thwarted gave me something of an unfair advantage over my opponent.”

“In battle,” said Mr. Lupin—*no, Remus*—entering just in time to hear this, “there is no such thing. Honor is for duels. Battles are about surviving.” He sat down and drew a quill and a small Muggle notebook from his pocket. “Where did you start?”

“The small encampment near Brighton,” Brian said, pulling his own somewhat grimy notes from his pocket. “Six werewolves live there full-time, but at least six more stop in every now and again.” A loud crack, and he handed the notes to Corona to take a loaded tray from Winky. “Thank you,” he said to both females.

“How do they break down male and female?” Remus asked.

“The permanent residents are four female, two male. The wanderers are mostly male, but one female was mentioned as dropping by occasionally.” Brian set the tray on his lap, opened the flask of pale blue potion, and drank it as quickly as he could without spilling, sighing in relief as the

tinges in his joints and the painful itching on his arms subsided. "I had news of a traveling female elsewhere as well," he added, setting down the flask again. "Is that very uncommon?"

"Somewhat," Remus said, making a note, "but then not everything is as simple as male and female. Go on."

Corona unrolled the scroll and held it where Brian could see it. He smiled thanks to her, squinted at the next notation, and deciphered it. "Three of the full-time residents at Brighton were willing to listen to me, if not to believe me right away..."

xXxXx

"So," Draco said to Harry after dinner on Wednesday. "How did it go?"

"How did what go?"

"Weren't you meeting Cho Chang today?"

Harry shrugged. "She wrote Hermione this morning to tell me she couldn't make it. A meeting for a club of hers got rescheduled."

"Sorry."

"Yeah, it's all your fault." Harry dunked his hand into the flour and started scraping his bread dough out of its bowl. "I have to tell her she can get notes straight to me by house-elf. Hermione doesn't like being used as a courier service."

"Hermione doesn't like anything lately." Draco stole a scrap of bread dough and popped it in his mouth. "I think she's got nerves about O.W.L.s."

"*Already*? It's barely the middle of September!"

"You know Hermione."

Harry left the imprints of his fists in the bread dough. "There are days I wish I didn't."

xXxXx

Theodore Nott followed his father down the Hogsmeade side street. "Sir, where are we going?" he asked uncertainly.

"I have business," Patroclus Nott said without looking around. "And you have a lesson to learn. One you will not learn at *Hogwarts* ." He sneered the word.

"Hogwarts isn't so bad," Theo muttered under his breath.

At least there, the people who don't like me just ignore me. They don't come looking for me and

claim they need to teach me a lesson.

Well, most of the time, they don't.

“Here,” Father said, breaking into Theo’s gloomy thoughts. “This is the place.”

“This?” Theo looked up at a dingy storefront with two floors’ worth of small windows above it. “It’s not even open.”

“For us, it is open.” Father stepped up to the door and rapped briskly on it. It opened after only a second, and Father turned and beckoned Theo impatiently.

Theo crossed the threshold with a little shiver. For no reason he could understand, the building made him feel cold and unwanted. “What business are you doing, Father?” he asked as Father shed his cloak. “Can I watch?”

“Your lesson will come first. After that, yes, you may watch, and listen. Perhaps you will even learn something.” Father turned away to hang up his cloak. “Though that would be a miracle,” he said under his breath, but still loud enough for Theo to hear.

Theo bit his lip hard. *I don't make mistakes on purpose. I'm just not very good at the things you want me to do. And is that so bad, really?*

Father ushered him up a flight of stairs and halfway down a hall. “How many of your Housemates do you know by sight?” he asked, taking out his wand.

“Most of them, I think,” Theo said truthfully. “Not the first years as yet, but most of the rest.”

“Excellent.” Father tapped his wand twice against the door, making a section transparent. “Then you will know this boy, will you not?”

Theo looked, and looked again, and stared.

“Pritchard,” he said, looking up at Father. “But—I thought—”

“I know what you thought.” Father restored the door to its original state. “But hear me well, Theodore. Parvus Pritchard fights for the Dark Lord now. You have seen why. I need no such incentive. I know where my loyalties lie. And so will everyone in my household.” His eyes sought the door again for a moment before locking onto Theo’s. “You understand me.”

Theo gulped, not even trying to conceal it. “Yes, Father,” he said almost inaudibly. His imagination was busy painting himself into the place of the thin boy sitting on the bed, his head bent over a piece of parchment, folding and refolding it.

A tiny room. No windows. No air. Alone.

No one would know where I was. No one would know what was happening to me. And no one would

look for me, because I was with my father.

“I will always come for you, Theodore,” Father said quietly. “Remember that. No matter what might happen to you, I will always come to find you.”

Unable to say anything, Theodore nodded, praying that the fear squeezing his heart didn't show in his eyes.

xXxXx

Ginny glanced up from her Charms text and did a double take. “Excuse me,” she said to Ron, getting up from her comfortable spot on the floor of the Den, “but who told you you could take my clay?”

“I didn't take a lot of it. And you can have it back when I'm done. What next, Harry?”

“That's not the point,” Ginny cut Harry off. “The point is, you didn't ask. And I want it back. Now.”

“We need it, Ginny,” Harry said. “We're using it.”

“I can see that. But you didn't *ask*.” Ginny made to grab the corner off the blobby building sitting on the table in front of Ron.

Ron blocked her hand with his own. “It's important, Ginny,” he said. “And if it means that much to you, I'll ask. Ginny, can we please use your clay?”

“What are you using it for?”

“We're modeling the house where Graham Pritchard is,” Harry said. “Or trying to. It's not going very well.”

“No, it isn't.” Ginny pushed at Ron's shoulder. “Budge up.”

Ron got out of his chair, and Ginny sat down in it. “How many stories?” she asked Harry.

“Three.”

Ginny stroked the building a little taller, urging the clay upwards. “Does it really have this thick wall all around the top of the roof?”

“Yeah, that's there. There's a door in it, and stairs.”

“Where?”

Harry poked a finger into the clay. “Here.”

“Where are the downstairs doors?” Ron interjected.

“Here on the front, and here on the back.” Harry pointed out two more spots. “This side is right up against another building, and this side is just flat wood and brick. No windows or anything.”

Ginny carved out the lines that made the doors with her thumbnail, then drew her wand and split the building down the middle. “If you’re going to use it, you’re going to need to see all of it,” she said. “Let’s get the inside right too.”

“OK.” Harry closed his eyes, remembering. “Top story is very plain, all one room, sort of like an attic, except it’s used as a meeting room. A table and lots of chairs. The stairs from the roof are inside one of the walls, they don’t go in there. You have to take the other set of stairs, the ones that start farther back in the house.”

“Slow down,” Ginny said, scooping clay out of the top third of the house. “All right, so there are two sets of stairs. Where and where?”

Harry pointed. “These go straight,” he said, drawing a thin line down one of the walls with his fingernail. “The back ones twist a lot.”

“Probably want to use them, then,” Ron muttered half to himself. “More cover. But you’d have to watch for people sneaking up on you.”

Ginny finished digging out the rough hole for the stairs and picked up her wand again. Tapping it three times against the clay wall, she murmured “*Scalae*,” then peered into the hole. Sure enough, a perfect miniature flight of stairs had formed within.

“Fancy,” Harry said, looking over her shoulder. “Can you do the switchbacks, though?”

“Watch me.” Ginny stood up to burrow through the back of the house, ignoring the voice in her head saying she was showing off. *I am not. I’m just helping.* “*Scalae Contortionis!*”

Ron laughed. “Don’t think you wanted a spiral,” he said.

“Shut up.” Ginny reached out and smeared clay down Ron’s nose, then tried again. “*Scalae Contortionis.*”

“Much better,” Harry said, . “But they go the other way. Left first, then right.”

“Do you want to do it?” Ginny demanded.

“No, but I want it to be right. We might need this.”

I hate it when he makes sense. “All right. Hold on.” Ginny concentrated hard on what was needed, not on how annoyed she was feeling (though less, surprisingly, than she’d expected). “*Scalae Contortionis.*”

Harry grinned at her. “That’s perfect. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Ginny sat back down. “Now, what about the middle story?”

xXxXx

Hermione was just starting to settle down to sleep that night when she got a feeling that something wasn’t right.

Hmm. Let’s see. She sat up. Lights nice and low, boys over there to sleep, girls over here, except Draco and Luna, they always snuggle up, and sometimes Neville and Meghan do too, but tonight Neville’s by himself—

And that’s it. Meghan. Where’s Meghan?

She went cat and began to sniff. Meghan had been right over here, the blankets still held some of the heat of her body, but she’d been gone for several minutes, and she’d gone *this* way, towards one of the doors, one under a yellow banner...

The bathroom? Hermione changed back into a human. *I don’t hear anything, but maybe that’s because there’s nothing to hear.*

She tapped on the door, but there was no answer. “Meghan?” she called quietly, tapping a second time, louder.

“I’m in here,” Meghan answered, a little hiccup punctuating the sentence. “I’m all right.”

“You sound like you’re crying.”

“I’m fine. Go away.”

“No.” Hermione opened the door.

Meghan glared at her from her seat by the windowsill. “Why doesn’t anybody in this family ever go away when I say go away?”

“Because we all know you don’t really mean it.” Hermione shut the door and crossed the room to kneel beside her little sister’s chair. “Pearl, what’s wrong?”

Meghan hiccupped again, then tumbled out of her chair into Hermione’s arms. “Everything!” she wailed aloud. “I’m so scared for Graham, and for Harry, and for Dadfoot and Mama Letha and Moony and Danger in the war, and for us in the war—I don’t want to fight, Hermione, I don’t want to get hurt, I don’t want anybody else to get hurt—”

We always forget she’s only twelve. Hermione held Meghan close and rocked her back and forth a little, standing up and turning until she could sit in the chair herself, and hold Meghan on her lap, or as much of Meghan as would fit. *She acts so grown-up that we forget how old she really is.*

Except when it all comes out, like now.

“—I like healing people, but not when somebody hurt them on purpose—I can feel it, Neenie, I can feel it when somebody *meant* to hurt somebody else, I could feel it when Harry came back from the graveyard, it hurts me to feel it, I don’t want to feel it—but if I don’t feel it, that’ll mean I’m not helping people, and I want to help them, I want to heal them, but I don’t want to get hurt —”

“Nobody wants to get hurt, Pearl,” Hermione said, hugging her sister closer. “But maybe you don’t have to heal people who were hurt on purpose with your Ravenclaw power. Maybe you can just heal them with the things Madam Pomfrey teaches you.”

“But then maybe they won’t get better!” Meghan twisted to look at Hermione. “Maybe they’ll *die* ! And that would be my fault, because I didn’t help them enough!”

“You don’t have to decide it all alone, though, Meghan.” Hermione slid a hand into Meghan’s hair and twisted the braids around her fingers. “You’re not going to be all on your own to decide who needs your special help and who doesn’t.”

“How do you know?” Meghan stared over Hermione’s shoulder for a moment, then looked back at her sister’s face. “How do you know I won’t be?”

“Because I won’t let you be,” Hermione said. “I’ll be with you.”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“You always have me here.” Hermione freed a hand to press against Meghan’s chest, against the Pack-pendants. “And I’ll be with you myself as much as I can. I know I can’t promise I’ll always be there, but I’ll do my very best.” She looked into Meghan’s gray eyes, frightened but resolute. “Is that enough?”

Meghan sniffled once, then nodded. “Thanks,” she said quietly. “Thanks a lot.”

“You’re welcome.” Hermione hugged her little sister once more. “Come on, we should get to sleep. It’s late.”

Hand in hand, the Pack’s daughters returned to their Den, lay down near one another, and fell asleep cuddled together as they had a thousand nights in the past.

xXxXx

Sirius got up late that Sunday morning and wandered down to breakfast. Remus sat near the end of the table, sipping a mug of tea and reading the paper. “Morning,” Sirius said, parking himself across from his friend. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Nothing. We ate it all.”

“Oh, ha ha. Come on, really, what is it?”

“I told you. We ate all the food. There isn’t anything left.”

“You’re having me on.”

Remus turned a page. “Go look for yourself.”

Sirius glared at the newspaper, then got up and went over to the pantry. “No food,” he muttered. “There’s never no food in this house...”

The pantry doors opened wide. The shelves within were empty.

Sirius looked over his shoulder at Remus. “This isn’t funny.”

Remus sipped his tea. “Depends on what side you’re on.”

“And what side are you on?”

“The ‘I already had my breakfast and this is what you get when you charm our sheets to be cold and clammy all night’ side.”

“That wasn’t me.”

“And who else lives in this house who plays pranks as easily as he breathes?”

“How do you know the person who did it did it easily?” Sirius spread his hands wide. “Maybe somebody put a lot of time and effort into that spell just so you’d think it was me, and now you’re punishing me for something I didn’t do.”

Remus folded back the newspaper. “Did I mention Danger tracked your scent out of our room and straight to yours and Letha’s?”

Sirius sagged. “Damn it.”

Remus sighed. “There are days I despair of you, Padfoot. Thirteen-odd years living with me, three with Danger and I both able to go Animagus whenever we want, and you still haven’t learned to mask your trail.”

“I have so—I was wearing masker spells all the way up to...” Sirius stopped. “You didn’t know it was me, did you?”

Remus’ lips twitched.

“You didn’t. You were just testing me. You *lied* to me.” Sirius ran his hands through his hair. “And I fell for it. What kind of idiot am I?”

“I don’t know. What kind of idiot are you?”

“Hungry.” Sirius shut the pantry doors. “And very sorry for playing a prank on you and I won’t do it again.”

“Until the next time you forget that I always catch you.” Remus took out his wand and waved it negligently towards the pantry. “There’s a plate on the second shelf down for you. Danger put a warming spell on it, so it should still be hot.”

Sirius reached in eagerly, then yelped. “Ow!”

“I *told* you it was hot.”

Sirius showed Remus the part of his hand that had been scorched.

xXxXx

“Harry, I’m so sorry about Wednesday,” Cho blurted out while the DA practiced Disarming Charms on Tuesday. “I just couldn’t make it, I wanted to so much, but I have to go to Library Club meetings, I’m the secretary and I’ll be removed from my post if I miss—”

“It’s all right,” Harry said, holding up his hand. “Really, it is. Do you want to try again sometime this week?”

“Oh, I don’t think I can.” Cho made a face. “I have a huge test coming up in Transfiguration, Professor McGonagall wants to see what we remember from O.W.L.s—and then next week we have a Potions exam—what about the week after that? I’m sorry, Harry, I sound like I’m putting you off and I don’t mean to, but—”

“You’re here to go to school,” Harry interrupted. “You’re not here to see me. I can wait.”

“Thank you.” Cho smiled, and Harry’s stomach flipped as he smiled back. “Thank you so much. At least we see each other here, right?”

“Right. How are you coming with the Disarmer?”

“Oh, I’m much better than last week. Can I show you?”

“Sure.” Harry pulled out his wand. “Give it a go.”

“*Expelliarmus !*” Cho cried, swinging her arm into line with Harry.

“*Oppiliorbus* ,” Harry murmured, and the yellow disk shot from his wand to absorb Cho’s spell. He felt the jolt shock through him, but no more. “That’s good,” he said, lowering his wand. “You’re casting it strongly enough to really take someone down.”

Cho frowned. “But I didn’t get you.”

“Trust me, you got me,” Harry said. “If I hadn’t blocked, you would have got plenty of me.” He stopped as several interpretations of that rushed through his mind, each dirtier than the last. “Here, you try the block now,” he said quickly. “Ready? *Expelliarmus !*”

xXxXx

Dolores Jane Umbridge stepped out of her rooms, her head held high. *I am under no obligation to pay attention to such a revolting thing as a poltergeist. It performs these foolish tricks to gain attention—if I give it what it seeks, it will continue. If I ignore it, therefore, it will eventually go away.*

“There she is!” Peeves shouted, swooping down from his place near the ceiling. “Ugly Umbridge!”

Calm, Dolores. Remain calm. His insults have no power over you.

An eyepatch materialized on his face, a huge captain’s hat on his head, and a mismatched and tattered outfit on his body. “Oooooooh,” the poltergeist sang, off-key.

Who lives in our castle although she’s no good?

Ugly Umbridge!

She never takes hints how to live like she should!

Ugly Umbridge!

If you are like me and you want to farewell

Ugly Umbridge!

Then listen, my lads, to the story I tell of

Ugly Umbridge!

Peeves began to dive at Dolores’ head, pretending to do each of the things he named, but sheering off before he actually made contact with her.

Let’s kick Umbridge,

Let’s beat Umbridge,

Let’s bomb Umbridge,

Ugly Umbridge!

The poltergeist whistled the last few notes of his song, then zipped off, laughing madly.

Dolores heaved a huge sigh. *That was not nearly as bad as I feared.*

Her calm lasted until she had taken three steps into the Great Hall, when she heard the first student humming.

Who lives in our castle although she's no good?

“Stop that,” she said sharply. “Stop that humming.”

The Hufflepuff girl looked up, surprised. “I wasn't humming, Professor.”

“You were. Stop it immediately. Detention in my office, tonight.”

Just as the Hufflepuff began to protest, Dolores heard more humming, coming from behind her this time.

Then listen, my lads, to the story I tell of..

“Stop that!” she shouted, whirling to face the Ravenclaw table. “Stop it immediately! Detention, tonight, eight o'clock! You, you, and you!” She pointed at three boys at random.

“But we weren't—”

“We didn't do—”

“What did we even—”

“Enough,” Dolores snapped, and turned to walk away.

Then she heard it again. Many voices, this time, instead of just one.

Let's kick Umbridge,

Let's beat Umbridge,

Let's bomb Umbridge...

Every student at the Gryffindor table was humming the song.

Dolores gritted her teeth and ignored them, continuing on her way to the High Table.

As satisfying as it would be, I cannot give an entire House detention.

But wait...why not?

She examined her reasoning and found it flawed. *Minerva might protest, true, and so might Albus, but my word is final. And I cannot give punishment to one student, or set of students, and let others go. It would be fatal for discipline.*

“Detention for all of Gryffindor House,” she announced loudly. “Tonight in the Great Hall, at eight o’clock. If you miss, you will receive two detentions to make up for it. That is all.”

The sight of Minerva rising from her chair, her face paling in anger, made Dolores’ day rather better than otherwise. *I could use a good argument. Particularly one that I know I will win.*

Smiling sweetly, she walked unhurriedly up the aisle towards the High Table, the grumbles of the Gryffindors music to her ears.

xXxXx

“All right, I’m changing my mind,” Aletha announced when the cubs’ disgruntled letters reached home. “Two more weeks and they’ll be up in arms against Umbridge.”

“Week and a half,” Sirius said.

“You’re on.”

xXxXx

“This is not fair,” Ron said, throwing the letter to the ground. “This is so not fair. Everyone else’s parents are letting them!”

“I don’t think that’s going to impress your mum and dad very much,” Hermione said. “Especially not when you think about who everyone else’s parents are. Luna’s dad would probably take her with him into a volcano if he thought they’d find something interesting there, Neville’s parents are so proud of him that they’ll say yes to anything he wants to do, and the Pack would let us do just about anything Professor Dumbledore said was all right, especially if it’s to help someone.”

“But it’s still not fair!” Ron kicked his chair hard, then sat down in it, making a face at his bruised toes. “I want to go with you. I want to help you.”

“I wish you could come,” Hermione said truthfully. “But your mum and dad said no.”

Ron gave a sour smile. “Ginny’s not going to like it either.”

Hermione laughed a little. “They’ll probably be able to hear her yelling in the Slytherin dorms.”

“Probably.” Ron growled under his breath. “Damn it. I wanted to help. I wanted to do something important.”

A thought tickled the edge of Hermione’s brain. “Maybe you still can,” she said slowly. “Did you keep that model of the house you and Ginny and Harry made last week?”

“Yeah. It’s down in the Den. Why?”

“I have an idea, or the start of one. Come on.” Hermione jumped up. “Let’s go down there.”

In the Den, Hermione set up the model house, then squinted at it. “You need little people,” she said. “Like chess figures.”

Ron opened a wall cupboard and took out a battered box, rapping on the top twice before he opened it to display yawning and grumbling chess pieces. “Like these?”

“Yes, just like these.” Hermione reached into the box and grabbed five pieces at random. “Here, these are us.” She set up her three pawns, bishop, and knight outside the house. “And this is a guard.” She picked up a rook and set it inside the doorway. “This is Graham.” Another pawn, placed in the upstairs room Harry said was Graham’s. “And a few Death Eaters upstairs in their meeting room.” A queen, two knights, and another rook. “Do you see yet?”

“Almost.” Ron looked at the house for a moment with his brow furrowed. Then his face cleared. “Rook, on patrol,” he ordered. “You, pawn, sleep. You four, talk. And you five, be quiet.”

The ‘Death Eaters’ began chattering noisily, while the ‘rescuers’ huddled outside the house.

“Black pawn,” Ron said. “Watch for the rook’s pattern. See when he’s not looking, then sneak in past him. Not all at once.”

One by one, the pieces crept past the watchful rook.

“Bishop up the stairs first, now. Then pawns, then knight. Don’t make too much noise, or the lot in the attic will hear you.”

Tiny feet minced up ceramic stairs.

“Pawns, go in and get your friend. Wake him up quietly and convince him nicely to come along.” Ron grinned at Hermione. “Like this?”

“Yes, just like this.” Hermione grinned back. “Only when we’re really doing it, you’ll move them to show where we are.”

“But how’ll I know?”

“Ginny will tell you.” The picture came clear in Hermione’s mind as she spoke. “Ginny will chain up with Harry, and that will let her talk to him, even if he’s out walking. And he will be out walking, with us, seeing where the guards and the traps are, and that will let you set them up on the model and see if there’s a pattern we wouldn’t notice from where we are. And you can tell us exactly where to go when, and how to get away.”

Ron watched the three pawns coming back out of the room. “I like that,” he said. “I’d really be important. You’d need me.”

“We always need you,” said Hermione. “Maybe we don’t always know it, but we always need you.”

“Are you sure?” Ron looked up at her. “Are you really sure?”

“I’m really sure, Ron. We always need you.”

“Well...well, good.” Ron nodded, watching the group of six chess pieces start back down the stairs. “That’s good.”

“Yes, that’s good.” Hermione winced as one of the pawns tripped and fell into two of the others, catapulting them all down the stairs. “That’s not good.”

“No, it’s not. Bishop, defend from the one at the bottom!” Ron ordered. “Knight, pawn still on the stairs, defend from the ones at the top! All of you, look for a chance to run for it! The back way’s open, try to get there!”

The red head and the brown leaned together eagerly over the miniature battle, watching.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 13: Just You Wait (Year 5)

Chapter 13: Just You Wait

One more week. That's all the longer we have to wait. Just one more week. Meghan peered out a window of Gryffindor Tower towards Hogsmeade. Just hold on for one more week, Graham. We're coming. We'll get you out.

“What are you looking at?” Natalie asked from behind her.

“Oh, nothing. Just thinking of Graham.”

Natalie nodded tightly. “They’re lying to us,” she said, joining Meghan at the window. “They’re all lying to us. The teachers, Graham’s family...I talked to his cousin, to Maya. She said they told her Graham was going away, and not to ask any more questions about it. Why can’t we ask questions? What’s the secret? Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” Meghan said, crossing her fingers behind her back. “I wish I did.”

I do know, but I can't tell you, because if they found out we knew, they might kill him. And I know you don't want him to die.

Natalie sniffled once. Meghan hugged her tightly. *I'm going to help get him back, she vowed to her friend silently, and then he'll be safe and I won't have to lie anymore. And maybe the Ministry will believe him, and then Harry won't have to hide anymore.*

We just have to keep hoping.

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Maya Pritchard sat outside the Owlery, her eyes shut, her hands running across the outside of a letter. She hadn’t opened it yet. She knew all too well what it would say.

Time to come home. We let you have your little vacation, a whole month at school while we prepared, but now it's time for you to be a good girl and come do what Mother and Father tell you. Pack up your things and be ready to come when we call.

She pressed against the inside corners of her eyes. *I don't want to disappoint my parents. I love them. Well, Mother anyway. I don't know if Father even wants my love. Just my obedience. But this is my life, my whole life, we're talking about—shouldn't I get a little say in what happens?*

For one dizzying instant, she imagined her life if she had not only a little say, but the final say. She could decide where to live, what to eat, who to see—

Who to fight for, who to care about, maybe even who to marry—

Harry Potter, facing down a room full of wary students and convincing them of his sanity and his cause. Graham as she had seen him last year, walking in the halls, talking with little Meghan Black and Natalie McDonald. And the boy who had told her about the first meeting of the DA, who had helped her overcome her trepidation about attending, who needed her help practicing some of the more difficult spells...

Lee.

I don't know if he's ever thought about marriage, I don't know if he'd even be interested in me, but I can't stop thinking about him. About the way his hand feels under mine when I show him how to work a spell, about the way he smiles and calls my name when he sees me, about the way he laughs when he tells a funny story about the Weasley twins...

Maya shook herself back to reality. That's just dreams. Love is nice, but it goes away after a while. It shouldn't run your whole life. Marriage can't be based on something as changeable as love. It isn't practical, it isn't reasonable, and Mother and Father would never stand for it.

Besides, he's a half-blood, and you know Mother and Father would never stand for that. It's Perseus Henderson or Claudius Greco for you. Your only decision is which one, and you're lucky even to have that. A quick marriage, and then...

She shuddered deeply at the thought of what would come next.

Our numbers are shrinking. We're dying out. A strong next generation is our only hope. That's what they'll tell me when they make me drink that fertility potion, and when they lock the door to that room and put up charms so they can claim they never heard me scream. If the potion fails and I don't 'catch', it will happen again and again until I do. And after that, I won't be allowed to leave the house in case I miscarry.

Her knees were against her chest, her arms wrapped around them. *They're still handling the older women with velvet gloves, but that's started to change since Corona Gamp left home. The pressure's on them to give in. Some man, any man, so long as he's pureblooded.*

Fear and disgust hit a tipping point and spilled over into rage. *It doesn't matter if we like him, it doesn't even necessarily matter if we say yes. It's our privilege, it's our duty, to advance the best blood in the world another generation. So don't fight back, they tell us. Just relax and try to enjoy it.*

She stared down at the letter, then slowly, deliberately, took it between her two hands and pulled. The parchment resisted at first, then tore apart, sounding to her ears like the ripping of a world.

No more. No more. There is another way, and I won't give up my entire life to what my parents think is right when I can see that it would destroy me.

The two halves of the letter fell from her hands to the floor, and Maya drew a deep breath, feeling as though she'd spent her life wearing a corset that had suddenly been cut away.

Now I need to create this new life of mine. "Not those people" is not enough, and "with these other people" is not enough either. I need a me.

What do I want?

The question reverberated in her mind for long enough that she suspected she'd never really thought about it before.

But I'll have a lot of time to think about it over the holidays. I'll be spending them here, I'm sure, after the family disowns me. And what will I do about summer?

Maya got to her feet, letting thoughts chase each other through her mind. I could stay at the Leaky Cauldron, or find a family willing to take a boarder... maybe I could even get to know Lindsey Jordan better...

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Hermione bounced twice on the bed and clambered off, brushing her hand past the bell she'd dreamed up for the red bedroom of the Den. It let people waiting above know that their landing pad was clear. *No more accidentally landing on top of Ron. But, on the other hand, no more pretending it was an accident that I landed on top of Ron...*

She scowled at herself. *And why would I want to land on top of Ron, anyway?*

Voices greeted her as she opened the door into the main room. Harry looked around from something Professor Dumbledore was showing him. "Lo, Neenie. Anyone else with you?"

"Ron and Neville. Draco will be here a little later, he had to ask Professor Snape a question, and I don't know when the girls will get here. Hello, Professor Dumbledore."

"Hermione," the Headmaster acknowledged her. "Come and see this."

"What is it?" Hermione asked, coming around Harry to get a better look at the large standing frame set up in the middle of the room. It was about the size of a doorway, reminding her briefly of the Door in the Air from the end of *Prince Caspian*, but that door hadn't had anything in it, and this one did—but it didn't—

"It's warded," Harry said. "Watch." He gritted his teeth and swung his hand at the doorway. It bounced off apparently empty air, sparking as it did.

"I'd have believed you, you didn't have to show me." Hermione squinted at the doorway. "What sort of ward is it?"

Harry made a face and held out his arm again. Professor Dumbledore gravely laid his wand against it, and a ghostly gray Dark Mark shot from the wand's tip and attached itself to Harry's forearm.

Ron came up behind Hermione. “What the—” He stopped himself as Harry slid his arm through the door with no trouble, and the rest of him followed. “What is that?”

“I thought I saw something odd when I was out walking around the house where Graham is the other night,” Harry said, coming back around the doorway, his forearm once again unmarked. “There are wards around the house to stop anyone from coming in who doesn’t have the Dark Mark, or isn’t brought in by someone who does.”

“So how will we get past them?” Neville asked.

“Could we learn to do that, Professor?” asked Ron. “What you did, with—you know.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Conjuring the Dark Mark requires a mindset I would prefer you use as little as possible,” he said. “And a temporary version calls for control beyond anything you will have at this stage in your training.”

“Couldn’t you do it, before we leave?” said Hermione.

“It doesn’t last long enough,” Harry said. “Even the best one we’ve got only stayed for a minute, and you can’t possibly get from here to Hogsmeade and through the wards in under a minute.”

“There is an alternative,” said Dumbledore. “A much simpler spell, which instead of fooling the wards merely opens a breach in them, without bringing them down.”

“They open that easy?” Ron snorted. “Not much of wards.”

“Observe.” Dumbledore waved his wand at the door once, tinting the ward within a glossy green, then made a series of gestures and spoke a short incantation. A small hole opened near his wand’s tip, widening as Dumbledore waved the wand in a slow circle. Finally, when the hole was about nine inches across, he stopped.

“Keep going,” Ron said. “That’s not nearly big enough for us to get in through.”

“That’s the problem,” said Harry. “That’s as big as it can get without tripping the ward and setting off every alarm they’ve got.”

“I don’t see a problem,” Hermione said.

Neville looked thoughtful. “I’d have to be careful, but I think I could go too. And Draco could make it for sure.”

“What are—” Ron stopped. “Oh.”

Hermione dropped to all fours, and Neenie darted across the room and leapt cleanly through the hole in the wards, tail tucked in tightly and ears laid flat. “There,” she said when she’d changed back. “That’s how.”

“And I’d *just* thought of that when you went and showed it off,” Ron said, but he was grinning. “Nice.”

“Can you get it to the ground, Professor?” Neville asked. “I can’t jump like Hermione can when she’s Neenie.”

Dumbledore directed the opening in the wards downwards until its bottom edge brushed the sill, and Neville went to all fours and shrank into his demiguise form.

“You don’t have a form name, Captain,” Harry said as the silver ape squirmed carefully through the hole. “What should we do about that?”

Neville stood up again. “I thought you just said it,” he said. “‘Captain’ sounds good to me.”

“But that’s not anything about your form,” Hermione objected. “It’s what we call you when you’re human too.”

“So is yours. I don’t think it really matters where you get it from, as long as you get it, and you know what you’re talking about.” Neville peered closer at the green ward. “Why is it that color?”

“Merely to make it easy to see,” Dumbledore said, taking his wand away from the hole in the ward, which closed silently. “The real ward is invisible, though it may be more noticeable to other senses...”

Hermione had changed again before the Headmaster was finished speaking. She prowled around the doorway, sniffing—was there a smell to the ward? Yes, there was, a little hint of the same scent you got when a spell passed by—

The kitchen door opened across the room. Neenie miauled happily and dashed over to leap into Draco’s arms. **Wards**, she said succinctly, letting the word be a conduit into her twin’s mind for everything they’d seen and done and thought. **Can you see it? I can smell it.**

“She can tell it’s there, Professor,” Draco said aloud. “Can you try opening it again? Maybe she can smell the difference between where the hole is and where it isn’t.” He crossed to stand with Ron and Neville. **I don’t recall saying I’d be your voice today**, he told her silently.

I’d do the same for you and you know it. Neenie leapt down and trotted over to the doorway. “Mrowr?” she said questioningly to Professor Dumbledore.

The Headmaster nodded and put the tip of his wand against the wards again, and Neenie stared. She could *see* a slight disturbance in the air. It was everywhere in the confines of the doorway; how hadn’t she noticed it before? The hole was clearly visible as the only place the air wasn’t shaking—

“That’s it!” She didn’t recall changing back to human, but obviously she had, or she wouldn’t be able to talk. “The spell, it made the ward shake a little, it made it vibrate, and I could see it! I could see where it was, and where it wasn’t!”

“So we will be able to see it,” said Neville. “Good.”

“But there’s still a problem,” Ron said.

“Problem, what problem?” Harry struck a heroic pose. “I laugh in the face of problems.”

“Yeah, well, laugh at this one.” Ron made a circle with his two hands and held it over his head as though he were miming a halo. “You can get in through a little hole like that, but how’re you going to get Pritchard out?”

“Oh.” Harry brought his arm down. “That is a problem.”

“Glad you agree with me.” Ron looked at Dumbledore. “Professor?”

Dumbledore shook his head, his eyes twinkling. “Work on it yourselves for a time,” he said. “I think you will be pleasantly surprised by what you know in combination. And I have nearly overstayed my time in any case; I must return to my office, lest Dolores make too free with it in my absence.”

“Blech.” Hermione shuddered.

“Why is she even allowed in there?” Draco asked. “Do you have to let anyone in who knows the password?”

“It is not required, but it is common courtesy. As well, I would give Dolores her way in as many small things as possible.” Dumbledore’s face was politely bland. “It lulls her so that she cannot believe me capable of flouting her will in any larger way.”

Five students snickered.

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“So we’re already supposed to know how to solve the problem of getting Graham out of a little hole?” Meghan said doubtfully, eyeing the warded doorframe.

“Maybe we just have to look at it a different way,” Ginny said. “Are you sure you can’t get the hole any bigger, Harry?”

Harry looked up from demonstrating the wand movement to Hermione and Neville. “Positive,” he said. “The bigger you make the hole, the harder it is to hold the ward together. Any bigger than about nine inches across and…” He tipped his hand over and mimicked the sound of an explosion.

“So if the hole can’t be bigger,” Luna said thoughtfully, “then maybe Graham needs to be smaller.”

Draco turned away from the chessboard. “What did you say, Luna?”

“Graham needs to be smaller,” Luna repeated. “Maybe we could use a Shrinking Charm.”

“That would mean we’d need to know a Shrinking Charm,” Ron said. “We haven’t learned those yet, they’re N.E.W.T. level.”

“Charms aren’t everything,” Draco said. “Neville, remember the day Trevor discovered his inner child, back in third year?”

“What—oh yeah.” Neville laughed. “I think he liked it. I still find him sleeping in my cauldron sometimes.”

“And Snape never would believe you’d fixed the potion yourself,” Hermione said. “All I did was remind you where to look up what you needed.”

“The Shrinking Solution,” Harry said. “That’s perfect. We know we can make it, it’s easy to reverse…”

“But we’ll have to be careful with the dose,” Meghan said. “If we shrink Graham *too* small, he won’t be there at all anymore.”

“We might have to ask Professor Snape to help us with it,” said Ginny, making a face. “Maybe we should even ask him to brew the potion. Not that you’re not good,” she added to Draco and Hermione, “but this needs to be perfect. We can’t risk poisoning Meghan’s friend just because we’re too proud to ask for help.”

“Would he help us, though?” Ron asked dubiously. “*Us?* ”

“It’s Order business, Ron,” said Hermione. “I think he will.”

“Are you sure?”

“The worst he can say is no,” Harry said quickly, forestalling the burgeoning argument. “And if we act like we can’t do it ourselves and we really need him, maybe he’ll like that.”

“How’d you know that?” Draco asked.

Harry smiled one-sidedly. “Moony in a bad mood is a lot more like Snape than he wants to admit.”

“You have a point there.”

“So now we need to factor in the time it’ll take to get Pritchard to agree to take a potion,” Ron said, standing up and crossing to the wall cupboard where the supplies for the rescue mission were kept. “And the time it’ll take to work, and extra time to get back downstairs and out carrying him.”

“We’ll need a way to keep him quiet,” said Luna. “The Shrinking Solution doesn’t just make him

smaller. It makes him younger too. He'll be a baby."

"So we need to know if Shrinking Solution interacts badly with any common sleeping potions," said Hermione, joining Ron at the small table which had grown from the floor near the cupboard. "And once we find that out, we need to get some of the sleeping potion that will work the fastest and the best. Pearl, can you work on that?"

"Sure." Meghan jumped up from her place on the floor and hurried into the library, emerging a few moments later with her arms clasped around three heavy books.

"Deployment," Ron muttered, setting out several small figurines. "Luna overhead to keep overall watch, Meghan on the outside because she's not going to fit through there even if she finishes Animagus in time..."

Meghan made a face at Ron and dumped the books on the table, knocking over three of his figurines and making the others squeal.

"So that leaves Hermione and Draco and Neville to go in." Ron helped two of the figurines up and shepherded them towards the clay house. A third one joined them. "Captain, you think you can carry a baby in form?"

"Get me a baby doll and I'll find out," Neville said. "But I think so. My arms are built a lot like a human's. I won't be able to move fast, though."

"That is a problem," Harry said, joining the others at the table. "We'll need to get out of there as fast as possible, in case they have a silent alarm on the wards that reports long-term tampering, or something goes wrong and you get seen. And unless you give him the antidote right outside the wards, and then wake him up, he's not going to be able to run on his own."

"Even if we do that, he'll be all groggy," Hermione said. "We'd just get him caught again."

"You sound like you need something that can carry a baby *and* run," Meghan said, turning a page in her book. "Maybe something that can carry a demiguise too."

The rest of the Pride looked at each other. Harry took the bait. "How far are you from finishing, Pearl?"

Meghan looked up and grinned. "I'm done."

Girls squealed, boys exclaimed, and Neville squeezed past Hermione and Harry to hug Meghan. "Why didn't you tell us?" he asked, shaking her lightly once he'd let her go.

"I just did."

Neville looked up to heaven. "Before this."

"Because I wasn't done until yesterday," Meghan said reasonably. "Professor McGonagall helped

me finish my head transfiguration, since *Professor Umbridge* doesn't want parents coming to the school. And my incantation is ready, so all I have to do is go home tonight and take my potion."

"And then you'll be an Animagus," Draco said, sliding his arms under Neville's. "Little Pearl, all grown up. I'm so proud."

"And that solves the problem of getting Graham away safely," Ginny said. "If Meghan has a harness on with a baby sling, she can run and carry him at the same time."

"But she'll want to balance the weight with something on her other side," said Luna. "Not anything too big, and she wouldn't want to carry anybody who can run fast themselves."

Neville covered a smile, then turned to Meghan. "My lady," he said formally, "when you carry your baby friend safely home, will you carry the baby thief with you as well?"

"I will gladly do that, my lord." Meghan curtsied, and Neville bowed in return.

"So here's the whole plan from the start, then," Ron said, pulling attention to himself. "Ginny and I are here with Harry." Three figurines were set off to one side, where they grumbled slightly. "Ginny's chained up with Harry, and Harry's out walking—did we ever test to see if that works?"

"Last week," Ginny said. "It's a little echoey, but I could hear him just fine."

"Good. So Harry's body's here, but he's really out with the rest of you lot." Ron placed five more figurines in a group on the table. "Luna goes owl and keeps an eye on things from above." One of the figures flapped its arms as though flying. Ron lifted it to the top of the clay house. "There you are," he said to it. "Meantime, Meghan stays on guard outside the house." A second figure flattened itself against the wall. "And you other three go in, with Harry."

The three remaining figures took turns letting each other through the imaginary wards around the house, then began to creep towards the door on all fours. "Are they in Animagus now, Ron?" Draco asked. "Sorry, are we?"

"Probably better that way. Smaller means harder to see. And you'll have to do something about your coat," Ron added in passing. "It's getting towards winter—are you turning yet?"

Draco changed forms and inspected his fur critically, chittering to himself. "Nope," he said, turning human again with a faint pop. "Still brown. But it's a light brown. I should probably darken up for this. Neenie, you too. Your white shows up really well in the dark."

Hermione hissed in her throat. "I hate getting dirty. But it's that or get caught, I know."

"You don't need to do anything," Ron said to Neville. "Except remember to stay invisible."

Neville smiled. "Not too hard. It's how I always want to be when there are people I don't know around. Especially ones who want to kill me."

“Yeah, that would tend to make you want to be invisible,” Harry said. “And I’m roaming around the house, letting you know, Ron, where the Death Eaters are, and sending these three your messages...” He stopped. “How’re we going to handle that, if Luna’s outside?”

“Ah, hell,” said Draco. “I knew there was something wrong with this.”

“I don’t know if I could get in through the wards,” Luna said. “If my feathers fluff up when I’m not expecting it, I’ll set the alarms off.”

“We’ll just have to get by with what we understand when Harry overlaps us,” said Hermione. “It’ll have to be simple messages, but really, how complicated will it need to be?”

“Or someone could use a blue jewel,” Ginny said reluctantly. “I know we can’t replace them, but this is at least as important as helping Hagrid get rid of Norbert, and we used a jewel for that.”

“We were kids then,” Ron said. “Eleven and twelve.”

“Hey!” Meghan protested.

“But I think you’re right,” Ron continued, ignoring this. “This isn’t some stupid prank where the worst thing that could happen is we get detention.” He opened the clay house along the line down its middle and ran a finger along the outline of the small, windowless room Ginny had sculpted to show where Graham slept. “This is somebody’s life on the line. Our lives, too, if we get caught.” He looked around at the Pack. “Maybe I won’t be out there, but if anything happened to any of you...” He shook his head, words apparently failing him.

“Meghan, you’ve got the most blue left,” Hermione said. “I’ve only got one, and Luna doesn’t have any. Would you—”

“Of *course* !” Meghan half-shouted indignantly. “I’d do *anything* if it meant Graham would get home safely!”

“So we’ll all be able to talk to each other,” Ginny said. “I suppose that means Harry and I won’t need to link up.”

“No, I think we still should,” Harry said quickly. “It might get noisy with everyone talking at once. If you and I have a direct link, then you can tell Ron things aloud he might not catch over a jewel-link.”

“And if it gets too noisy, I can just...” Ron mimed pulling off a necklace. “So now I think we’re covered. Draco, Hermione, Neville, you three will go in and up to Pritchard’s room—you’ll have to switch off who’s holding the wards open while you’re going in, but that shouldn’t be too hard—and then get him to take the potions.”

“Problem,” said Meghan. “The potions. If he takes the Shrinking Solution first, he’ll turn into a baby, and it’s hard to get babies to drink potions. But if he takes the sleeping potion first, he’ll be asleep and he won’t be able to drink the Shrinking Solution.”

“I’ll work on that,” Draco said. “We might be able to mix them, or put a time-delay on one. I can ask Snape about it, act like I’m looking for extra credit.”

“Or you could just make the sleeping potion sweet and put it in a baby bottle,” Ginny suggested. “Then he’d drink it.”

“Oh.” Meghan nodded. “That would work.”

Ron directed his figures through the motions of the rescue as he narrated it. “Captain grabs the baby, the four of you go back down, open up the wards again, stick Pritchard on Meghan’s sling—we’ll need to have somebody help us make that—and you’re gone.”

The figures ran in all directions. Hermione caught one as it plummeted off the edge of the table. “Not quite like that, I don’t think,” she said, setting it back on its feet.

“I hope not,” Harry said. “Come on, Draco, I need to show you the opener spell. It’s not hard, but there’s a trick to it. It took me a little while to really get it.”

“Can you show me too?” Ginny asked. “I won’t have to stay behind forever.”

“And me,” Ron said, waving the figures into their box. “More we can learn, the better.”

“Sure. Just get your wand out and get ready to listen.”

“Hermione, we should practice more while Harry’s starting them out,” Neville said, taking out his wand. “Come on, Meghan, maybe I can teach you how it works. It would be good to have someone standing by to catch the wards if we slip.”

“But I’m not very good at Charms...”

“That’s probably just because you think you’re not,” Neville said patiently. “You’re so good at other things that you think everything should happen easily and right away, and Charms is a little harder for you than that, so you think you’re not good at it when you’re really all right.”

“That’s not true! I work hard at Charms, and I never get any of them right!”

“Pearl, you think something has to be perfect to be right,” said Hermione. “I could Summon a pillow and have it come to me all wobbly, or I could Summon it and have it fly here beautifully. Either way, I still have it.”

“But the one way you looked silly!”

“So I looked silly.” Hermione made a horrendous face, pulling on the sides of her eyes and sticking out her tongue. “I looked even sillier right then. Nobody ever died of looking silly.”

Meghan growled, but drew her wand and adopted a listening pose.

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Perched on a shelf that had grown from the wall of the Room of Requirement, Harry watched two teams from the DA carefully navigating a maze of cubicles. Fred and George, it turned out, had still had some of the Combat Club equipment left over from two years ago, and were perfectly happy to supply the DA with all the fake wands and potion bombs they could want. One team was playing the Ministry/Order side, with orders to stun and restrain their opponents if at all possible, and the other was playing by Death Eater rules—pain was good, death even better.

Their tactics mean they have more options than we do. So we just have to be better than they are.

One of the Ministry team—Zacharias Smith, Harry realized after a moment of squinting in the dim light—was lagging behind his teammates. They'd already turned a corner, in a few seconds he'd be left alone—

Points off them for leaving him, and points off him for getting left. Harry made a note on the scroll he had charmed to hover beside him. He's not injured, he knows the rules, he has no excuse for hanging back—

A Death Eater burst around the corner, and Smith whirled and shot at him.

Ahh . Looking for glory, are you? Harry felt Wolf's growl rumble his chest. Fool to seek a pride fight when his pack is in danger. Stupid, stupid cub.

On some level, Wolf characterizing Smith as a cub amused Harry—it was better than even odds Smith was older than he was, after all—but on another level, he had to admit Wolf had a point. Smith had no more idea of how to fight than a baby.

He wasn't listening at all. And he didn't do any of the reading I suggested. I wouldn't have fought like that when I was seven years old...

Harry watched coldly as Smith got his sleeve tagged by a bit of the Death Eater's blue dye. "Out," he called just as Smith brought up his own wand and sprayed the Death Eater in the face with his own red dye.

All right, that's it. "I said, out!" Harry clapped his hands twice to bring up the lights, then jumped down into the middle of the simulated office. "What're you playing at, Smith?"

"He barely touched me," Smith complained, spreading his sleeve to show the few tiny dots of blue dye. "That wouldn't have done anything even if it was a real spell."

"If it had been the Cruciatus, you'd be screaming," Harry said bluntly. "Bringing your teammates running and giving their position away. Not to mention you'd be in pain and probably no good to fight for several minutes after. And if it had been the Killing Curse, you'd be dead. Which might not give away your teammates, but I don't think you'd care for it much."

"Bollocks," Smith shot back. "How do you know it would've done that?"

“How do you know it wouldn't?” Harry countered.

“This is just a mock-up. It's not real.”

“That's not the point. The point is to develop reflexes.” Harry shifted his stance, glancing down to confirm his Combat Club wand was in its place at his belt. “Reflexes will save your life when your brain shuts down from fear.”

“I'm not afraid of anything,” Smith said cockily.

Harry flipped into Wolf-mind for an instant. *Interloper. Dangerous. Destroy.*

His wand was in his hand faster than his mind could follow. Smith jerked back as a spray of green dye covered his chest.

“Are you afraid of death?” Harry asked softly, lowering his wand. “Maybe you should be.”

“That's not fair,” Smith said sullenly. “You cheated.”

Harry barked a laugh. “That's right, I cheated. That's why I'm still alive and you're not. Are you going to tell a Death Eater he cheated? Oh wait, I forgot. You won't be able to. You'll be *dead* .”

Smith's face turned blotchy red. “I don't have to take this from you, Potter.”

“You're right, you don't. There's the door.” Harry pointed at it. “No one made you come here, no one's making you stay. Don't try and tell Umbridge about us, though. You wouldn't like what happens.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No, it's a warning.” Harry stared Smith down, fighting the urge to force the other boy to his knees and grip his throat. *He is not Pack*, he reminded Wolf. *He is not subject to our laws. Under me for now, yes, but not to be dominated. Not like that.*

After a few seconds, Smith looked away. “Never said I wanted to leave,” he muttered.

“Then you want to stay?”

Smith nodded grudgingly.

Harry spread his hands. “Then stay. Follow the rules, and you're welcome here.”

Smith snorted, but didn't say anything.

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Harry nodded to the DA members as they slipped out of the Room of Requirement a few at a time.

Go on without me, he signed to the Pride. I have something to do.

Draco and Ron both had suggestions about his “something”, each different but both equally profane. Harry told them both where they could stick it, and they sniggered under their breaths.

Harry didn’t care. Cho had caught his sleeve as he passed by and whispered that she had a little time after the meeting was over. Now she was sitting by the bookshelf, mostly hidden by a little jag that had appeared in it, browsing through a copy of *Jinxes for the Jinxed* .

Be careful, Hermione signed.

Of what? Harry demanded.

Just...be careful.

Harry exchanged weary glances with Draco and Ron. He’d never understand girls.

Although maybe I’ll understand them better after tonight.

Finally, the door closed behind Neville, Meghan, and Natalie, and Harry sighed in relief.

“Don’t you like doing the DA?” Cho asked, looking up from her book.

“I like it. But it’s hard sometimes too. Have you ever had anything like that?”

“Oh, of course. Everything that’s really worth doing is hard at first.” Cho smiled. “Even being in a relationship is hard at first.” The smile cracked and began to slide. “It was a little rough for me and Cedric at first, you know. We liked each other very much, and we had Quidditch and a couple of favorite school subjects in common, but somehow it never felt like we had a lot to talk about.” She sighed. “Maybe we were too much the same.”

“Maybe,” Harry said, thinking this was probably a safe answer.

Cho’s lower lip trembled. “It still doesn’t seem real that he’s gone forever. I keep expecting him to be there at the Hufflepuff table in the morning, or to walk into one of these meetings—and then I wonder, if he’d known what you’re teaching us, maybe—” A sniffle. “—maybe would he have lived?”

Harry sat down on the next beanbag over from Cho. “Nobody stays alive after Voldemort decides to kill them,” he said quietly.

“Nobody except you.” Cho rubbed at her eyes.

“I had help. And a lot of luck.”

“And Cedric didn’t.” Cho sniffed again. “How did it happen?” she asked, looking up at Harry with glistening eyes. “All I know is that he stayed behind to try to help you, and got killed instead...”

Harry swallowed hard. “I wish he hadn’t,” he said honestly. “I wish he’d run for it while he had the chance. Voldemort wasn’t about to kill me right away.” He let his hand rest on the side of the beanbag, palm up. “If Cedric had just run, the first instant he realized something wasn’t right, he might have been able to bring help in time to stop what happened.”

“But he was being noble. He was being brave.”

“No, he was being stupid,” Harry snapped, suddenly unable to keep up the façade any longer. “He should have known he had no chance. He should have run and brought help instead of hanging about hoping to play hero.”

Cho stared at him, aghast. “How can you say that? He saved your life!”

“And got himself killed in the process! Which meant I got to come back here, try to explain what had happened, get branded as a liar and possibly a murderer, and deal with the fact that yes, he died trying to save me, but what he did had almost nothing to do with my actually getting saved, so now I have to live with that for the rest of my life—I’ll always be the person Cedric Diggory died for, and I don’t know if I’m worth it or not—”

Harry shut his mouth with an effort and sagged into the beanbag. “Sorry,” he said under his breath. “I just...haven’t talked about it much.”

“I can tell,” Cho said softly. “But Harry?”

“Yeah?” Harry sat up a little to look over at her.

“I think you’re worth it.” A tear spilled from one of Cho’s eyes and tracked down her cheek. “And Cedric must have too.”

Harry felt a lump rise in his throat. “Thanks,” he said, swallowing against the lump. “Thanks a lot.”

He leaned forward, meaning to wipe the tear from Cho’s face, but Cho was leaning forward too, her face getting closer and closer to his, and her eyes were closing...

xXxXx

A few minutes later, they were on the same beanbag, Cho’s head on Harry’s shoulder and several small wet marks on Harry’s robes.

“Thank you,” Cho murmured.

“You’re welcome. And thank you.” Harry knew the basic mechanics of romance, had since he was thirteen, but he had never understood before this just how such things could be enjoyable. Now he was beginning to see.

And if Padfoot was telling the truth, the farther you go, the better it gets...

“Let’s talk about something else,” Cho said, sitting up a little. “Let’s talk about...families. You go first.”

“Are you sure? Ladies first.”

Cho laughed shakily. “I asked you first.”

“All right, if you want.” Harry tried to calm his mind enough to get a grip on the Pack in a way that Cho would understand.

“I’m very close with my family,” he said finally. “We do a lot together. Not everything, that would get boring, or stifling, but we spend a lot of time together. I miss my parents when I’m away at school, and they miss me and Draco and Hermione and Meghan.”

“That’s right, your brother and your sisters.” Cho’s eyes were shut again. “I know how you came together, or at least some of it. Doesn’t it ever bother you that you don’t look like any of them?”

Harry shrugged the shoulder Cho wasn’t leaning against. “No, not really. I know who I do look like, and I know who I belong with. Draco has it harder that way.”

“I can see that. What about your special friends? The Weasleys and Luna Lovegood and the Longbottom boy?”

“Well, together, we make a thing called a Pride. That’s different than just being friends, even special friends, the same way my Pack’s different than just a family.” Harry laid a hand on his chest, feeling the bumps of the Pack-pendants under his robes. “We swore an oath to protect each other and take care of each other always.”

“You swore?” Cho pulled away to look at him. “Like an Unbreakable Vow?”

“Not quite, but sort of. We’ll definitely get in a lot of trouble if we break it. But we wouldn’t ever do that. It just won’t happen.”

“How do you know?” Cho had her head tilted to one side curiously. “People change. Didn’t one of your parents’ best friends end up betraying them?”

Harry winced inwardly. “This is different,” he said. “I know the Pride and the Pack. I trust them.”

“Didn’t your dad and your mum trust their friend?”

“Yes, but they’d never done the things I’ve done with these people—”

“Like what?”

“Like share blood with them!” Harry reached into the neck of his robes and pulled out his pendants. “We took blood from each of us, and something important to us—my parents’ wedding rings, a ring Draco’s mum left him, a ring from Ron’s grandfather, things like that—and we swore

an oath, in blood, to watch out for each other even if we die for it. And the pendants seal that.”

Cho had her hand over her mouth. “You swore in blood?” she whispered around it. “But that’s— that’s—”

“Binding,” Harry said with a sharp nod. “I know.”

“No! It’s Dark!” Cho was on her feet. “Using blood makes it Dark magic!”

“What?” Harry stared. “Cho, my godfather and his wife signed their marriage contract in blood— Draco’s adoption contract is signed in blood—it’s not Dark, it’s just a way to say you’re giving your whole self to something—”

“It’s horrible!” Cho backed away across the room. “What else have you *done* with these people?” Her eyes were wide with fear, but a trace of accusation lurked in them. “How many of them have you slept with?”

Unbidden, Harry’s mind conjured up an image of the Pride’s last den-night, the one where they’d awakened tangled around each other like so many puppies, and before he realized what he was doing, he laughed.

“That’s what I thought.” Cho had her hand on the doorknob, accusation now crowding out fear in her face. “You’re sick, Harry Potter. Just as sick as they say you are. Maybe in a different way, but they were right about you. They were right all along.”

“Cho, no, wait—”

The door of the Room of Requirement slammed behind Cho Chang.

Harry groaned and sank back down on his beanbag.

Well, that first date was a success.

If by success you mean utter bloody failure.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 14: You Should Get Out More (Year 5)

Chapter 14: You Should Get Out More

Wham. Wham. Wham.

Harry flung the bread dough against the table, again and again, pretending it was—not Cho Chang, no matter what she'd said he didn't actually want to hurt her, but his feelings for her. The feelings that had led him to tell her more than he should.

Wham. Wham.

His jaw ached where he was clenching his teeth, and his hands, when they weren't actually holding the dough, were fists. He was breathing harder than the exertion of kneading the dough would account for, and realized distantly how angry he must look.

If anyone was here to see me.

He raised the dough high and slammed it down on the table once, resoundingly.

WHAM.

The dough quivered, then resumed its form as a pale and unoffending lump, and Harry sank his fists lightly into its surface, feeling the smooth resilience against his skin.

Ready for a second rising. And in record time, too. I should get mad every time I bake.

The absurdity of the thought made him smile, then wince at the pain in his face. He pulled over a chair, sat down, and raised his hands to his jaw to rub out some of the tension in the muscles there.

What is wrong with her? All I did was tell her we'd used blood magic, and she flew off the handle—she completely overreacted—it was as if I'd said we sacrifice babies! And where the hell did she get the idea that I sleep with people in the Pack or the Pride? I know there've always been stories, stupid stories, because there are more of us than would usually live in one house, but anybody who got to know us would see that's all they are, stupid stories...

He stood up, shoving the chair backwards, and went over to the counter to get the bowl he'd put the dough in for its second rising. "The Pack is a *family*," he said aloud. "And the Pride are just friends. Maybe we do some strange things, but not like that. Everyone who knows us knows that much."

A small, cold certainty was growing in his gut that he'd said something important, and that whenever he figured out what it was, he wasn't going to like it.

Whatever. How can I fix this? Whatever went wrong here, how can I put it right? Harry plopped

the dough into the bowl and draped the floured cloth over it, then set it in the sheltered corner of the counter he used for things that needed some time to rest. *Have to find her, get her alone somewhere, but not act like I'm being a stalker, just find some time to talk to her alone and ask her what's the matter...*

He looked around and sighed. "And that would be a lot easier if I weren't in hiding," he said aloud. "Add another reason to get rid of Umbridge."

"As if we needed any more," said Hermione from the door.

Harry jumped. "Don't *do* that."

"I wasn't trying to be sneaky. You were just thinking so loud you couldn't hear me." Hermione stepped into the kitchen. "How did it go?"

Harry shrugged.

"That doesn't look good."

"She's got some funny ideas," Harry admitted. "About me being Pack, and what that means. And about the Pride, too. And I didn't help any—she said something about us sleeping together, and I couldn't help thinking about den, and it made me laugh, so now she thinks I think she's funny—but everyone knows we don't do stupid stuff like that! Everyone who knows us knows—"

He stopped.

"Everyone who knows us," Hermione repeated into the silence. "Everyone who took a little time to get to know us *all*."

Her tone was not judging, but Harry caught a whiff of guilty satisfaction and well-worn bitterness in her scent. "Did she—she never said anything, or did anything—I mean, you've never—"

"She was never rude to me," Hermione said, shaking her head. "But she was never really polite either. She just never seemed to notice that I was there, that any of us were there except you, Harry. She would answer us if we talked to her, and she would notice us if something we did affected her directly. But she didn't try to get to know us or make friends with us at all."

"She's older," Harry said, hearing how weak his voice sounded even in his own ears. "She's a different House. She's got her own friends."

"I wouldn't ask for her to be best friends with me. But if she wants to date a boy who has a close family, maybe she should try to get that family on her side." Hermione smiled a little. "Or at least notice they exist."

Harry looked away. "So how stupid do I look right now?" he asked harshly. "How much of a fool am I?"

“I’m not qualified to answer that question. This is only a little bit stupid, and I’ve seen you do too many *really* stupid things.”

“Like what?”

“Like walk through fire to confront Voldemort alone when you were eleven. Or speak Parseltongue in public when you were twelve. Or fight a Death Eater wand to wand when you were thirteen. Or—”

“All right, all right, you win!” Harry held up his hands in surrender. “You win. And I lose.” He thumped his forehead against the wall. “I really lose.”

“It...” Hermione trailed off. “You’re just going to get mad, no matter what I say, aren’t you?” she asked. “Because you’re really mad at yourself and at her, but I’m right here and available, so you’ll feel better if you can yell at me and get it all out, won’t you?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You might feel even better if you tried something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like this.”

Harry turned to see what ‘this’ was.

“Want to play tug-o’-war?” Hermione asked, slapping the thick, knotted rope in her hand against the doorframe.

“I’d bowl you over,” Harry protested. “You’re too little.”

“I never said I’d play alone. Some of the others are on their way in. And I bet I can hold you until they get here.” Hermione caught the bottom end of the rope with her free hand and pulled it taut. “So, what do you say?”

“I say...” Harry pushed away from the wall, feeling some of Wolf’s endless energy returning to him. “I say you’re on!” He transformed and bounded across the kitchen, leaping up to clamp his jaws around the center of the rope, then worrying it back and forth, trying to get it out of his sister’s hands.

“You’re a crazy wolf, aren’t you?” Hermione teased, and jerked the tug-o’-war rope up and down, making Wolf’s head nod. “You’re a silly wolf, aren’t you?” Up, down, up. “You’re going to let me win, aren’t you?” Up, down—“Oh!”

Ha-ha. Wolf pranced around the room, the rope dangling from his jaws. *Got you that time.*

Instinct warned him to spin and drop as the calico cat pounced.

xXxXx

Nearly an hour later, the Hogwarts Den was the site of a free-for-all, everyone-for-himself, don't-kill-anyone-but-no-other-holds-barred fight. Wolf had just got the better of Redwing after the hawk's third stooping attack on his tail when a snarling ball of fur hit him from the side, and he went down hard.

Surrender, Lynx growled, her teeth around his throat and her claws prickling his shoulders. You're mine.

Wolf slumped and closed his eyes. His tail thumped once, dispiritedly. Sneak attack. No fair.

Lynx climbed off him, and Wolf heard the faint pop that meant she'd changed back to human. "Weren't you the one lecturing everyone about sneak attacks and there not being anything fair about war earlier tonight?" she asked.

Wolf grumbled in his throat and curled up, tail over his nose.

"I know what you need," Ginny sing-songed. "You need somebody to scratch your ears. That's what you need." A small, warm hand pressed against Wolf's skull, then began to rub behind his left ear. "There, how does that feel?"

Idly, Wolf considered snapping at the hand, but he had to admit, what Ginny was doing did feel awfully good...

A conversation he'd had with Padfoot during the summer meandered back into his mind, and he shot upright with a yip.

"What?" Ginny pulled back. "Did I hurt you?"

Wolf shook his head, then changed back to human. "No, you're fine," Harry said. "Just..." To his annoyance, his cheeks were heating up. "I...thought of something. That's all. But I did mean to ask you..."

"Ask me what?" Ginny shifted until she was sitting with her knees to her chest, arms resting on top.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut to get his thoughts back on line. "Ask you..." His imagination provided a vivid picture, and he felt his face heat even more. *No. No. Stop that.*

"Are you feeling all right?" Ginny asked, her voice sounding worried. "You're not having a flare-up, are you?"

"No. No, I'm fine. Fine." Catching his breath, Harry opened his eyes. "I've seen you with Michael Corner after DA meetings," he said in a voice that sounded almost normal. "I was just wondering..."

“If he was curious about the Pride the way Cho was?” Ginny shook her head. “No, he’s never asked. But then, it’s not as easy to see with me, because I don’t live with anyone unusual—not that you do, but...”

“Yes, I do,” Harry interrupted her, but without the anger he thought he ought to feel. “The Pack’s not usual. We never have been.” His mind caught up with him and handed him the reason he wasn’t angry, and he smiled. “And you didn’t say normal. Which is good, because we’re not that, either.”

“Who is?” Ginny looked around the Den. “Neville never knew his parents until he was thirteen, Luna believes in Crumple-Horned Snorkacks, Ron learned to fly by falling off Gryffindor Tower... I don’t think the word ‘normal’ should be allowed in this room.”

“Move that it isn’t,” said Harry promptly.

“Second,” Ginny came back.

“Attention, everyone!” Harry called over the conversations in the Den, which promptly ceased. “We have a motion that the word ‘normal’ never be used, referred to, or otherwise referenced in this room! It has been so moved and seconded—all in favor?”

“Aye!” shouted the other six members of the Pride.

“Vote is unanimous, motion carries,” said Hermione, licking her finger and drawing a tally mark in the air.

“That’s normal,” Ron said.

Meghan swatted him on the back of the head with a pillow.

xXxXx

“Have you been feeling low-level upset from Harry today?” Aletha asked Remus and Danger at dinner.

The Lupins both nodded. “Not at a level where we *must* intervene, but one where it seems we’d be welcome,” Remus said. “He can’t have been caught or anything drastic of that sort, but perhaps a personal problem...”

“Who’s got a personal problem?” asked Sirius, coming through the door. “You, Moony? We’ve known that for years... it’s little and furry and really rather cute when it’s not trying to kill us...”

“Blow it out your ear,” Remus said good-naturedly. “Harry, as it happens. Haven’t you felt it?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think it was anything we needed to get involved with. Kids get upset sometimes.”

“But our pendants have been getting smarter about that,” Aletha pointed out. “They don’t usually go off anymore unless it’s for something that we can and should deal with. Which means Harry could probably use one or two of us to go talk to him for a while.”

“If we can get in,” Danger said. “The school’s under tighter security than ever these days, what with Albus worried about Voldemort and Death Eaters, and *Madam* Umbridge worried about keeping ‘her’ students under control...”

Remus smirked. “I can get us in,” he said.

“How?” Aletha and Danger asked at the same time.

“Ee-ih ah?” said Sirius through a mouthful.

“Yes, exactly.” Remus nodded. “The wards won’t be a problem—we helped to build them, so they should recognize us—and I know at least two places we can start from that will get us into Hogwarts without anyone seeing us...”

xXxXx

“Where do you lot keep disappearing to?” George asked Ginny later that night, when most of the Pride had returned to the common room (Meghan had stayed behind to take advantage of her mothers’ unexpected appearance from the kitchen entrance of the Den, while Mr. Moony and Mr. Padfoot and Harry went off together for some boy talk). “We never see you anymore. And don’t tell me you’re in the library or off studying somewhere, because I know you’re not. You almost missed Quidditch practice yesterday, and you wouldn’t miss Quidditch for studying.”

“If I tell you it’s none of your business, will you leave it alone?”

“Only if you answer one question about it.”

“I don’t know if I can answer a question about it until you tell me what the question is.”

George smiled ruefully. “We should never have taught you how to argue.”

Ginny made a face at him. “I would still have learned, you know.”

“I know. Trust me, I know. So here’s the question.” George lowered his voice. “Does wherever you’re all going off to have something to do with Harry?”

Ginny nodded once, slowly.

“He’s found somewhere good to hide, then.” George pantomimed wiping his brow. “We’ve been worried.”

“You two? Worried?”

“He’s our friend too, you know,” said Fred, looking up from the book he’d been studying. “And we see him at DA, but never any other time. We didn’t know if he was just hiding in different places around the castle and moving to keep Umbridge or Filch from finding him, or if he’d actually found someplace they don’t know about...”

“Nice try,” said Ginny, grinning, “but I’m not telling.”

“Nuts.” Fred snapped his fingers. “She’s onto us, O twin of mine.”

“We’ll have to try a more subtle plan next time,” George agreed.

xXxXx

“So, girl trouble,” Remus said on the Den’s Quidditch pitch, nodding. “It happens to everyone.”

“Everyone?” Sirius wiggled his eyebrows. “I don’t seem to recall you losing your heart to anyone in school, Moony...”

“That’s because I was convinced I was cursed,” Remus retorted. “Which I may have been. There’s speculation that lycanthropy began as a truly nasty curse, rather than a disease as such... but there’s also speculation that lycanthropy developed out of a magical strain of lupus. We may never know.”

“Speaking of which, how’ve you been feeling?” Sirius asked Harry.

“Fine, just fine. I take the potions, and it doesn’t bother me, except the day I got here, and I was really upset that day...” Harry frowned. “I was upset when everything happened earlier,” he said. “But I didn’t have a flare-up. Ginny even asked if I was, and I told her no, I felt fine. And I do.” He looked up at his Pack-fathers. “Shouldn’t I be...”

Remus shook his head. “There’s no ‘should’ in matters of the heart, Harry. They are the way they are. You can learn some measure of control—and you should be practicing that, to get yourself ready for when you can emerge again and begin your Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape —”

Harry grimaced. “Do I *have* to? I mean, I’m blocked off two or three different ways now—I hardly ever go out of here, and I have the blood bond with you, Moony, and Voldemort might even be blocking the link himself if Professor Grumpy’s plan worked—”

“I would really rather you not call him that during the school year,” Remus said in a tone of fraying patience.

“Oh, why not?” Sirius came in on Harry’s side. “He’s not in class, is he? At least, not so old Sevvie can hear him—”

“That’s not helpful either.” Remus’ words were short and bitten off.

“Remus, what’s wrong with you?” Sirius asked, looking closely at his friend. “Danger been away and I haven’t noticed?”

“No. It’s...” Remus sighed deeply. “Albus has me working closely with Severus on certain matters of Order business, and I prefer to be able to talk to him with a straight face. And thinking of you two exchanging disrespectful nicknames for him is not helpful.”

Sirius and Harry exchanged a disbelieving look and started laughing helplessly. Remus resisted for a few moments, then joined in.

“Jokes aside, though, Harry, yes, you do have to work on Occlumency,” Remus said when they had all gotten the mirth out of their systems. “Because you won’t always be here, Voldemort might decide to investigate that bond between you at any time, and the blood protection might not always work. We don’t know how it would stand up to a concerted attack, and I would far rather you practice Occlumency and not need it than not practice it and need it.”

Harry looked at Sirius. “Why does he always have to make sense?” he said, pointing at Remus.

“It’s a bad habit from our school days he’s never been able to ditch,” Sirius said promptly. “I’ve tried everything to wean him off it, but Danger and Letha just encourage him. Sad story, very sad. Probably end with him dead by the side of the road, of excessive sense-making.”

Remus dropped his face into his hands as Harry snickered. “I think I was temporarily out of my mind the day I made friends with this man,” he said through his fingers.

“Temporarily?” Harry said.

“Don’t start.” Remus reached over and ruffled Harry’s hair. “I know all your baby stories.”

Harry pouted. “You fight dirty.”

“I’m a Marauder. It comes with the territory.”

“*Pad* foot,” Harry whined. “Moony’s being *mean* to me.”

“Who said you could be mean to my godson?” Sirius demanded.

Remus raised an eyebrow. “You did, the night we decided to share him and Hermione.”

Sirius deflated. “Oh.”

xXxXx

In the blue bedroom, Danger and Aletha rebraided Meghan’s hair, one braid at a time, while Meghan, sitting very carefully still, talked about the plans to rescue Graham.

“—and I’m going to be the sentry on the ground, the one who keeps watch and lets them know if

anyone is coming. Luna will be in the air, but it always helps to have someone down below. It might take Draco and Neenie and Neville longer than we think to get inside and find Graham and wake him up and convince him to come along, so we have to make sure that no one sees us, or if they do that they don't realize who we really are. Luna can just look like any other post owl, and they'd probably think I came out of the Forest..."

"That's assuming you can do your transformation reliably by then, Pearl," Aletha reminded her daughter.

"But I can! I can! Watch!" Meghan pulled away from Danger's hands, leaving one braid half-undone and waving in the air. "Celeripes et ventosa sum," she recited carefully, her eyes shut in concentration, "ungulis quattuor et luminibus suffuscis magnis. Niteo similis concha atra, igitur amici mei vocant me Margaritam. Cervam sum, nec periculum timeo nec lupo fugio, et veritatem et astrum nimis amo."

For an instant after her recital had finished, nothing changed. Then, all at once, where Meghan had been standing was a dark-furred yearling doe, eyes still shut tight and one patch of fur sticking straight up on the top of her head.

Danger hid a laugh behind her hand. Aletha smiled warmly. "Congratulations, Meghan," she said as the doe opened her eyes. "Well done."

Pearl turned her head, blinking rapidly, then closed one eye and looked at the two women with the other.

"You'll get used to it," Aletha told her. "Try not to think about it too much."

"Would you like me to transform?" Danger asked. "Your mama's form might not fit too well in here, but mine will."

Pearl nodded a little gingerly.

"I won't eat you, I promise." Danger stood up and leaned forward, letting her wolf shape slide onto her. *I never thought I'd be able to do that so quickly—*

Of course, before I was twenty-one, I had no idea it was possible at all!

I did it, I did it, I did it! chanted the doe in front of her, prancing slightly. I really, really did it!

Yes, you really, really did, Danger agreed, moving forward to nuzzle the doe's shoulder. Good work.

Pearl pulled back a little, then wrinkled her forehead, sidling her back end towards her mother at the same time. You don't smell scary, she said doubtfully. Well, a little in the back of my mind, but you smell more not scary than you smell scary.

Danger retransformed so she could laugh. "That's because you're still human under that fur,

Meghan Lily,” she said, stroking the flyaway tuft which was Meghan’s still-undone braid. “And like you said yourself in your spell, you don’t run away from wolves or from danger. Your human side knows that I’m not about to eat you.”

“Unless you’ve been making messes in the kitchen again and calling it potions,” Aletha amended, caressing Meghan’s flank. “Oh, love, you’re beautiful. Your father and Moony will be so proud of you. Shall we go show them?”

Pearl pranced again, and Danger didn’t need to be in wolf form to understand an ecstatic Yes, yes, yes!

xXxXx

“The best way to not mope over something,” Harry muttered through his teeth as he walked backwards down the hall under the Invisibility Cloak, “is to think about something else.”

Though really, I haven’t been moping much. I only think about Cho every now and then, and I feel funny when I do, like she’s missing from the place in my mind where she used to be...

Well, if she’s missing, she pulled herself out. And I have other things to think about right now.

Namely, getting the invisible net Fred and George had supplied into position.

They ought to sell a few of these to the Order. Just as long as we know how to detect them, so the Death Eaters can’t use them on us.

He pulled what looked like a set of clip-on tinted lenses for his glasses from his pocket. George had spelled them to let him see most common spells, including the ones the twins had enchanted the net with, and Harry had found that if he wore the lenses when he went ‘walking’, the ability transferred.

I wonder what else I could take with me... or what it would do, in spirit form...

Later. The net was perfectly in position. Harry started off, trailing the invisible string behind him. Just as he reached the T-junction at the end of the hall, Luna walked by in the cross-corridor, her nose in a book and one hand bumping along the stones of the wall. Harry slid the spool of string into that free hand, which closed around it and dropped to Luna’s side to hang naturally.

Perfect.

Harry watched Luna meander away, occasionally veering towards a wall but always correcting in time, the string stringing itself out behind. When she reached her destination, she would loop the string three times around it and melt it into itself. That would seal the spells laid on the net for three hours.

Depending on how many people notice, that might not be long enough, or it might be just perfect.

So it's time for step two.

Making sure enough people notice.

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Dolores Jane Umbridge flounced towards her office, her temper seriously out of kilter.

No matter how many detentions I give out, no matter how many punishments I assign—and I cannot use my favorite one, with Dumbledore watching over me like the meddling fool he is—the students seem to have some secret I do not share. Some rallying cry, some central locus that binds them all together. If I knew what it was, I could learn about it, learn how I can replace it, but without that knowledge I am powerless...

Even if she had been looking, she wouldn't have seen the net. It was invisible, after all.

Though she certainly felt it when she stepped onto it.

What is—

The fibers leapt up and twisted around her. She opened her mouth to scream—

But all that came out was an animal-like bellow.

What has happened to me?

Her feet were moving without her consent. She tried to reach for her wand, to call for a house-elf, for Filch, for anybody, but the net pinned her arms to her sides, and her legs seemed to be completely out of her control.

Not completely, she discovered. If she struggled a little, she could fight the compulsion to walk. But as she did, the net twisted itself tighter around her. Not tight enough to cut off her breathing, but tight enough to hurt, to make her squeal with pain. Or rather, bellow.

That is not a natural sound. Or not a natural human sound. It amuses some of the students, I see, to cause me to make sounds as though I were an animal...

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“The only real drawback to this,” Fred said mournfully, “is that it's illegal.”

“Bloody hard to make, too,” George added. “We gave you our only really good prototype, Ronniekins. I hope you didn't waste it.”

The portrait hole opened, and Katie Bell tumbled in. “Everyone get outside, *quick!*” she squealed. “Professor Umbridge is on the Astronomy Tower and she can't get down and she's *mooving!*”

Ron looked back at the twins as all of Gryffindor House stampeded for the portrait hole. “Good enough?” he said.

The twins frowned at each other. “For now,” said Fred finally. “I expect more from you as time goes by, though.”

George reached out and patted Ron’s shoulder. “Tha’ll do, Ron,” he said in a ridiculously thick accent. “Tha’ll do.”

Ron leveled a look at George that promised revenge in the fullest.

xXxXx

“Moooooooooooo,” rang out in desperate tones over Hogwarts’ lawns. “*Moooooooooooo!*”

“I wonder what she’s trying to say?” said a light voice next to Draco. He turned to see a red-haired girl he recognized vaguely from DA. “Amanda Smythe,” she said, sticking out her hand. “And you’re Draco Black.”

“That’s me.” Draco shook her hand and looked up at Umbridge. “Maybe she’s calling for help. Or for Filch—he seems to do everything for her.”

“Or maybe she’s trying to say, ‘Detention for everyone for the rest of your lives!’” Amanda giggled. “I wish I knew who did this to her. I think I’d kiss them.”

“Would you kiss me if I said I knew about it?” Draco said impulsively.

“Maaaaaybe.” Amanda looked him up and down. “Make that yes. I didn’t realize you were quite so... so...”

Draco struck a pose. “Manly?”

Amanda grinned. “That’ll do. You just always seem to fade into the background at meetings. Is it because Harry Potter is there?”

“It could be.” Draco considered this. “It probably is. He’s almost always been the most important of us, the one people notice more.”

“Do you resent him for that?” Amanda was studying him intently. “My dad’s brother, my uncle I guess except we never see him, he was always the golden boy, and I think Dad resents that just a little, even now after all this time.”

Draco shrugged. “We don’t do a lot of ‘I’m more important than *you* are’ at home, unless we’re fighting over the last bun or something, and even then it’s tacky. I guess we get enough of that when we can’t avoid it. When we’re at home, it’s more like, ‘Phew, glad that’s over, now gimme that last bun, I’m five days older than you so I’m in charge’...”

Amanda laughed with him. “But he’s such a leader,” she said. “I can feel it from him. He was born to be that way. Even if he’d grown up in a place that hated him, he’d be a leader. But his family, your family, they made it stronger. And now...” She looked up at Umbridge, leaning over the edge of the tower and moaning down at the cheering crowd of students. “Now he can show stupid people up for the fools they are, and maybe bring Voldemort out in the open and destroy him. And *nothing* is more important than that.”

Draco blinked at the burning passion in her voice. “I’m glad you’re on our side.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else in a million years.” Amanda’s eyes were narrow as she stared at Hogwarts. “The House of Slytherin has tried to destroy my family for centuries. I want a piece of them. And if it just so happens that getting that piece will help end a brutal and completely pointless race war, and save thousands of lives...” She turned back to Draco and smiled impishly, all trace of fury gone from her face. “What’s not to like?”

Draco nodded. “Definitely glad you’re on our side.”

“Thanks.” Amanda shivered. “Merlin’s socks, I should have brought my cloak, I didn’t realize it would be so windy out here...”

“Here, share mine,” Draco said, pulling it halfway off his shoulder and holding it out.

“Thanks.” Amanda huddled into the curve of his arm and sighed in satisfaction. “Much better.”

No, Draco told himself sternly. You’re taken. You’ve been in love since you were eight. You don’t have too much longer, and you are not going to give Luna another reason to cry over that gravestone.

But the combination of the warmth against his side and the smell of lavender wafting from the red hair was starting to make him a little dizzy.

And I thought Harry had girl trouble...

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I feel like we should have music playing, Neenie said through the mental link Meghan’s blue jewel had established as she loped down the path towards Hogwarts’ gates. **The intrepid rescuers departing.**

Do you really want music? Snow Fox, the brown of his coat darkened with the same spell that hid Neenie’s white and orange patches, twitched his nose in the air to catch the wind. **Music would give us away.**

Music like in a movie. Where nobody can hear it and be distracted by it, but where it adds to the tension.

I don’t know about you, said Captain from his carry-sling on Pearl’s harness, **but I don’t think I**

need any more tension right this second.

True, Neenie conceded.

Starwing drifted above them, her feathers a shadowy gray for this one night. **We will all do well**, she said surely. **Because we have to.**

People have messed up things before that they ‘had to’ do, said Harry, who was walking—in both senses of the word—beside the half-Pride of Animagi. If Neenie didn’t think too hard about it, she could see a vague glowing shape in the air that might be Harry...

Or I might be making it up.

That’s cheerful, said Ron with a mental snort. **Let’s try and think positive about this, all right? Mum would have a litter of knittens if I ran out there to try to save you, and you know I’ll run out there and try to save you if you get in trouble.**

Harry chuckled. **All right. Just for you, Ron, we won’t get in any trouble.**

You can’t get in trouble anyway, Harry, Ginny chimed in. **No one will even know you’re there.**

The yellow bedroom at the Den as Neenie had last seen it drifted into her mind’s eye. Ginny was curled up in a comfortable chair beside the bed where Harry’s body lay, her fine gold chain looped around his neck as well as her own, while Ron sat at his modeling table with the house in front of him, waiting for the Pride’s descriptions to lay out his modified chess figurines, black for Death Eaters, white for Pride members...

—if any of them are like Luna, Harry was saying as Neenie returned her attention to the conversation. **For that matter, I haven’t gone anywhere near Voldemort like this. And I’m not going to. What if he could grab me and keep me out of my body, or split me off from it and turn me into a ghost? I’m not *that* stupid.**

How stupid are you? asked a small chorus of voices.

Stupid enough to give you lot a straight line, Harry answered promptly.

Everyone laughed, and Neenie felt her spirits lift slightly.

We will do this. We will. We have everything we need, and we know everything we can. We can fight, we can sneak, and we will not let Graham Pritchard die just because His High Darkness wants Graham’s father to fight for him.

She bared her teeth and hissed. *Look out, Death Eaters. Here comes the Pride.*

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Graham Pritchard awoke in the darkness to someone shaking his shoulder and a hand over his

mouth. For one instant, he panicked. *They're here to kill me—*

No, why would they wake me up?

Because they like to see people scared—

“Meghan sent me,” said a low voice in his ear.

The panic vanished, and he realized he knew the voice. “Longbottom?”

“Yeah.”

“Who else?” He could hear someone else breathing in the room, maybe two people.

“Her sister and brother. She’s outside. Long story. Listen, we need you to drink this.” The cool glass shape of a flask touched his fingers. “You’ll feel strange, then you’ll fall asleep, and when you wake up we’ll have you out of here.”

“Why—”

“No time. It’s the only way.”

Graham almost put the flask to his lips, then stopped. “Is it going to hurt?”

“No more than my coming over there and smacking you if you don’t get a move on!” snapped Hermione Granger-Lupin’s voice from a few feet away.

“Way to be inspirational, Neenie,” said Draco Black under his breath.

“I’m not trying to be inspirational, I’m trying to be scary!”

Graham smiled for the first time in a month and a half. *I wasn’t imagining it. I didn’t make it up. They came after me. I’m going home.*

Lifting the flask to his mouth, he drank off the potion—or *I guess that’s what it is*—without hesitation.

A moment later, he knew why they hadn’t explained.

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The baby on the bed drew breath to howl in frustration—

And Hermione slid the nipple of the baby bottle deftly between his parted lips.

Automatically, baby-Graham’s mouth closed around the rubber nipple, and he sucked. His eyes opened wider at the taste, and he continued sucking for about five seconds before suddenly sighing and going limp with the finality that only infants could manage.

Hope he's not too attached to these clothes, Draco remarked, pulling out the soft cloth they'd brought along to wrap up the baby.

I think he'll want to get rid of anything that reminds him of this place, said Harry. **But we should take them with us. Make it seem like he just vanished.**

Hermione grinned. **And I have one final touch.**

What? asked Neville, looking up from the sleeping baby he was now cradling.

Make the bed. Hermione took the cloth from Draco and started wrapping Graham in it. **I'd do it, but my hands are full.**

Harry laughed. **And I don't have hands. At least, not corporeal ones.**

Slave-driver, Draco grumbled, stepping up to the bed and beginning to pull the sheets straight. **So this way, it looks like he got away before he ever went to bed?**

Right. And if any of them saw him in bed—you mentioned, Harry, that there was a woman taking care of him—they'll start thinking maybe they didn't see it, maybe it was a trick... Hermione tucked in the loose end of cloth and nodded to Neville.

Captain the demiguise held up his arms. **One invisible monkey, ready to carry baby,** he said. **Ron, how are we doing?**

No guards anywhere near you, Ron's voice answered. **Most of them are downstairs talking and drinking. One's at the back window, but he's not really watching for anything. He missed you coming in completely.**

He hasn't seen Pearl, Ginny added, **and she's out in plain view.**

She's what ? Everyone winced at the force of Captain's mental shout. **Pearl, hide, for Merlin's sake—!**

But then I won't be able to see when you come out! Pearl protested. **I won't be able to start opening the wards for you!**

You won't be able to do *anything* if you get caught!

I won't get caught! The thump of a hoof being stamped on pavement rang through the link. **You always think I'll get caught, or get in trouble, or get everyone else in trouble, and I won't, I never do—**

Um, everyone? Harry broke in. **The guard at the back just heard something, or at least he's acting like he did...**

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Facing Danger

Chapter 15: Cooperation Makes It Happen (Year 5)

Chapter 15: Cooperation Makes It Happen

Everyone froze in position, breaths held, waiting to see what would happen.

I don't think he sees you yet, Pearl, Harry reported after a moment. **But he heard you. Listen carefully—wander out into sight, then let your deer instincts take over. When you see something, or hear something, that scares you, run. With luck, they'll just think you were in town looking for food.**

That doesn't make sense— Hermione began doubtfully.

They'll never— Captain started.

People see what they expect to see, Harry cut them both off. **And they're not expecting anything strange or dangerous here, so they won't see it if we don't make it obvious. Pearl?**

I'm doing it, said a small voice.

What about everyone inside, though? Ginny asked. **If that guard sees one unusual thing, it might make him start wondering about other unusual things. He might decide to have a look around.**

That's why everyone inside is either small or can go invisible, answered Ron before anyone else could.

And I think you all should, right now, Harry added. **The guard isn't looking yet—he's still watching Pearl—but he might start thinking something's funny any minute.**

Captain accepted the swaddled baby from Hermione and crouched on the floor, bending himself over so that his fur fell around the bundle. A few seconds later, they were nowhere to be seen. Neenie leapt up onto the bed, Snow Fox just behind her. **Should we be up here?** Snow Fox asked, pressing his paw to Neenie's side to speak to her privately. **What if they come in?**

We're up here in case they come in.

What do you mean?

Like this...

Neenie outlined her idea 'out loud', and was gratified to hear Ron laugh as he took it in. **It'll give you a little more cover, as long as they don't actually come in,** he said. **And if they do...**

Then we're dead anyway, Snow Fox said resignedly. **All right, I'll go along with it.**

Then do it now, Harry broke in. **There's two of them coming your way!**

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Nuncius Avery trudged up the narrow stairs. "Gibbon thinks that he might have seen something, and for this we go on alert," he said over his shoulder.

"I would rather be sure than sorry," said Patroclus Nott from behind him. "And it costs us nothing to be more wary rather than less."

"Nothing but some twinges in our knees from too many stairs." Avery caught his breath at the top of the current flight. "Why could we not have found something more spacious on one floor?"

"This is the safest place we could be," Patroclus said sanctimoniously. "No one will suspect us here, or see what we do."

Avery grumbled under his breath. *I know that, you pretentious swot. Haven't you ever simply wanted to complain about a situation, even though you knew why it was the way it was?*

He rubbed most of a cramp out of his calf, limped down the hallway, and opened the door to the room where the Pritchard boy slept.

A tangle of dark hair was visible above the bedclothes, which rose and fell evenly. Avery sighed and shut the door again.

"Such a shame," he said musingly. "To use our own children—as if there aren't few enough..."

"He was being raised wrongly," said Nott, a warning creeping into his tone. "Now that we have him in our control, he can be retrained. Or, if that proves impossible, kept secure until he is of age to pass on his bloodline. You are still devoted to the cause, I take it?"

"What sort of stupid question is that?" Avery glared at Nott. "Just because you were one of the first to join the Dark Lord, that says nothing about the loyalties of those who joined later!"

"But it could. Or some people might think that it could." Nott started back down the hall. "Just think about that, the next time you start to feel sorry for one our Master has rightfully taken into his possession."

Avery clenched his fists for a moment, then followed Nott towards the stairs.

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In the bedroom, three breaths of relief were exhaled.

That was closer than we really want to come, said Ron shakily. **All right, those two are on their way back, the guard on the back window's being replaced because they think he's seeing things—Starwing, where's Pearl?**

A momentary vision drifted before everyone's eyes, Hogsmeade from above, with a tiny moving blotch in a street below. **Two alleys away. She'll be ready by the time they make it downstairs.**

Right. Harry's decisive nod was audible in his tone. **We'll never get a better time. Go, go, go!**

Snow Fox tumbled out from the place partway under the covers that had shown his dark-furred back to the watcher at the door. Hermione flipped back those covers and leapt out of the bed, quickly pulled them back up, and transformed. Captain, now visible again, was the last one out the door, moving unsteadily on his short legs while his arms cradled the sleeping Graham.

Down the stairs, Ginny's voice guided them. **Move quietly, the Death Eaters are on the floor you're coming to. Good...very good...**

Captain nearly stumbled on the steps, but Neenie was there for him to catch himself on, though she hissed under her breath as he pulled on her fur. **Sorry,** he said.

It's all right.

Death Eaters moving around, Ron told them as they crept to the next flight of stairs. **Some of them like the bloke who was on duty and want to stay and drink with him, some of them don't. Keep your eyes open and be ready to hide.**

Down, down, down the stairs. Cat paws, fox paws, pressed only lightly against the stair treads. Demiguise feet pressed a little more heavily, but even so no creaks erupted to betray them.

Almost out, Harry told them, his form flickering at the corner of Neenie's eye. **Ground floor.**

I know that, Snow Fox snapped, then shook his head. **Sorry, Harry, I—**

Never mind. Get safe now. Apologize later. And that goes for you, too, Pearl, Harry added 'loudly'. **Whatever happened, whatever needs to happen, we'll deal with it when we're all safe.**

Okay, said a small and meek voice.

Neenie backed up until her tail draped across Snow Fox's back. **We should let Meghan put our lives in danger more often,** she said sarcastically to him. **It might break her little 'queen of the world' act.**

Hey, she's usually got it under control, Snow Fox pointed out. **It's annoying, but no worse.**

Yes, but why do we put up with it?

Snow Fox shrugged. **Because most of the time, she acts so grown-up that we don't even notice she's younger than us until we run straight into it?**

There's that.

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Harry stood in the second-floor hall beside the Death Eater sentry, who was watching out the back window vigilantly. **Starwing , go.**

A silent form shot through the half-shadowed courtyard, making the Death Eater jump back and swear. “An owl,” he said aloud, regaining his composure. “Just an owl, that’s all...”

Excellent fly-by, Harry told Starwing. Watch from above. I need to run one more recon through the house before we head out.

Yes, sir.

Harry was about to tease her for calling him ‘sir’, when it dawned on him that there was nothing funny about it.

She’s using it where it should be used. In the field, on a mission where we have to know who’s in charge. And who’s in charge is... me.

He swallowed his discomfort firmly. *I know how to do this. I’ve been in training for it my whole life. This is no time to get cold feet.*

Besides, in five minutes it won’t matter. We’ll get out of here, take Graham back to Hogwarts, and then we can all collapse.

I look forward to it, murmured Ginny in the back of his head.

Harry jumped a little. **What’s that supposed to mean?**

It means I’m scared and I want this to be over with, said Ginny tartly. **Now, is there anyone out of place with Ron’s map?**

Harry looked through Ginny’s eyes at the sculpted house, the chess-figure Death Eaters, the animal figurines huddled in a cluster at the back. **Looks right to me,** he said. **They’ve checked the house, they’re sure there’s nothing wrong here, it was just an animal in the back—**

And if we’re lucky, that’s all they’ll think it was until morning, Ron finished. **Never get a better time, mate, most of them are half the house away, and there’s two or three closed doors between them and you. Even if you tripped the wards, by the time they could get there, you’d be gone.**

Harry turned and hurried through the nearest door. **Then let’s get going. Pearl, you back in place?**

Yes.

Wait until I tell you it’s safe to open the wards. Then do it as quick as you can. Got it?

Yes. Meghan's voice was a mental whisper, so quiet Harry had to strain to hear it.

Poor Pearl. But she can't just do whatever she wants, especially not on a mission. The sooner she learns that, the safer we'll all be.

Two more strides brought him back into the hallway where the sentry stood, still scanning the courtyard. **Wait for it,** Harry said, his eyes on the sentry. **Wait for it—wait—**

The sentry yawned, bringing a hand up to cover his mouth, half-closing his eyes.

Now, Meghan, now, now!

Harry only half-saw the tiny spark of Meghan's beginning the spell, and that only because he knew where to look. The Death Eater finished his yawn, lowered his hand, and swept his eyes across the courtyard with a satisfied nod.

At your own discretion, Harry sent to Snow Fox, Neenie, and Captain. **Make it quick, though.**

Yes, sir, came three brisk replies.

Harry crossed all his fingers and edged closer to the sentry, trying to get the same view of the courtyard that the man had. *Just a little longer... we're almost out, almost free...*

xXxXx

Snow Fox slipped from shadow to shadow on one side of the courtyard, Neenie mirroring him a few steps behind. Captain could move from shadow to light without fear, but was slowed by the need to carry and conceal the baby in his arms. *So far, though, so good. Almost there—one more tricky bit...*

He flattened himself against the wall and crept past a patch of light, his tail between his legs so it wouldn't twitch and give him away. Safely in the shadows on the other side, he exhaled in relief.

Now a straight run to the wards...

Stopping short of the smell of magic, he sniffed delicately. *Yes, yes, yes, yes—ah-ha, no. No magic right over... here. And little sister/deer on the other side.*

Here, Meghan whispered silently, and one dark hand flirted through the air and was gone. **Here's the hole.**

Thanks, Pearl, I see it now. Snow Fox shrank down to the ground and oozed forward. Tighter than any snow tunnel, more dangerous than any thorny hedge, this was the greatest challenge he'd ever undertaken in fox form—

And then he was out.

Well, now, that wasn't too bad.

He pulled his brush free of the ward, turned, and retransformed, quickly drawing his wand. **Hold it just for a second, Pearl,** he said, clasping her hand with his free one. **Let me take over.**

Meghan nodded silently.

Perforo avertos, Draco pronounced within his mind, envisioning the energy from his wand blossoming from the end, flowing outward until it brushed the inside of Meghan's, ready to take over when she stopped. **All right, try it now.**

Meghan took her wand away from the wards. Neenie, on the other side, sniffed at it. **I still smell the hole,** she said. **I think you did it.**

Good. Come on through.

Neenie was faster about slipping through than Draco recalled himself being. Once on the other side, she too retransformed, and set about helping Meghan adjust her harness, making sure both slings were ready for their occupants.

How're we looking up there, Luna? Ron asked. Draco spared a moment to think of his friend, hunched intently over his model house, directing his pieces here and there, and as likely as not wishing he was in Draco's place holding open the wards...

No one for three blocks, Luna reported.

Harry, what about inside? asked Ginny.

He still hasn't seen anything. Not even the little bit of Snow Fox's tail I spotted once.

Oops, said Draco guiltily.

I said he didn't see it, dragon dung for brains. The words came with an affectionate mental flick.

Yes, but you did. Draco let just a bit of exasperated moan get into his voice. **And you're going to tease me about it for years.**

That's right. Alpha's privilege. Harry chuckled, then turned serious in a heartbeat. **Captain, how's it coming? I can see you if I squint just right. You're almost there.**

Almost. Captain's tone was ragged, giving the sense of panting. **I didn't know it'd be this hard... this form's not designed to walk like this. Not just on two feet... but hunched funny to hide the baby.**

Meghan, transformed into Pearl, nuzzled at Hermione with fear plain in her eyes.

You going to make it? Harry asked worriedly.

Yes. Of course. Just... I need a second... need to breathe...

Right, Harry said. **Take the time you need. No sense rushing and getting caught, not when we're so close.**

Draco's nose twitched. He wanted to be back in Snow Fox's form, so he could smell Captain and know where he was, but they'd gotten the wards open without setting off any alarms, and there was no sense in risking one just to satisfy his curiosity.

Five heartbeats. Ten. Fifteen. No movement, no sound, nothing but his own breathing and that of his sisters.

Ready, Captain reported just as Draco's twentieth heartbeat sounded in his ears. **Here I go.**

A scrap of movement in the courtyard caught Draco's eye. Fabric, a scrap of fabric—the edge of the blanket Hermione had wrapped Graham in—it was visible, it must have fluttered loose while Captain was resting—

Look out! shouted three voices at once.

Captain hissed wordlessly in his mind. **Take him!** he demanded, and baby Graham flickered into view just as a window slammed open upstairs—Hermione dropped to her knees and snatched the baby through the hole in the wards, yanking him out of the path of spellfire—

A blue spell lanced down from above, striking just to one side of Captain, or so Draco thought until he heard a mental gasp of pain and saw a bright blotch of blood appear on the stones of the courtyard. Meghan noticed it too, a little whimper breaking from her.

Run, get out NOW, Harry snapped, his tone preoccupied. **I'm overlapping him, shouting at him, he thinks he's being possessed—he can't cast right now, get OUT of there—**

Hermione snapped shut the last buckle on Graham's sling, swiveled back to the wards, and reached through the hole, her left hand closing on nothing and dragging it through. With her right hand, she drew her wand and aimed it up at the window, where the figure of a man was just visible, writhing with his hands to his temples. "*Stupefy,*" she hissed aloud, and the red blast of her spell shot straight and true.

That's got him! Let's go! Harry shouted.

No, wait! cried Ginny, urgent and sharp. **The blood! Captain's blood! They can test that, they'll know whose it is!**

Ginny, we don't have time— Harry began.

We don't have time *not* to, Ginny snapped back. **If they find out Neville was here, they'll know**

we're more than we seem.

Being underestimated is our strength, Starwing added in what Draco thought of as her trance voice. **We cannot give it up so easily.**

They're only halfway there, Harry, Ron put in. **You've got long enough for this.**

Harry threw up his mental hands. **Fine. All right. You win. Who does the best Cleaning Charm?**

I do, but I'll need hands, said Ginny. **Meghan? Will you let me in?**

Yes. Meghan turned human, and staggered a little under the combined weight of baby and demiguise, but Hermione caught her. **Help me?**

Right here with you, Pearl, Harry said comfortingly, and Draco thought he saw a flicker of white pass into Meghan. **We're here. Let us guide you.**

Meghan went to her knees in front of the hole in the wards, drew her wand, and aimed it carefully. *"Scourgify,"* she whispered.

In Ginny's voice.

That is just a little bit creepy.

But the blood was gone, the stones much cleaner than they had been a moment before. Meghan stowed her wand away, got her feet under her, and began to whisper her incantation—

Here they come, Ron warned. **Draco, let the spell go, now—everybody get out of sight—**

Draco released the spell and backed up a few steps. Hermione did the same, but Meghan was still transforming, and the voices of Death Eaters were audible now—

Forget you have something? Harry asked, and Draco's hand went into his pocket without him sending it there.

Hey!

Sorry. No time. Get her covered!

Right. Draco tossed one end of the Invisibility Cloak to Hermione, then ducked under it, transforming as he went. Hermione did the same, Neenie the cat nipping under the belly of Meghan/Pearl, now almost fully transformed—

You made it, said Luna, her voice slightly shaken for once. **They didn't see you. If you back up slowly, they won't know you were ever there.**

And that's the way I want it. Harry's voice receded slightly, and Snow Fox thought he must be

on his way home, back to his body. **Come on, before they start throwing spells.**

Step by careful step, fox, cat, and doe backed up. Snow Fox could feel Starwing pacing them silently above. Neenie warned them with a low hiss as she came to the corner, and Snow Fox swung wide to navigate the turn—the noise from the courtyard they'd left behind was growing—

Let's GO! Neenie pivoted in place as only a cat could and raced off. Snow Fox dropped back to rearguard, behind Pearl—hoofbeats rang out clearly on the hard ground of the alley, but what did that matter now? They were free, free, free and safe—

They're trying to cut you off, Starwing warned urgently from above. **Coming at you from your left!**

Neenie and Pearl increased their speed. Snow Fox slowed deliberately. **Tell me where,** he sent upwards.

NO. Snow Fox winced as Harry's voice drilled through him. **We do NOT need anyone to play hero. Just keep running—you've got a good lead on them, and four feet are faster than two. Unless you want us to have to do this all over again for you?**

Awww ... Snow Fox pouted. **You're no fun.**

An image of bared fangs. **Get running.**

Snow Fox ran.

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Harry opened his eyes, blinking against the gritty feeling they always seemed to have when he'd been out walking. "Glasses," he croaked.

"Here." They appeared in his peripheral vision, Ginny's fingers around the nosepiece. "Ron's gone down to the gates already, to wait for them there. Do you think you can get there?"

"Give me—oof—five seconds..." Harry flinched as his muscles protested movement. **What happened?**

Your body was tense from all the worry, Ginny told him, unfolding the glasses herself and sliding them onto his face. **I tried to keep you from knotting up too badly, but I don't know how well it worked.**

I'll live. Harry rolled his shoulders forward, then back, then forward again, turning the motion into a surge upwards. He stumbled, but Ginny caught him. **Thanks.**

Anytime. Ginny's cheeks went pink, but her tone was steady. **Can you walk?**

I'll do better on four feet. Help me down?

Of course.

Ginny's hands bracing him, Harry dropped to hands and feet, shook himself all over, and was Wolf almost immediately. He licked his chops appreciatively at the scent beside him, then turned his attention to the task at hand. *Get to my Packmates. Bring them safe.*

He bounded across the room and shouldered through the door he wanted, Ginny running beside him. "Thank you, Godric," she said breathlessly, and Wolf leapt into the passageway that opened for him. Dropping to his side, he let his momentum and the inherent magic all around carry him forward. *To the place I want to be, to the closest way to my Packmates...*

Behind him, the distinctive scent of Lynx blossomed, and a low, excited yowl filled the stone slide. Wolf answered it with a half-toned croon, the 'indoor voice' of a howl, and the music of the two voices reverberated through the passage and through Wolf's bones.

This is good, murmured Wolf's instinct, this is right, this is as it should be...

Harry's mind kept this carefully shielded from the part of him that was linked to the Pride.

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Ron pelted down the path towards Hogwarts' gates, fumbling in his pocket as he ran. **Where are you?** he broadcast over the Pride's link.

Coming in above you, Starwing called. **The others are close behind, but someone is chasing them.**

Ron swore once, mentally, saving his breath for running.

You can't come up to give me passage, can you? Starwing asked.

No, I can't, it'd take too long to get off the ground and then back down again. Come in with the others.

I will. He felt rather than heard her sheer off, and then his hand closed around what he'd been looking for—

Written confirmation that I'm allowed to open the gates. Dumbledore's handwriting, Dumbledore's magic, to let us let them back through the wards and the walls once they've got Pritchard safe. Now I just need to use it.

Ron scrambled to a halt at the gates and yanked the paper free of his pocket, unfolding it frantically and pressing the inked side flat against the padlock. He could hear them now, paws drumming the earth, rough panting as they fought for breath—

The padlock shot open, and the gates creaked under his hand.

Home free! Ron shouted through the link, slamming himself against the left-hand gate, which opened a few inches with great reluctance. **Come on, let's go, let's go, let's go!**

A streak of grey shot past Ron at eye-level, brushing his face with feather-softness—*Starwing*—two streaks past his ankles—*Snow Fox, Neenie*—

And then he looked out and saw Pearl, running straight at him, and a shape in the dark behind her, a shape which could well be a man, a Death Eater, with a sudden gleam bursting from it—

Left! he shouted, and Pearl swerved just in time, as a Stunner dug a furrow beside her.

Ron, the gate—not enough— Neenie's voice was faint but terrified, and Ron glanced at the opening he'd made and swore again. He'd only just barely opened the heavy gate, and the slings on Pearl's sides made her wider than the others—*she's not going to fit—*

He reared back, ready to throw himself against the gate again, knowing it wouldn't be enough—*she'll crash into it, or she'll slow down so much he'll get her, and then this will all have been for nothing—*

On three! shouted Harry, and Ron's head swiveled. Wolf was running flat-out towards the gate, Lynx pacing him perfectly, and there was just enough room between them for a skinny human—

One! Two! THREE!

Ron slammed his whole weight against the gate, feeling a double impact, one on either side of him. With a rusty groan, the hinges complied, and Pearl shot past the three of them at full speed, her pursuer almost at her heels—

Ron, change, now! Lynx snapped. **Don't let him see you!**

Ron dropped to the ground and thought hard about feathers and talons. A moment later, Redwing the hawk mantled his wings uneasily. He hated nighttime; it meant he couldn't see properly, and besides, owls hunted at night and would gladly take a hawk down a peg or two if they got the chance...

Stay human-minded, Neenie reminded him, prowling into his sight. **I don't think we'll want to miss this.**

Miss wha—

"I've got you now!" shouted a hoarse voice, and a man in black robes pounded through the gates of Hogwarts.

Oh.

xXxXx

Harry seated his human mind firmly in Wolf's body and started snapping off orders. **Starwing , stoop on the Death Muncher. Lynx, get Pearl to the Forest in case he doesn't flinch. Fox, run get help. And me...**

He turned and gave Dumbledore's paper a glance. A flash of fire, and it was gone.

The gates slammed shut behind them.

The man had just barely turned to see what the noise was when Starwing materialized out of the night, screaming like a banshee's ghost. The man shrieked in his turn and flung his arms over his head, dropping to his knees.

Pearl and Lynx vanished into the darkness, Starwing turning her dive to follow them. Wolf's nose knew they were still out there, but he was focused on the threat—*though it's not much of one at the moment. Still, better to keep him off guard.*

He stalked forward, letting a low rumble come to his throat. *You hunted my sister. Both my sisters, my brother, and my sister's friend, you hunted them and tried to hurt them. So now I hunt you.*

The man's eyes widened, and a very gratifying fear-stench permeated his scent.

You don't like this. Wolf let his lips draw back from his teeth and the rumble emerge from between them. *You don't like being the stalked one, instead of the stalker. Too bad for you, there's nothing you can do about it—*

Except that! snapped Neenie, and her dark shape shot past Wolf's nose to land on the man's face, all her claws extended.

What—Nenie—

He had his wand! Neenie leapt straight up into the air, her claws digging furrows down the man's face. He screamed and clutched at them, blood and pain now mingled with the fear in his scent. **Redwing, if Wolf lights it up around here, can you help us watch him?**

Hey, I hadn't thought of that. Good one, Neenie. Wolf, can you?

Wolf shook his head, admonishing himself for not noticing the man's wand hand starting to come up. **Yes, I can,** he sent. **Hold on a second.**

A quick thought, and four balls of fire burst into being, along with one smaller one alongside the man as his wand burned to ash in an instant. Redwing chuckled—there was no other word for it—and rustled his feathers down into place. **Better,** he said, sweeping his wings once or twice before he made the strong downward sweep that thrust him into the air. **Much better.**

Plus, said Wolf in satisfaction, glancing toward the castle, **it makes us very easy to see when people come to help us...**

Shaun Dietsch flattened himself on the ground, panting in pain. No part of this night had made sense. First had come the alarm from Gibbon about noises behind the house, but nothing in sight when they'd gone out to check. The Pritchard boy had still been in his bed when Nott and Avery went to check, and everything was fine.

Then another alarm, from Runnals this time, cut off in the middle, abruptly. Shaun had heard some nonsense being shouted from the window as he ran out of the courtyard, something about being possessed, but he'd paid more attention to the chase than to the words.

And then the very nature of the chase. Animals. A human, chasing animals—animals who always seemed to know when he lifted his wand, and which way to dodge—and he'd been so busy running, he hadn't noticed where they were going until he'd barreled past gates and suddenly registered his whereabouts—

Hogwarts. They've led me to the school—are they Animagi? Teachers?

In the very moment he'd realized where he was, the gates had slammed behind him, and a hideous scream had accompanied a devil diving at him from above. Some fragment of his mind recognized an owl, but the rest was too busy shielding his head and dropping to the ground, away from those wicked talons.

But the ground had been no refuge, for a wolf waited there, a snarling wolf which seemed to glow with its own inner light—and when he'd tried to bring his wand to bear, a spitting demon had leapt into his face and left him half-blinded by his own blood. The same fragment of his mind was still trying to tell him that it was a cat, only a cat, when fire erupted above him and lit the scene as brightly as day, and his wand flamed up where he'd dropped it and was gone.

This can't be real. I must have fallen and hit my head, or been caught by a spell that makes me see things—none of this is possible, it's not happening—

A sweep of wings overhead, and a sound like a satisfied laugh.

Or perhaps I'm dead, and my grandmother was right—there really is a Devil, and he does come for you after you die if you've done evil in your lifetime—

Darkness, looming to one side. A sardonic voice. "I assume all of your... *people* returned safely?" A pause. "So I see there is one area in which you are not totally inept." Another pause, longer this time. Then, in a voice like chewing glass—

"Well done."

The light went out over his head, and something screamed.

Shaun Dietsch, Death Eater, fainted.

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Godric's sword and shoes—

Wolf! What happened to the light?

Sorry! I'm sorry! I just—I was so surprised I lost it!

I can't blame you—I mean, considering the source—

"*Lumos*," said Snape, and Wolf and Neenie blinked in the sudden wandlight. Redwing squawked in pleasure and glided down for a landing.

Snape stepped to the Death Eater's side and prodded him with a toe. "He seems to have fainted," he observed. "That would make it safe for you to resume your human forms."

Wolf rolled his eyes. **And contrary to popular opinion, we can take a hint—**

Only when it's applied with a sledgehammer, Neenie said acidly, shooting upwards into Hermione. "Thank you, Professor," she said aloud as Harry, Ron, and Draco followed her lead. "Will you take care of him?"

"I will. And I believe you will need this." Snape extracted a small bottle from his pocket and handed it to Hermione. "Four drops should suffice to reverse the effects. I remind you that it is for external use only."

"How come?" Ron asked. "I mean, you drink the first one, shouldn't you drink the second too?"

Snape bestowed his patented glare on Ron. "The potion I have just given to Miss Granger-Lupin, as you would know had you been paying attention in your third year Potions lessons, contains several toxic compounds. Drinking it would have results ranging from messy to fatal. If this is any indication of your retention rate, Weasley, I doubt we shall meet again in an official capacity after this year."

"And isn't that just a shame," Ron muttered.

"Thank you for the reversal potion, Professor," Harry said loudly before anyone else could talk. "We'll just go and take care of that, then."

"Do." Snape turned away from them, his attention already on the Death Eater crumpled on the ground.

Come on, let's go. Harry twisted back into Wolf. **Ron, want a ride?**

Sure. Give me a second—

Snow Fox, race you! Neenie shouted.

Marks, get set, go!

Talons fastened into Wolf's ruff, and he left the ground with a great leap. **You won't win**, he called after them, paws slamming into the ground. **Not either of you—we will!**

Will not! chorused two voices, and the race was on.

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Deep within the Forest, two sets of eyes and three noses tracked the coming of the Pride and their prize. They had seen the Death Eater enter the gates of Hogwarts, had been ready to act if action was necessary, but none had been, and they were proud.

Now they guarded the little group hidden within the trees, one girl tending to the baby, one to the injured boy, and the last girl sitting alone, her knees drawn up to her chest. They had thought of approaching her, but her scent shouted that she wanted to be alone, and so they left her that way, instead prowling about to ensure the safety of the five.

Four more joined them in time, and one of the guardians decided it was time to make herself known.

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Ginny gasped, Hermione squealed, and Draco and Ron yelled as a great green blunt-nosed head poked around a tree.

"Sangre ! Don't do that!" Harry darted across the clearing, pounded a fist against the basilisk's nose, then hugged her. *"You scared us half to death!"*

"My apologies," said Sangre with a chuckle in her tone. *"I only wanted to tell you how you are guarded, so that you will not fear to stay here as long as is needful. And also to tell you something I doubt that you know—something to do with the lake not far from here, where I sometimes go to swim on nights when I will not be seen..."*

"She's guarding us," Harry translated over his shoulder, *"so we can stay here even if we're human. What about the lake?"* he asked, switching back to Parseltongue.

"I sometimes speak aloud to myself," Sangre said. *"It is often a fault of those who are much alone. And one night, when I was lying on the shore of the lake and telling over a tale my first master once told me, I felt a strange motion in the earth nearby. I stopped speaking, and the vibrations also stopped. When I spoke that section of the tale again, the same pattern of vibration recurred, but this time moving the other way. As though my words had wakened something, something which moved back and forth."*

"Tell me the story?" Harry asked, sitting down.

Sangre swayed back and forth, flicking her tongue in her form of laughter. *"You will find it funny,"*

eggling—my master loved himself above all else, and his tales were usually about himself. ”

Her tone took on a singing quality, strange to hear in a hiss. *“Hear now the tale of the greatest wizard of all time, the master of subtlety, Salazar Slytherin, who alone among wizards of his time understood the necessity of the purity of blood. But he was not to be alone forever, for with his three underlings of greatest promise he caused a school to be founded, and there he taught the young of his land, though he himself taught only the strongest and the purest among them. And when he had taught them what he knew, they fell at his feet in gratitude, saying, “Thank you, Master, for this gift of knowledge—unworthy as I am to thank you, Salazar Slytherin...””*

“Stop right there,” Harry said, feeling a grin start on his face. *“Can you show me where this happened, Sangre?”*

“Of course—why? Do you know what I felt?”

“I think I might.” The grin developed to full strength. *“I think I very well might.”*

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Graham Pritchard stirred, licking his lips. A strange taste lingered on them, vying with the sourness of sleep in his mouth.

Did I ever really wake up? I thought Longbottom was in my room, and Black and Granger-Lupin, Meghan’s brother and sister—

But that’s stupid. How could they get in where I was? It was just a dream, like the time I thought someone was talking to me, telling me he knew where I was, that he’d help me, that he’d come back for me. Just a stupid dream.

That’s all it was.

He opened his eyes.

Far, far above, the slight silhouettes of bare tree branches swayed against a star-filled sky. Graham caught the scent of woodsmoke and an odd musk he’d never smelled before, and voices were whispering nearby.

“—harm done, just save it for later next time—”

“—course we still love you, you silly, how could we not—”

“Wait, I think he’s awake—”

“Graham?” A girl’s voice, shrill with excitement and familiar...

“Meghan?” Graham rolled onto his side and pushed himself up on his elbow, his incredulity growing—this *had* to be a dream—

“Graham, you’re awake!” Meghan launched herself at him, her eyes almost glowing in the firelight. Over her shoulder, Graham could see the fire, and other figures gathered around it—Meghan’s family and friends, her Pride, he realized as his eyes adjusted to the light—Potter and Granger-Lupin and Black, the two Weasleys, Longbottom and Lovegood, all looking at him, smiling with real happiness, real care in their eyes—

“H-how—” he stammered. “How d-did you—”

Meghan pushed away from him and smiled, one tear sliding out of her silver eyes. “Magic,” she said simply. “We used magic. And now you’re safe.”

Graham closed his eyes and hugged Meghan again, commanding his own tears to go away but, just this once, not really caring whether they obeyed or not.

Safe.

It was worth shedding a few tears over.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 16: Did He Just Say It's Time? (Year 5)

Chapter 16: Did He Just Say It's Time?

One of the perks of being Headmaster of Hogwarts was that one could choose whether or not to make an appearance at breakfast. Today, Albus Dumbledore chose not to, since he had a feeling that good humor would be in abundance elsewhere.

“Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place,” he said clearly, and stepped into the Floo fire.

The sound of laughter greeted him as he emerged from the flames on the other side of the connection.

It seems my feeling was accurate.

“—ran *circles* around them, and the best part is, they have *no* idea who it was!” Danger waved a hand in the air, giggling as though she and not Hermione were the younger of the sisters. “We could take credit for it, or some Aurors who’ve done work off the books—”

“Even better,” Sirius broke in. “Spread around four or five different stories. It was us, it was Aurors, it was real animals on some kind of intelligence potion the Department of Mysteries dreamed up, it was animals under Imperius by other Death Eaters making a power play, it was shape-shifting American kids playing superhero—”

“Not that one,” Aletha said, shaking her head. “Too close to reality.”

“Coupling reality with absurdity will make them less likely to believe the real story if they ever do hear of it,” Remus disagreed. “And the less likely they are to believe the real story, the better, in this case.”

Danger caught her breath, looked up, and smiled. “Oh, Albus, hello! We’re just talking about last night, and the cubs—they did good work, if I do say so myself, though Meghan... but we’ll talk to her. Come for breakfast?”

“I admit I harbored some such hope.”

“And there’s only good news to talk over, for a change,” said Sirius, standing up to shake Dumbledore’s hand. “Whoever’s been keeping Letha on double-shifts at the hospital finally gave up.”

“Excellent.” Dumbledore turned to take both of Aletha’s hands in his. “You have my apologies for the inconvenience,” he said, “since it was likely our association which caused it.”

“I’d sacrifice far more than a few sleepless nights for such an association,” Aletha answered. “Besides, there were... compensations.” She winked at Dumbledore with the eye farther from

Sirius. “My loving husband felt it his duty to repay me for the times we missed together.”

“I see.” Dumbledore released Aletha’s hands and went around the table to take his usual seat. “And did these repayments eventually take on... a separate physical form, shall we say?”

Aletha raised an eyebrow. “I’d ask how you do that, except I doubt I really want to know.”

“Separate physical form?” said Sirius, sitting down across from Dumbledore. “I don’t think I get it.”

“Nothing new there,” muttered Danger.

“Sirius, let me put it this way,” Remus said, adopting the tone he might well have used with the cubs when they were small and didn’t seem to understand something. “When a man and a woman love each other very, very much...”

Sirius rolled his eyes and put his hands over his ears. “*That* I know,” he said loudly. “If there’s something else going on, would you all please stop speaking in code and just say it in plain English?”

“Only if you take your hands off your ears,” Aletha said just as loudly. “I don’t want to be shouting this all over the house.”

Sirius snickered. “Oh, no. The hands stay where they are.”

“That will tend towards awkwardness when you attempt to hold your son for the first time,” said Dumbledore conversationally.

The hands came down in a hurry.

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Remus slipped out of the kitchen with a mental sigh of relief. **Call me when I can come back in without being in danger of strangling on estrogen fumes.**

I will. Sissy. Danger’s affectionate laugh was accompanied by a slight mental shiver as she closed her barriers against him, leaving only the sensation of joy behind.

And no jealousy, thank God. She may still want a child, but she isn’t angry with Aletha for having one.

That fear had lurked at the back of his mind ever since he’d noticed the difference in Aletha’s scent a few days ago, but it seemed groundless at the moment. *I’ll just keep an eye on things, but I doubt there’ll be anything to keep an eye on after this...*

So a new cub for our Pack. Will we even remember how to do this? It’s been so long since they were little—we’ll be back to diapers and midnight feedings and colic—

But we'll also be back to bright round eyes and big toothless smiles and all the firsts. First time rolling over, first time sitting up, first time crawling—first step, first word, first “NO!”—

He smirked. *And best of all, I can always hand the baby off to his “real” daddy whenever he gets too troublesome.*

I doubt it, murmured a voice in the back of his head. **For one thing, he wouldn't let you, and for another, I've seen you with babies. You get besotted awfully fast.**

I thought you were blocking me.

I had my blocks up. You didn't. It takes both of us, these days. And you were thinking pretty loud. But I do have one question.

Yes, oh my beloved and oh the delight of my eyes?

...if you ever do that again, I shall find you and turn you into a donkey.

Remus chuckled. **Hee-haw. I am ashamed. What was your question?**

How on earth did Dumbledore know the baby's a boy?

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Maya Pritchard poked a sausage moodily with her fork. Nothing was going right—well, things weren't actively going *wrong* either, but that wasn't much comfort. The DA meetings were the best times of her week, since there she could let loose her feelings in the spells Harry Potter was teaching them—

It's like Professor Moody said last year, and like Professor Longbottom has been saying all along. Any spell can cause damage if you use it wrong—or maybe I should say if you use it right. Because sometimes there are things, or people, that need to be damaged.

Her Disarming Charm was one of the strongest in the class, and although she couldn't do a Full Body-Bind well yet, her Leg-Locker was reliable. *Now if there was just an Arm-Locker, so we could be sure whoever we down won't pull out their wand anyway and get us from where they are*—

Her thoughts dissolved as a sharp point poked her in the arm.

She looked down. A small note protruded from the hand of the girl next to her—Natalie McDonald, if she recalled correctly—and it was addressed to her.

Delicately, Maya slid the note from between the girl's fingers. Natalie never looked at her, instead continuing her conversation with Meghan Black across the table, but then, that was good note-passing etiquette.

The elaborate folds gave way after a few moments of tugging. Maya looked down at the paper and sighed.

There was nothing there.

Just a silly prank—

Wait, there is something. There in the corner. Something very small.

Maya sneaked looks at the note in between bites of eggs. “Walk Me”? “Warn Me”?

No, that’s an M. It says “Warm Me”.

She slid the note under her leg and left it there for the time it took to clean her plate.

Then she pulled it back out.

The neat copperplate handwriting was faint and brown, but visible.

DA place at noon. “Cracker”.

Maya slid the note into her pocket, her mind working furiously.

The DA place is the Room of Requirement—that last word must be a password—but why tell me about a meeting this way? Why not just use those coins Hermione made for us? And what’s with a password? They’ve never had that for meetings before...

Wait. Noon. We can’t be having a meeting then, we wouldn’t have time. We’d run into afternoon classes.

Something strange is going on here.

The hours between now and noon suddenly looked much longer than they had a few moments ago.

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Harry was awakened by someone knocking on his bedroom door. “C’min,” he mumbled, shoving the covers off his head.

Graham Pritchard opened the door. “What is this place?” he asked. “A guest suite?”

“Sort of.” Harry rubbed his eyes with one hand and located his glasses with the other. “See you found the bathroom.”

Graham ran a hand through his wet hair. “Theirs was small. And not too clean.”

A sudden flash of a small and blindingly white room which smelled excessively of Lysol came to Harry, and he grinned in sympathy with Graham. “Hungry?” he asked, pushing down the covers

and swinging his legs out of bed. “You can call a house-elf from the kitchen if you haven’t eaten. Just tell them what you like, and they’ll bring it. I do my own cooking sometimes, but that’s because I like doing it.”

“This is where you’ve been hiding, isn’t it?” Graham asked. “Meghan was telling me last night about everything I’ve... missed.”

Harry nodded, then stopped. The last word had held a brittle tone, and Graham’s scent had a sour twist to it that Harry hadn’t encountered before. “Did Meghan tell you we got one of them?” he asked off-handedly. “One of the Death Eaters who chased us here?”

Graham’s eyes widened for an instant, and the sourness was momentarily overwhelmed by triumph. It was still there, Harry knew, but some of it had been washed away by the knowledge that at least one of the people responsible for what had happened to him would pay.

The rest of it... well, deal with that when it’s time.

“No, she didn’t,” Graham said belatedly. “Thank you for telling me. And the lady in the painting in my room told me about the house-elves, so I’ve already eaten. I kept some over for you if you want it.”

“Thanks, I might—wait, the *lady* in the painting?”

Graham nodded. “The one with the red hair and the glasses. Should I not have talked to her?”

“No, it’s just...never mind.” He definitely needed to have a word with Alex, Harry decided. Assuming Alex was still around when he went to look. “I’ll probably shower first myself, though. There’s a library under one of the blue banners if you’re bored, or an indoor Quidditch pitch under the other green one.”

Graham’s eyes widened. “You’re not serious.”

“Go have a look.”

Graham disappeared. Harry shut the door and changed into his dressing gown, picking his day robes off the chair where he’d left them. His watch was with them, and he grimaced slightly at the time. 11:20—he’d have to move fast if he was going to get Graham to see his cousin at noon—

And maybe I should tell him about it before we go. He’s had enough people surprising him with things lately.

xXxXx

At five minutes to noon, Maya was waiting in the seventh floor corridor, her heart thumping painfully. She’d considered telling someone about this—Lee, maybe, or Lindz—but the fact of a password made it likely no one else was supposed to know about this, not even anyone else in the DA.

What is it about? Why just me? What do I have, or who am I, that this is so important for me to be here and no one else—

Then it hit her.

It's who I am. But it's also who somebody else is.

This is about Graham. It has to be.

That's the only reason they'd be so secretive, was if they knew something about him...

Movement caught Maya's eye. The outline of a doorframe was starting to emerge from the stone of the wall. *It's time!*

She ran to the outline, found the crack between the door and the hinges, and whispered the password. "Cracker."

A moment of silence. Then the door was suddenly fully there, and Maya's hand was on the handle—she wrenched it down and pulled—

Harry held up a hand. "Go easy," he said. "No need to rush. He's here."

He—oh, great Merlin's socks, does he mean—

Harry stepped aside, letting her in, and slipped around her to step out into the hall and shut the door behind him. Maya barely noticed. Her attention was focused on the other end of the room, on the too-thin, too-pale boy standing there.

"Hello, Maya," Graham said, a half-smile on his face, obviously forced.

Maya shook her head. "Don't," she said, crossing the room to him. "Don't pretend. You don't have to, not with me. Not ever with me."

Graham shut his eyes, and his face began to crumple. Maya caught his shoulders, pulled him close to her, and sat them both down on the large silk puff the Room had thoughtfully provided right beneath them.

"It's over," she told him again and again, putting her arms around him. "Whatever happened, it's over now. You don't even have to tell me about it if you don't want to. I won't ever ask, I promise."

Graham simply held tight to her and shivered, an occasional tear slipping from between his eyelids. "They never touched me," he said finally. "Except to take me places. And none of them ever looked at me like I was a person."

Maya laid a hand on his cheek and leaned back until her cousin's face came into focus. "I see you," she said softly.

Graham looked up at her and smiled, a real smile this time, if a slightly damp and shaky one, and in that moment Maya knew they'd won. There were a few battles still to fight, but the war was over, and victory was theirs.

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“But why not?” Meghan stared at Neville. “It’s your hand! You need it!”

“It’s my finger,” Neville corrected. “My little finger, on my off hand. I don’t really need it—well, except for chording, but I can learn to do without it.”

“But you don’t have to! I could heal it!”

“And I told you, I don’t want you to heal it. Not any more than you already did.”

Meghan boiled up, then clenched both hands into fists and visibly pulled herself together. “All I could do while I was so scared was stop the bleeding,” she said. “And make sure that it wouldn’t get infected.”

“You did that really well.” Neville touched the finger in question, which now had only one joint and no fingernail. “It doesn’t hurt, and the skin’s regrown over it. It just looks like I was born with this finger a bit shorter than the others.”

“But you weren’t!” Meghan cried out. “You shouldn’t have to have it that way! I don’t understand! Why won’t you let me help you?” Her eyes began to glisten. “Is it—is it because I was bad? Because I got angry and made the noise? That’s why you got hurt...” Her fists tightened again. “Are you trying to make me remember, so I don’t ever do it again?” A tear spilled over, and she flicked it away angrily. “Is that why?” she demanded. “Tell me the truth!”

“It’s part of the reason,” Neville began, “but—”

“I *knew* it!” Meghan burst out. “I *knew* you were just doing it for some *stupid* reason like that—I don’t need you to do that, I don’t need you to do anything, I don’t need anyone to do anything, I won’t ever forget that as long as I live!”

She searched her pocket for a tissue, sniffing a bit, until Neville held one out to her. “I *can’t* forget it,” she said through the tissue. “I keep thinking about it all the time. The way my stomach felt, and my legs—I was sure you were going to get caught, and then the Death Eaters would have hurt you, and the Order would have had to come and rescue you if you weren’t already *dead*, and nobody would ever take us seriously ever again, and all of it would be my fault...”

Neville pulled her into a hug. “None of that happened,” he said quietly. “But it could, if you do something like that again. You know that now, and I don’t think you’ll forget it. But I can’t be sure. Nobody can be sure about something like that. So I want you to have a way to always remember, a way to remember forever and ever.” He reached down and brushed his hand under her chin, lifting her face to meet his. “So I don’t ever have to feel that way about you. Because in a

war, if you make a noise, you're the one the enemy will find."

Meghan nodded, her eyes still gleaming with unshed tears. "Promise me one thing?" she whispered.

"If I can, I will."

Meghan's hand closed around Neville's injured one. "The day the war is over. After Harry wins. Promise me you'll let me heal you then."

Neville smiled. "I promise. The day the war is over."

Meghan pulled his hand around and kissed the little finger. "It won't be too much trouble to learn how to do the chords again," she said with determination. "For some of them, you can just spread your other fingers a little wider, and for other ones you'll have to turn your hand more so you can use what you have..."

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"Hello, is anyone—" Bartemius Crouch pushed open the door of the kitchen at Number Twelve. "I seem to have stumbled on a party," he said. "Is there an occasion?"

"I'm going to be a father," Sirius said. "Well, not that I'm not a father already, but—"

"Ah, I see. Congratulations." Crouch nodded to Aletha. "I was hoping Dumbledore was here, or that perhaps you know when he'll be back..."

"Possibly later tonight," said Danger from the stove without turning around. "But it might not be until fairly late. *Professor* Umbridge has been watching him more closely in recent weeks. She thinks he knows where Harry is."

Crouch gave a dry little laugh. "I can't imagine he wouldn't," he said. "He seems to know most everything that goes on in that school, unless someone has made their first and only priority keeping themselves secret from him. And seeing as it's Potter—his secret weapon, you could say..."

"Secret weapon?" Remus said, in an even tone that nonetheless drew eyes. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Come now, Lupin. Isn't it common knowledge the—" Crouch stopped and cleared his throat. "I mean, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is after Potter? And he seems unable to kill Potter, though he's tried multiple times. With the enemy so fixated on that one target, we have more latitude, more ability to strike at him, because he's blind to other areas from which a threat might come. Don't you agree?"

"Of course," said Aletha, taking a sip of her drink. "And that's why we've been so vigilant about teaching Harry, and all our cubs, self-defense and basic fighting spells. If they must be targets, at

least they won't be sitting jobberknolls.”

Crouch inclined his head to her. “Nicely put, Healer. You taught Defense for a year at Hogwarts, didn't you?”

“Co-taught with Sirius, yes. Though I had to finish the year alone when he got himself Petrified.” Aletha laughed. “I suppose I should be grateful he thought fast enough to keep the basilisk—Sangre—from killing him and Hermione out of hand.”

“Sangre?” Crouch looked intrigued. “You mean Slytherin's basilisk had a name?”

“Has,” Danger corrected. “She has a name.”

Crouch frowned. “Are you telling me that Dumbledore's allowed the thing to stay at Hogwarts?”

“She lives in the Forest,” said Sirius, irritation clear in his tone. “She can't see anymore—her eyes were wounded, then healed closed. She hunts by scent, and she agreed not to kill humans in return for being allowed to stay.”

“Agreed?” Crouch's face cleared almost as soon as he'd said the word. “Ah, yes, I had forgotten Potter's Parseltongue. I'd imagine he acted as translator, yes?”

Danger chuckled. “I've heard it was quite a sight to see,” she said. “Dumbledore on one side, a forty-foot snake on the other, and the skinny little Harry in between them. Harry's become rather close with Sangre, actually. He sometimes sneaks out at night to play with her—” She stopped, her face worried.

“Or he would, if he were still at school,” Crouch finished smoothly for her. “Never fear, Mrs. Granger-Lupin, I have no love for Dolores Umbridge. Besides, I had already decided he must still be somewhere at Hogwarts, or you and your compatriots—” He gestured at the rest of the Pack-parents. “—would never be so sanguine about his apparent disappearance.”

“Harry has always been good at hiding when he doesn't want to be found,” Sirius said. “I think it's a family thing.”

“And yet sometimes, even those who do not wish to be found, are,” Crouch said blandly.

Sirius half-rose. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Sit *down*,” Aletha hissed at him, grabbing a handful of his robes and yanking. “You'll have to excuse my husband,” she said to Crouch. “I sometimes think he's categorically unable to let go of the past.”

“You should talk,” Sirius muttered.

“What was that, dear?” Aletha said dangerously.

“Nothing.”

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“So,” Minerva said conversationally. “We have a second year Slytherin boy and a sixth year Gryffindor girl who refuse to be parted. Not to mention a pair of second year Gryffindor girls who are beginning to show the signs of wishing to join the party.”

“And the Slytherin of the pair, at least, cannot at the moment return to his dormitory.” Severus seemed perfectly calm, but Minerva knew well that was only the outward composure acquired by any double agent who remained alive for longer than a few days. “In fact, he may be permanently unable to return there. I can never be sure that I know all my students’ loyalties, or what they would do if properly motivated.”

“It would be a shame if anything happened to Mr. Pritchard here at Hogwarts,” Minerva agreed, “after what he has already been through.”

Severus glanced at her, as though weighing her words for double meanings or hidden slams. Unless he was being unduly critical, though, he would find none, for none had been intended. “Indeed,” he said finally, his tone noncommittal. “So we must find some alternate lodging for these two students, and do it in such a way that we cannot be faulted for favoritism.”

“For Pritchard, there’s an easy answer, at least to begin with.” Minerva ran a finger across the top of the framed picture on her desk, grateful that its frame was currently empty—she wasn’t up to the barbed comments Severus would toss her way if he saw the occupants of the photograph she had kept for all these years. “He can remain hidden, as...another has done.” She didn’t quite dare to say Harry’s name aloud, not while Dolores Umbridge was in the castle. “I’m positive Poppy will want to see him, and probably keep him under observation for a few days before she permits him to go back to class.”

“It also strikes me that a full Healer might be needed in his case,” Severus observed. “One whose specialty is troubles of the mind and the heart.” The faintest touch of distaste colored the last word. “Adults, fully capable and rational, usually have a great deal of trouble dealing with the aftermath of a situation such as Pritchard’s, and he is a twelve-year-old boy.”

“Which may yet be his salvation,” Minerva countered. “He knows, or ought to know, that there’s nothing he could have done to save himself. Most adults would feel that they should have been able to rescue themselves, even if that is completely illogical.”

“Allow me to remind you of the Headmaster’s caution to me, when this situation was first made known to us,” Severus countered in his turn. “‘War ages us all.’ Pritchard may have lost his childhood by this act. He will certainly have lost a great deal, if not all, of his innocence. And he will have been hurt, deeply, by his treatment among the Death Eaters, even if it was relatively kind.”

Minerva nodded slowly. “We’ve worked ourselves rather thoroughly off track,” she said after a

moment. “We were discussing housing, and how to deal with the fact that the Pritchard children need one another after what they’ve both been through.”

“We briefly discussed another,” said Severus, a brief frown of distaste crossing his features. “Do you perhaps have information that I lack about the spaciousness of that other’s chosen...*den*?”

“Not directly. But I can obtain it. Are you suggesting...”

“That if there is room, and if it will not compromise security, the Pritchards should remain with this other for the time being.” The frown had mutated into a sour smile, as though discussing Harry Potter in such coded terms appealed to some portion of what passed for Severus’ sense of humor. “He has certainly proven himself difficult to find.”

“So he has.” Minerva’s lips twitched as she thought of the pranksters’ latest offensive against Professor Dolores Jane Umbridge. “I believe Dolores would eat her own wand if it meant a chance to find him.”

Severus snorted a laugh. “I agree.”

Harry, or whoever was helping him, must have done hours of research on this latest prank, and Minerva’s ears ached to think of it. They had carefully winnowed through children’s songs and rhymes to find the most disgusting, most banal, or most unforgettable of them, with a priority placed on those which combined the three elements. Then they had enchanted the suits of armor throughout the castle to sing them whenever Dolores passed by.

Added to this were wicked little cartoons, usually illustrating a line or two from the songs, posted in some of the most public places the pranksters could find. Dolores removed them as fast as she found them, of course, but they seemed to multiply magically, so that every time she tore one down, two more appeared in its place.

Peeves, of course, had ‘improved’ upon the songs, and was not tied down to any one spot as the suits of armor were. He could, and did, follow Dolores around the castle, humming the tune of one or another of the chants incessantly and bursting into full-fledged song as the mood struck him. He had also made a suit out of the cartoons Dolores had ripped down, and the pictures on them danced in time to his humming. All in all, he was a most amusing sight to behold.

“I would love to know,” Minerva mused aloud, “which of them thought of combining visual and auditory attacks.”

“I have a guess,” said Severus, surprising her. “Only a guess, but I would be willing to take a risk on it.”

“Oh?”

“Ginny Weasley.”

“Really?” Minerva frowned. “I wouldn’t have thought...”

“She remains deliberately in the background much of the time,” Severus said with a degree of certainty Minerva wasn’t used to hearing from him. “I believe she wishes to be underestimated, so as to be more free to work. She has intelligence, cleverness, and the ability to plan a few steps ahead, which is more than I usually see in a Gryffindor. And she was the one in the costume near the beginning of the school year. I recently had a chance to reexamine my memory of the event, and it could have been no one else.”

“But I saw her at the Gryffindor table!” Minerva protested. “She couldn’t possibly have changed her clothes and removed that makeup in the amount of time she had—not to mention that the doors were locked from the inside after she’d left!”

Severus shook his head. “I have no idea how she could have done that,” he said. “All I know for certain is that it was Ginny Weasley who mimicked Dolores Umbridge so perfectly that some of the students are still laughing about it now, almost two months after it happened.”

“Well, then.” Minerva smiled. “I will have to watch Miss Weasley more closely, to be sure I notice all the times when she’s doing something she shouldn’t.”

The two Heads of House shared a long look, for one all-too-rare moment perfectly in accord.

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Harry shut the door of the green bedroom and looked up at the painting on the wall, empty except for the green leather chair. “*Alex?* ” he said in Parseltongue.

A dark head poked around the edge of the frame. “*Somebody calling me?* ”

“Yes, it’s me.”

“Hello, Me, you’re looking well,” Alex said cheerily.

“Har har. Look, I was talking to Graham this morning, and he said there’d been a woman in the painting on the wall of his bedroom. A red-haired woman with glasses. But this is the bedroom where he slept last night, and yours is the only painting on the wall...”

“Which means there was a redhead with glasses in my painting, doesn’t it?” Alex finished. “And you want to know who it is.”

“I might like that.”

Alex seated himself and folded his arms. “And what if it’s none of your business?”

“I’m hiding here,” Harry said, “and that makes anybody who might know where I am my business.”

“Ah.” Alex nodded. “You don’t need to worry about her for that, Harry. She’d no more give you away than I would.”

“Yes, but who *is* she? There’s only Margaret of all of you who has red hair, and she doesn’t wear glasses.”

“But you’re forgetting, Harry, I have the entire castle to roam in.” Alex spread his arms wide. “Or, at least, the portrait world of it. She could be anyone, couldn’t she now?”

“Yes. She could be.” Harry folded his arms. “And that’s why I want to know who she is, so I know if I can trust her.”

“Don’t you know by now?” Alex grinned. “You can always trust a redhead. They’re inherently trustworthy. Not to mention very attractive.”

Harry’s cheeks flamed. “Shut up.”

“Only if you promise to stop impugning my lady’s honor.”

The blush disappeared as fast as it had come, and Harry grinned in his turn. “Oh, so she’s your *lady*, is she?”

“Yes,” Alex said with dignity. “As it happens, she is. And she is as trustworthy as I am, quite possibly more so, because I am a Slytherin and everyone knows we are sneaky bas—”

“A-lex,” crooned a woman’s voice from somewhere out of sight.

“Baskets of muck,” Alex finished, rather lamely. “*She doesn’t like swearing,*” he confided in Parseltongue. “*It takes some time to get used to, but I think I like it.*”

“*Like what?*”

“*Having a girlfriend again. Being able to feel this way. I shouldn’t, you know. It’s not the way we’re meant to be. But—*” Alex stopped, frowned, then switched back to English. “Extenuating circumstances called for it. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised there’s no way to say that in Parseltongue. It’s a more complicated concept than most snakes could deal with.”

“You’d be surprised,” Harry said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “You remember Siss?” The name brought only a small pang, now, before the memories of the good times they’d shared wrapped their comfort around the ever-present pain of loss. “She was pretty smart. She knew a lot of things I didn’t know, or was too young to understand all the way.”

“Well, she was a special case…” Alex glanced off to one side, rolled his eyes and nodded, then returned his attention to Harry. “Sorry, Harry, I have to go. Anything that you have to tell me right away?”

“Well, I think we found the last entrance here. The one through the indoor Quidditch pitch. I think it lets out by a big rock out near the lake—does that sound right?”

Alex looked away, his eyes suddenly shadowed with pain. “Yes,” he said roughly. “Yes, it sounds

exactly right. Just...don't ask me why. Not now. Not today. I have to go. Good luck—”

And an instant later, the chair was empty.

“Good luck?” Harry repeated aloud. “Good luck with what?”

Someone knocked on the door of the green bedroom.

“Come in!”

Ginny stuck her head around the door. “Professor McGonagall sent me with a message,” she said. “She wants to know if Graham can stay here with you for a while, and Maya too. Do you think they can?”

Harry laughed aloud, standing up. “It's not like there isn't room. But what about Maya's classes? Are we going to tell her how to get in and out of here so she can come and go when she needs to? It's not that I don't trust her, but the fewer people who know the password here, the better—it's not like guessing the others is hard, once you know one, you know them all...”

“That's why I was thinking of asking the twins for a reusable voice spell set on a watch or a pin or something,” Ginny said, shutting the door behind Harry. “One that's inaudible to people. That way, she could trigger the spell any time she needed to get in or out, and the door would open for her, but she'd never know the password herself. Just knowing where the door is doesn't do you any good if you can't open it.”

“But what if Umbridge got a hold of her and made her use the spell to open the door anyway?” Harry objected. “I'm still dead if she finds a way in here. Unless I run out the Quidditch pitch door as Wolf and go hide in the Forest...”

“That can be the backup plan. But there has to be a way to make sure no one can take that spell from Maya. Table and chairs, please,” Ginny said to the ceiling of the main room.

Harry sat down on nothing, a cushioned chair bursting out of the floor to catch him. “What about an automatic ending spell on the voice spell if whatever it's in leaves Maya?” he suggested. “Maybe if it gets cold, because that'd mean it was away from her body. But that still leaves someone forcing her to use it while she still has it...”

“Have two triggers for it,” said Ginny promptly. “One for normal use, and one for forced use. The forced one will destroy the spell instead of making it work.”

“That would do it.” Harry pulled out the parchment and quills he knew would be waiting on a shelf under the small table. “So let me write this down—a voice spell in something like a watch, with a destruction spell if it gets colder than body temperature, and two separate triggers for it... you think Fred and George can handle that?”

“In their sleep,” Ginny said, chuckling. “You know how Mum was so angry with them for only getting a few O.W.L.s each? They could have gotten as many as they'd had classes if they'd

wanted to. It just suits them to have people think they're stupid or lazy."

"When really, they work very hard," Harry finished. "Just not on school projects."

They both laughed.

"Sometimes I envy them," Ginny said, leaning forward and resting her chin in her hands. "They've always known what they wanted, from the time they were young. And they've never been alone, because they always have each other."

"It looks like that," Harry said, thinking of one of Letha's favorite sayings. "But you can only see their outsides, the faces they put on. Maybe they don't know what they want as much as you think they do. Maybe they still get lonely, even with each other around." He shook his head. "Or maybe I don't know what I'm talking about, and you're right, which is a lot more likely."

"No, you could be right. You are right about one thing—I can't see inside them. So I don't know for sure. But I do see them a lot, and it'd be hard for them to be pretending all the time." Ginny shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Only them," Harry said with an answering shrug of his own, "and they aren't telling."

"So," said Ginny after a moment's silence, "were you talking to Alex?"

Harry nodded. "Apparently he's got a lady-friend—Graham saw her in the portrait this morning."

"Ooh." Ginny's eyes danced. "Should we try and catch them..."

"Playing guitar?" Harry suggested when she seemed to be fumbling for a phrase. "Long story," he said at the puzzled look in her eyes. "It's from before we met you, when we were in America—we met some wizarding kids in a place called Phoenix, and that was what they called it when a guy and a girl went off together, was 'playing guitar'."

"So I could say that Neville and Meghan play guitar together and be right both ways, then." Ginny laughed. "I like that."

The laughter, light and sweet and musical, drew Harry's thoughts back to the moment Alex had implied that redheads were especially attractive. Since Harry only knew one redheaded girl—

Well, two, but I've barely talked to Amanda Smythe at DA meetings. She hangs around Draco more than me.

He amended his thought. However many redheaded girls he might know, Ginny was the only one he knew well, and certainly the only one for whom he had, or might have, or was starting to have, feelings in that direction.

Part of me feels like it's wrong, like she's my friend, like I'm betraying something by liking her, but another part of me feels like it's the best thing I could be doing—

Harry would have smacked himself on the forehead if Ginny hadn't been sitting right there. *Idiot. What are Padfoot and Moony always telling you? Always, every time this comes up? "Don't date someone who isn't a friend first. Don't get involved with someone you can't talk to. If you don't have things in common, you won't last. The best person to marry—"*

Um, I think I'll stop right there for now. That's going a little far at the moment.

But it's not wrong to like a friend that way. It's right. It's a lot more right than liking a girl you've only seen in the distance, just because she's cute, without ever knowing anything about her.

But how do I tell her? Or should I tell her at all? Maybe she'll do something first—maybe I don't have to—

No, she won't do that. She's been talking to that one Ravenclaw, Corner, Michael Corner—I don't know how serious they are, but she won't dump him unless she has a reason, and she won't have a reason unless I give her one—but how can I give her one without looking stupid?

"Knut for your thoughts." Ginny's voice broke into his ramblings, and suddenly Harry knew exactly what he was going to say, and how.

"Show me the money," he said.

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Ginny dug a Knut out of her pocket and slid it across the table. "Money-grubber," she teased.

"It's for the war effort." Harry picked up the coin but didn't put it into his own pocket, starting to play with it instead. "Though I should probably give you this back. I've been trying for a while to figure out how to ask you this."

Ginny's heart started to pound, despite her best efforts. *Stop that!* she told it firmly. *This can not be what it sounds like...*

"I suppose I could ask Hermione, but I don't think she's even noticed boys are different than girls yet, except that boys annoy her more. Meghan knows a little about it, but I feel silly asking her. She's so young still. And I don't think Luna'd say anything I could understand. Besides..." Harry spun the coin on the table. "I like talking to you. I like how we always sort of know what the other one means to say."

"So what do you need to ask me?" Ginny said, amazed at the evenness of her voice.

"I need some advice. Er, for a friend." Harry picked up the Knut and spun it again. "He thinks he really likes this girl, but they're just friends right now, and he doesn't know how to tell her he wants it to be more than that. He doesn't want to just say it, because if she doesn't like him that way he'd feel stupid. Besides, he made a fool of himself with a girl once this year already, and he doesn't want to do it again. But if he doesn't say anything, then he won't ever get anywhere."

Ginny felt her heart hit the floor. *“For a friend” would work so much better if you weren’t down here all the time except for DA meetings, Harry. And you never have time to hear something like this from the other boys—not that they’d tell you this anyway. You might know about it if you were up in the Tower with us, but down here? Not a chance.*

So the “friend” is you. Has to be. But a girl you’re just friends with... who’s that? You’re friendly with the DA, but I don’t think I’d call an awful lot of them your actual friends. You just haven’t known them long enough.

“Ginny?”

Get a grip, girl. Think later. He needs that advice now. “Right.” Ginny took a deep breath, thinking over what she’d like in this position. “Well, if he’s not good at dropping hints—going off with her to talk alone, just the two of them, or always offering to help her with things—he might just have to come out and say it. Do you want me to help you figure out how y—*he* can make it sound good?”

“Yes, please.” Harry either hadn’t heard or was ignoring her slip of the tongue. Ginny would have bet on ‘ignoring’. Not much got past Harry these days.

“All right. Does the girl have a name?”

Harry thought for a second. “Just call her Molly.”

Ginny snickered. “That makes things easy. I can just crib from Dad.” She pulled herself up and put on her father’s voice. “Molly, I have to tell you this, because it won’t leave my head until I do. You’re smart, you’re beautiful, and I think I really like you. Would you go with me to Hogsmeade on Saturday?” She dropped the voice. “Only you’ll have to slot in something else, since you can’t go to Hogsmeade.”

Harry pouted. “I didn’t fool you with my friend?”

Ginny gave him a look.

“All right, it was pretty transparent. Thanks, Ginny, that’s a big help.” Harry pushed back his chair and stood up.

“You’re welcome.” Ginny closed her mouth firmly after the second word, to avoid making any noises that would tell him how she was really feeling. He was walking away around the table, he must be going into one of the other rooms to practice—

No, he was circling back around to her side of the table—

Wait a minute—

Harry sat down on the corner of the table beside her. “Ginny, I have to tell you this,” he said, looking into her eyes with a straight face, “because it won’t leave my head until I do. You’re

smart, you're beautiful, and I think I really like you. Would you help me plan my best prank ever on Professor Umbridge?"

Ginny blinked once. Then again. "No," she said hoarsely.

"No?" Harry stared at her. "You don't want to help me?"

"No, this can't be happening! This is crazy! You can't really mean this! This is a joke or something—Ron put you up to this, didn't he? Ron or the twins, but they'd have had to go through him...I'll kill them, you wait and see, I will kill them so dead they'll wish Voldemort got a hold of them first..."

"That's part of the reason I do really mean it," Harry said over her rant. "You're not afraid of his name. You just say it out."

"Only because you did it first," Ginny retorted. "I've spent my entire life—well, the part of it since I met you—trying to be like you. I think you're amazing. I had a crush on you for years, and I thought I was over it, but obviously I'm not..." Her cheeks and ears might as well be on fire for all the heat they were generating. "I knew you liked Cho Chang, I thought you were going to start dating her, I thought you and I would just be friends and Pridemates forever, and I'd finally got myself convinced that was all right..."

"You think I'm amazing?" Harry was starting to grin, that little cocky grin Ginny knew irritated Hermione endlessly. "Who stabbed a huge snake with a borrowed dagger? Who figured out what Luna meant in time to send Buckbeak to save Hermione and Draco? Who was the first one to think of getting the Pride together to help me when I was at the graveyard?"

Ginny's mouth fell open. "How did you know about that?"

"Hermione told me over the summer. And speaking of Hermione, did you notice she's not doing a lot of alpha female things in the Pride anymore?"

"No," Ginny lied.

Harry lowered his head and looked at her over his glasses. "You know I can smell it when you do that," he said. "The same way you can smell it if I do. But I'm not. And you know that."

Ginny folded her arms across her chest and glowered at him. *Just like a boy, bring logic into an argument...*

Surreptitiously, she inhaled.

A fresh, clean scent like a beam of morning sun warmed her from the inside out.

He is. He's telling the truth.

Harry Potter is sitting here, on this table, telling me that he likes me. That he likes me. And I know

it's the truth.

“So you think you really like me,” she said quietly, not meeting his eyes. “Would you do something for me, then?”

“Anything,” Harry promised. “If I can.”

Ginny stuck her arm under his nose. “Pinch me.”

Harry obliged.

Ginny blinked several times. Nothing changed.

Well, that rules out the dream theory.

So it's not a dream, and it's not a lie...

I guess that only leaves one thing it could be.

I'm going mad.

“May I?” Harry asked, still cradling her arm in his hands (and wasn't *that* sending chills all through her spine).

“May you what?”

Harry brought one finger to his mouth, kissed it, and laid it against the spot he'd pinched her. “To make it better,” he said solemnly.

All right, that does it. You are going down, Harry Potter.

Ginny yanked her arm back, got her feet under her, and transformed and leapt at the same moment.

The panicked look on Harry's face was very gratifying for the instant it lasted, but then Lynx had Wolf to deal with, and Wolf wasn't taking no for an answer.

Not that I'd really want to give him one.

They ended up in a tangled heap by the library door, and Harry retransformed an instant after she did. He sat up, she leaned down, and half by accident, half by design, their lips met—

All right, maybe a little more than half by design. At least on my end.

Ginny'd tried kissing Michael once or twice, but it had always felt awkward and strained. This...didn't.

No lightning and thunder. No sunbursts and angels singing. But then, we'd want to pay attention

to that instead of to this.

I think I like this better.

Her arms were going around him. His were already around her. Neither of them seemed to want to let go, and Ginny had heard about this interesting thing you could do while you were kissing someone...

A door opened somewhere in the room. “Harry? Ginny? You in here?” said Ron’s voice. “I was just—oh my God.” A long pause. “Er, I’ll come back later.”

The door shut again, very firmly.

Ginny burst into giggles, pulling back from Harry just in time to avoid spitting on him. A second or two later, Harry was laughing too. “I think we broke him,” he managed to get out. “You think he’ll ever get over it?”

“He’d better,” Ginny said coolly. “I’m not giving you up.”

“Well, good. I happen to feel the same way.” Harry rearranged their positions slightly. “And we were just getting to the interesting part... should we try again?”

Ginny smiled. “Let’s take it slowly,” she said. “We won’t get a second chance at this.”

Harry sketched a bow in her direction. “I am at your service, m’lady.” He stopped. “My lady,” he repeated more slowly. “You know, that sounds really good.”

Ginny’s smile grew until she felt like it would stretch right off her face.

Off mine and onto Harry’s... sounds like a plan.

A plan they proceeded to put into action.

If I’m going mad, please don’t ever let Meghan and Neville come after me...

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Facing Danger

Chapter 17: I'll Be Seeing You (Year 5)

Chapter 17: I'll Be Seeing You

George Weasley looked up in mild surprise as Ron dropped into the armchair next to his. "Where'd you come from?" he asked. Then he took another look at Ron's face. "What's wrong?"

"Ginny," Ron croaked.

That got George's attention instantly, and Fred's too. "Is she hurt?" George's twin demanded urgently. "Sick? In trouble?"

"No! No, no, no, no, no..." Ron waved his arms jerkily, warding off those ideas.

"Good." Fred settled back into his own armchair. "So something about Ginny has your robes in a knot..."

George took another look at Ron's pallor, put it together with some of the looks he'd noticed flying about during DA meetings (though always strictly when the other party wasn't watching), and made a guess. "Harry?"

Ron shot upright. "Y-you *know* ? How—"

"No magic this time, little brother," said Fred in the tone of superiority he'd perfected. "Just native wit and the proper combination of information."

George took on his own carefully crafted voice, that of placation and sympathy. "It had to happen sometime, Ron. And Harry's hardly likely to hurt her."

"He'd better not," said Fred, tapping the list in his hand significantly. "Or the more explosive products of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes will have a new tester."

"He's practically family already," George took over again. "You two have been impossible to pry apart since the day you met. You tell me. Would Harry ever do anything on purpose, or even accidentally, that might hurt Ginny?"

Ron blinked a few times, then slowly shook his head.

"And she's just right for him, too," said Fred, blowing on the list to dry the notations he'd written on it. "Or should I say, they're just right for each other. Ginny needs someone who'll think the world of her, but not try to put her on a pedestal or lock her up for her own good—"

"And Harry," George picked up, "needs someone who can keep up with him, even challenge him. A partner, every way that goes."

Ron's color was returning to normal. "I know," he said a bit hoarsely. "I know all that. But it's just—I mean—you weren't the ones who walked in on them *snogging*!"

The twins glanced at each other. It was a mistake. Fred cracked first, or at least George thought he did; he might have done it himself, and in the end, it didn't matter. The result was the same. A pair of roaring redheads, a third slumped in a chair with his face in his hands, and most of Gryffindor Tower craning their necks to see what had the Weasley twins so amused.

"It's not you," George assured his brother when he could breathe again. "It's just like the old joke..."

Fred pulled a long face. "Oi, George, I broke my arm in two places."

"Well, Fred, if I were you—"

"I wouldn't go to those two places anymore!" they finished in unison, and surrendered to laughter once more.

It was an improvement, George thought as he sneaked a look at Ron's face. Red, rather than white. Yes, it would do. For the moment, anyway.

They were simply going to *have* to teach Ron how to give a stern older-brother look.

xXxXx

Draco paused with his hand on the doorknob of the door to the Quidditch pitch. The sounds coming from inside the room were the normal ones he'd expect—shouts, laughter, squeals—but only two voices were making them. One male, one female.

And since there's only one of the girls who really likes to fly...

He opened the door and stepped inside.

High above one set of goal hoops, Harry perched on his Firebolt, both hands above his head. "Try this one!" he shouted, and a shining ring of fire appeared in the air over the pitch, closer to the other end than to his own. "Take them as they come!"

"Here I go!" Ginny called back, and she zoomed out of the shadows and guided her Cleansweep expertly through the hoop. Another appeared, low and to one side, and she dived and swooped through the center of that as well, then pulled back sharply to climb and make the next one, higher even than the first and almost in the stands—

An obstacle course. Or flying practice. We should do this when Harry's back on the team.

Draco pulled his eyes off Ginny long enough to look at Harry. He wanted to be sure this wasn't too much of a strain on his brother.

He snorted. *Strain. Right. If that's a strained look, I'll get strained any day...*

Hey, wait a second. I know he loves using the Gryffindor magic, now that he can, but that's not all that's going on here.

Draco followed Harry's line of sight and came up with Ginny, which shouldn't have been a surprise. She was his friend, his teammate, his Pridemate, and a fine flyer, and she'd just shredded through his obstacle course. But there was something more in Harry's look today, something Draco hadn't seen before—

Well, not on Harry. I see it on the Captain every now and again. Padfoot or Moony, or Mr. Weasley. And I'd bet I look like it too sometimes.

The new element in Harry's expression was the incredulous pride of a man who has somehow, by the gift of some mad god, been deemed worthy by the finest woman in the world.

He's in love. And so is she, or he wouldn't be grinning like that.

Just for confirmation, Draco glanced back at Ginny. The youngest Weasley wore the same look on her face as Harry, the look Draco was still privately astonished to find in Luna's eyes when they were alone together.

Marvelous. Harry's managed to acquire a roommate and a girlfriend in the same day.

And he's still technically expelled.

One of these days, I'm going to find whatever part of him attracts this kind of insanity, and I'm going to remove it. I don't care what part it is, or how important he thinks it is. I am going to get rid of it if it kills me.

The vision-image of the love in Luna's eyes turned into bleak and bitter pain suddenly slashed at him.

Bad choice of words, perhaps.

He stepped back out of the room, got his back to the wall, and let himself sink to the floor, eyes closed, overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. *It's wonderful Harry and Ginny are together, I'm so happy for them, but I'm going to be dead in less than two years—I'll probably never even get married, and they'll have their whole lives together—*

Unless Harry gets killed in the war too. Or Ginny does. She's not going to sit at home and stay safe, no matter what Harry wants. She's a fighter, and she won't settle for anything less than a piece of the same action we get.

Though maybe she'll change her mind after... after me. Maybe that's what I'll do, is save her life. And that would be saving Harry's life, too, if I'm right about them. They don't look like they'd want to go on without each other now that they've finally got it figured out...

A little sound, either sob or snicker, escaped him. *I knew this was coming eventually. She's been on the prowl for him—God, almost since we met. Going on nine years ago now. Even my boneheaded little alpha brother couldn't keep his head in the sand forever.*

Hands on his arms startled him. “A—I mean, who’s there?”

“It’s just me,” said Luna. “If you want me.”

“Always,” Draco said, and only after he said it did he realize he’d started to say something else.

Carefully, he excised the something else from his thoughts and buried it under several layers of inconsequentials. Then, for good measure, he stomped on the mental grave.

And stay there.

The princess of the moon and the stars had come to his arms of her own free will. Nothing else mattered.

xXxXx

“I’m so happy for you both,” Hermione said, hugging Ginny tightly. “And I’m glad you worked it out on your own,” she added over Ginny’s shoulder to Harry. “Danger and I were going to start dropping hints if you didn’t get it by Christmas.”

Harry raised an eyebrow at her.

“I’m sure she’s not kidding, l-love,” said Ginny, half-turning to see Harry’s expression. Though she’d stumbled over the word, there could be no doubting the feeling behind it, not with the brilliant smile currently lighting every corner of the room. “Mums know these things.”

“They do.” Hermione let Ginny go. “But there’s something we have to take care of now.”

“What?” Ginny looked perplexed.

Hermione glanced back over her shoulder. Graham had returned from his time with Maya earlier that evening, and was now in the green bedroom, supposedly asleep. The door was open slightly, though, and she was getting an occasional scent from within that didn’t smell like sleep.

Might as well give him a good show, then.

She drew her dagger from its place at her side and flicked it cleanly into the padded floor between Ginny’s feet. “Challenge,” she said, lifting her head high. “Three rounds, hands, wands, and forms. Best two out of three.”

The Pride started up, dismayed, all speaking at once.

“Hermione, what are you—”

“You don’t have to—”

“This really isn’t—”

Ginny slid her hand down Harry’s side, pulled his dagger free of its sheath, and flung it down to land side by side with Hermione’s. “Done,” she said, meeting Hermione’s eyes.

“Done,” Hermione answered. “You choose first.”

“Excuse me?” Harry stepped between them, looking from his girlfriend to his sister with an expression somewhere between bemused and angry. “Hermione, why are you doing this?”

Hermione opened her mouth to explain, but Ginny beat her to it. “Because I won’t be alpha female just because we’re together,” the younger girl said, drawing the Pride’s eyes to her. “You have your place because you’re the best one for it. I should prove myself just like you did.”

Harry moved closer to her, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Ginny, you’ve already proved yourself to me—”

“Then let me prove myself to myself,” Ginny interrupted. “Let me know, once and for all, that I really deserve what I’m going to have. That I’m not just coasting on what you’ve done.” She looked up into Harry’s eyes. “I need this,” she said softly. “We both do. If you stop it, we’ll all just wonder for the rest of our lives what would have happened, and if Hermione might not still be a better alpha female for us, even though I’m your mate.”

Harry’s head came up, as though he were Wolf catching a new scent on the wind. “You’re sure?” he asked after a moment.

“Positive.”

Harry turned to Hermione. “Neenie?”

“This has to happen, Harry.” Hermione reached for her brother’s hand, hoping some of her bone-deep certainty could be transmitted through their touch. “You never fought for your place, but that was because there was never any question who our alpha male was. Now we need to be sure we have the right alpha female. For the good of the Pride. We’re going to be fighting in a war, and the only way we’ll make it through is if we have the best leaders we can. Both of them.”

Harry squeezed her hand once and let it go. “You are both insane,” he said in a casual tone, backing up a step. “So insane that I think I’d get hurt if I tried to stop you from doing this. So I’m not even going to try.”

“Good,” Ginny said, her lips peeling back from her teeth. “Because I’d hate having to hurt you not twenty-four hours after we finally got around to admitting we like each other.”

“And I’d hate having to hurt you back while you were hurting me.”

“So now that we all know we don’t want to hurt each other,” said Ron, reaching out a long arm to snag the two daggers, “why don’t you girls get on with it?”

Harry accepted his dagger back and sheathed it. “Challenged party picks the first round,” he said, half-bowing to Ginny.

“Wands,” Ginny said promptly.

“All right.” Harry waved the rest of the Pride back a few steps, then pulled his own wand as Ginny and Hermione walked up to each other and bowed. “Turn away,” he instructed. “Seven paces. Go.”

Hermione measured out her steps, making them small and deliberate, hearing Ginny’s strong paces behind her, but they reached their destinations and spun around at precisely the same moment.

“*Bracchimotor Mortis!*” Hermione cried, as Ginny shouted “*Stupefy!*”

Hermione managed to twist out of the way of Ginny’s spell. Ginny wasn’t quite fast enough, and the orange light brushed her right shoulder. Immediately, her right arm went stiff. She cursed under her breath and transferred her wand to her left hand.

Have to get her now—if I can pull off some quiet spells, she might not see them coming—

“*Incarcerous*,” Hermione whispered. “*Stupefy. Impedimenta.*”

The three spells sped almost invisibly towards Ginny, who was working to get her arm unlocked—

But her wand came up in time, and her shouted “*Protego!*” created a visible shield against which Hermione’s spells splashed—

No, they didn’t splash, they bounced, and they bled off enough energy that now they are invisible—

Hermione dropped to the floor, but felt an impact on her left side as she did, and swore as movement suddenly became very difficult. *Lucky for me it was just the Impediment Jinx. If it’d been the Stunner or the Binding Spell, this duel would be over now.*

The important thing was getting her wand to a place where she could protect herself, surviving the next volley and the one after that. Even a full-strength Impediment Jinx wore off in fairly short order, and she’d been hit with a low-level version, reflected at that. If she could block Ginny’s next two spells, she’d have a moment’s breathing space to free herself and get back into the game—

Ginny snatched her wand back into her right hand. “*Mucus Aligerum!*” she shouted.

Hermione’s hissed “*Protego*” brought up the invisible magical shield—

And Ginny’s hex blasted straight through it and hit her in the face.

Hermione sneezed. And sneezed again. And then screamed and sneezed at the same time, because something large and slippery and disgusting had just hit her in the face, and she could hear flapping wings all around her, and there seemed to be more of them coming every second, whatever they were, and she couldn't stand it, *get them away, get them AWAY—*

“Halt!” Harry's voice shouted. “*Finite!*”

Hermione felt the Impediment Jinx release her, and the *things* vanished. She drew a long, shaky breath, then opened her eyes and accepted Harry's hand up. “I think that means you win,” she said to Ginny. “What was that?”

“Bat-Bogey Hex,” Ron volunteered before Ginny, blushing furiously, could say anything. “One of her specialties, though she's only ever done it at home before this.”

“It was the only thing I could think of that I knew well enough to punch through a shield,” Ginny said without looking at Hermione.

Hermione touched her face gingerly, relieved to find it clean. “And that means you won,” she said. “It doesn't matter how you win, not in a real fight. And it's not as if you cheated—you just used a spell I wasn't expecting. I should have been more ready for anything, more able to adjust. So you won this round.”

“And that means you pick the next bout.” Ginny put her wand away and started stretching. “Hand-to-hand or form combat?”

Hermione slid her own wand into its special pocket in her robes and thought about it. *If I really wanted a chance at winning, I'd ask for hand-to-hand next. I've been doing that much longer than Ginny has, and I'm older and bigger than she is. I'd have the advantage there. In forms, I'm smaller than she is, and I haven't had that much more practice. Her weight would give her the advantage there, especially since she's heard the story of how I tricked Harry over the summer.*

But this isn't about winning, not really. Not for me. Her eyes moved across the spectators, Draco and Luna sitting side by side, Meghan in the bend of Neville's arm, Ron sprawled on the floor watching intently. *It's about proving to everyone, including Ginny, that she has what it takes. That she really can be the alpha female we'll need if we're going to fight in a war. They know me as alpha. They know what I can do, what I'm capable of. They don't know her that way.*

So I'm not about to throw the individual contests—it wouldn't be fair to either of us if I did—but maybe I'll pick differently than I would have if this were about winning.

“Forms,” she said.

Ginny paused in her stretching, then gave Hermione a long look. Hermione met her Pridemate's eyes evenly. *Yes, I'm ceding you the advantage. Now I hope you remember your lessons—don't ever insist on a fair fight as long as it's unfair in your favor!*

“Forms,” Ginny agreed, and bent over to touch her toes.

A few moments later, Neenie the calico cat once again faced a larger, stronger animal in a fight. This time, though, she couldn't attach herself to a leg, because these legs had weapons of their own on the ends. She could try her rush and leap approach, but Lynx was both canny and flexible, and she'd probably miss and be at the mercy of the larger cat—

Lynx pounced. Neenie shot between the big predator's feet and, feeling daring, reached up a paw as she passed to bat Lynx's stumpy tail. *Point for me.*

Lynx yowled and spun in her own tracks, swiping an oversized paw after Neenie. It caught her on the right flank, knocking her off balance. In a real fight, she knew, there would have been claws involved, and she'd be down and bleeding right this very moment. As it was—

As it is, I can still fight. And maybe make it a decent defeat, if not a victory.

She converted her stumble into a long, looping turn that brought her back towards Lynx outside the bigger cat's claw-range, then leapt for Lynx's back, landing (to her considerable surprise) squarely astride the shoulder blades. In a flash, Neenie bared her teeth and clamped them onto Lynx's spine—

Lynx twisted, hissing, and Neenie flew off to one side. She tried to get her paws under her, but the trajectory was wrong, and she landed on her head with enough force, even on the padded floor, to see stars. An instant later, Lynx was crouched above her, a growl rippling in her throat. Surrender, the big cat demanded, or you are food.

Neenie went instantly limp and closed her eyes. You win, she said in animal-language. I will not fight.

“Halt,” said Harry calmly, and Neenie heard/felt Lynx back away. She opened one eye, then the other, to see a human Ginny blinking at her.

“Something for you?” Hermione asked when she'd sat up and retransformed.

“Did I just beat you?”

“That's what it looked like to me.”

“And you beat Harry the last time you fought.”

Hermione bit her lip to keep from laughing. “I wouldn't think this necessarily means you could do that,” she cautioned. “But you'd give him a run for his Galleons. Ginny, you're good. You have a lot of strength, and you've been training it for years in school and with us. Why are you so surprised you can win?”

“I don't know...”

“Then don’t be,” Ron said, breaking a long silence. “You won, Ginny. You’re alpha female now.”

“Yes, you are,” Hermione reaffirmed, shifting her position until she was sitting on her heels. “Come and take your prize.”

She tilted her head back and half-closed her eyes.

Ginny made the tiniest squeak, then got to her feet and came forward, gingerly at first, but gaining confidence with every step. Two fingers rested on Hermione’s throat and moved away, and Hermione bowed her head, smiling as Ginny’s hands parted her hair and found the back of her neck.

As long as there is a Pride, I will fight beside you and with you and for you, she vowed silently. I will listen to you and do as you say, because you have proved yourself worthy of that trust. And I will help you when you are afraid or worried that you can’t do this job. I know what that feels like. But in the end, you are the only one who can.

Alpha female. Leader of the Pride.

My leader.

Ginny’s hand came away. Hermione lifted her head and stood up, and Ron dropped to his knees in her place.

“This is a little silly,” Ginny said under her breath.

“I promise I won’t bite,” said Ron, grinning at her. “Gin, you did great. You deserve this.” His head went back, and Ginny laid her fingers on his Adam’s apple, then her whole hand on the back of his neck when he’d bowed his head before her.

Luna was the next to offer her allegiance, and Draco after her. Neville knelt in his place next, and Meghan came last of all, shoulders hunched as if she were afraid she’d be refused. Ginny placed her whole hand around Meghan’s throat, instead of the two-fingered touch she’d given everyone else. “Your pride will keep for after missions,” she said in a soft, penetrating voice. “Your Pride will not.”

“Yes, Ginny,” Meghan whispered.

Hermione looked sharply at Ginny, impressed. The emphasis laid on the two words had shown clearly which meaning Ginny intended to use each time. *Not everyone can do that. I don’t even do it right half the time.*

Meghan lowered her head, and Ginny not only laid a hand on the back of the younger girl’s neck, but caressed it. “It’s over,” she said. “All is well.”

And she knows when to stop scolding. I never know that. I always want to keep on being mad at people, even after they’ve apologized and it ought to be over.

Hermione glanced at Harry, and saw much of the same conclusions in his eyes. *Good choice*, she signed to him as Ginny helped Meghan up.

Choice? Harry signed back. *What choice?*

Hermione thought of certain conversations long-past and snickered. *You have a point.*

Harry sagged. Obviously, he'd been hoping Hermione wouldn't understand what he was talking about.

“Our new alpha female, everyone,” said Ron, catching hold of Ginny's arms and hoisting her off the ground. “Ginny Weasley!”

The Pride cheered, and Luna began to sing, everyone else joining in by the end of the first line.

“For she's a jolly good alpha,

“For she's a jolly good alpha,

“For she's a jolly good alpha...

“Which nobody can deny!”

Ginny blushed and laughed as Ron carried her around the Den on his shoulders, the rest of the Pride trooping behind them singing.

And so, a new time begins for the Pride, Hermione mused even as she sang as heartily as the others. *May it be blessed.*

xXxXx

In the green bedroom, Graham sat at the desk, his quill in his hand. The words “Dear Father and Mother” were dry on the top of the scroll before him. He'd written them that morning, then sat motionless and unable to continue for nearly an hour.

Now he knew what he would write.

I have missed you both a great deal, and I would like to come home for a while, if it is safe. But I think I should come back to Hogwarts as soon as I can after that. Not only because I have missed almost two full months' worth of schooling, but for another reason.

You have always told me, both of you, that the real purity in the wizarding world should not be blood, but traditions. That we should cherish the things that make us different than Muggles, but always be willing to try new things and put away old ones that no longer work. I believe I know of people here at Hogwarts who agree with these ideas, and I would like to learn more about them and the traditions they have. If I am lucky, they may even accept me as a member of their group, or another group like it.

With them, I will be safe. I know this, not only because I know the people involved, but because I know what they did. They risked their own lives to try to help someone who was a friend to only one of them, and they succeeded. If they had not, I would not be writing you this letter.

I hope to see you both very soon.

Your devoted son,

Graham

P.S. I think Maya may be having a disagreement with her parents. Is there any way that she could come and stay with us for the holidays?

xXxXx

The next morning, a series of excited squeals from the Gryffindor table drew the attention of the entire Hall. Meghan Black was jumping up and down, hugging Natalie McDonald, and shrieking not quite at the top of her lungs, but certainly close. “I’m a sister! I’m a sister! I’m going to have a little brother!”

Minerva sighed, set down her spoon, and started to get up—the girl had every right to be excited, but not the right to disturb everyone’s meal—but Ginny Weasley spotted the motion, hissed at Meghan and Natalie, and they stopped what they were doing instantly and took their seats, looking chastened but still excited.

“So a brother for Meghan, then,” Minerva said to Albus as the normal conversations in the Hall resumed.

“Indeed.” Albus took a sip of tea. “Sirius is overjoyed, as are Remus and Danger. Aletha admits it will be nice to experience a pregnancy with magical as opposed to Muggle medical care, but she also understands the social pressures she may come under with this child.”

“Social pressures? With a perfectly legitimate, male, *half-blood* heir to the House of Black? Oh, heavens, I can hardly imagine why there would be social pressures in that case.” Minerva snorted. “Even if Sirius did make it quite clear he would rather eat dragon scales than return to pureblood society.”

“Pureblood society may come to him,” Albus said quietly. “His family fortunes are in good repair; his conduct, apart from his marital choices and a few episodes of what they may choose to see as youthful high spirits, is impeccable; and his bloodline is unimpeachable. They may have no choice but to come to him.”

“But for what? Why would they? Unless...” Minerva frowned. “Albus, you’re not telling me there’s talk of—”

“Nothing serious, Minerva. No pun intended, of course.” Albus smiled slightly. “But a man of Sirius’ age and vigor, with a male heir to establish his line and proven ties to most of the

pureblood lines in Britain, is a very strong contender indeed. And the item in question has a mind of its own, should it be activated.”

“But if his heir is only half-blood—”

“It will be more than many others have. More than most, to be honest. There are fewer pureblood men of Sirius’ age than there should be, since so many fought in the last war. And of those, fewer still have married or produced heirs.”

Minerva sighed deeply. “And Sirius will be back in the thick of a life he’s tried so desperately to leave behind.”

“But in a position to make some of the changes he has chafed at being unable to effect.” Albus’ smile widened. “I believe I may well push for this after all. It will take time, since I can most certainly not make the requests openly, but that time might convince Voldemort that I have forgotten about this possibility, or that I never knew. And the purebloods can trace family trees as well as I, and will not want to activate the item unless there is no other choice.”

“If you need information about the other current prospects, you will want to speak with Corona Gamp,” Minerva reminded her friend, intercepting the toast rack as Filius Summoned it. “She has been in pureblood society far more recently than any of us, and she may well have been researching the lines for different reasons.”

“Investigating possible matches, or those to be avoided.” Albus nodded. “How are she and Brian, by the way? I have missed them the last three times I have been at Headquarters.”

Minerva’s lips twitched. “Molly Weasley is somewhat scandalized by the amount of time they spend together, but even she admits she has no right to interfere. I would guess, by the way they treat one another, that both of them had given up hope of ever being found acceptable as a romantic prospect, much less desirable. And Corona was openly ecstatic to hear Aletha’s news.”

“Wonderful.” Albus refilled his and Minerva’s teacups with a wave of his wand. “I had meant to ask, since Sirius and Aletha know the sex of the baby, have they considered names?”

Minerva laughed. “Danger produced an old piece of parchment and claimed Remus just *happened* to find it in one of her books, being used as a bookmark, a few days ago.”

Albus chuckled with her. “And what might it have been?”

“A list of possible baby names, from Aletha’s pregnancy with Meghan. It seems that they didn’t know the baby’s sex then, and were covering both possibilities. Sirius looked rather surprised at the front-runner for a boy, but eventually he admitted that it could legitimately have been a name either from the pureblood tradition or from a Muggle family, and I believe it may well stick.” Minerva dropped one lump of sugar into her tea. “They plan to name him Marcus.”

xXxXx

“The potion’s looking good,” Harry said to Ginny, spooning up some so she could see its consistency, then dropping it back into the cauldron with a thick splat. “Another two days, and it ought to be ready to use.”

Ginny sniffed the steam rising from the cauldron. “Funny how it doesn’t stink at all while you’re making it,” she said. “We’ll have to clean up especially well in here after we’ve finished with it.”

“We’d better. This is my kitchen.” Harry waved a hand around at the room. “Draco can brew in here if he wants to, but I’m not letting him stink it up.”

“You know, maybe we should just have asked the Den if it could make us a workroom,” Ginny mused. “It made the music room when Luna wanted one, didn’t it?”

“I don’t know if it made the music room so much as it just opened it up…” Harry stopped, thinking of pirate ships. “Maybe you’re right. We could ask Alex, but he hasn’t been around much since Graham left, and I still haven’t seen that woman Graham said he met in Alex’s painting.”

“So why don’t we just try it?” Ginny stood up. “We need a workroom, please,” she said to the ceiling, which had become the default place to address any requests to the Den. “Some place to brew our potion, so it doesn’t get into the food.”

The wall to the right of the door rippled, and a door materialized from the stone. “Just like the Room of Requirement,” Ginny said, going over to try the door. “Oh, this is perfect—it’s even a little cool, just like Snape keeps the dungeons, so we don’t get too hot with the fires going.”

“Is that why he does it?” Harry put his hands under the cauldron, willed them to generate the same amount of heat the fire was doing, and lifted. “Get the hob, will you, Gin? I always thought Snape kept the dungeons cold just so we wouldn’t fall asleep in class.”

“Well, probably that too.” Ginny scooted around him, grabbed the tripod from which the cauldron had been hanging, and followed Harry into the new section of the Den. “That’s still a little spooky,” she said, coming around to peer into the cauldron, full of merrily boiling potion. “You holding that in your hands, and not even feeling it.”

“Yes, well, so would it be to a Muggle if they saw you wave a stick and make things fly around or change into other things.” Harry tried to balance the cauldron with one hand, to have the other one free to hang its chain back on the hook, but the cauldron wasn’t having any. The potion sloshed warningly—in another few seconds it would be spilling—

“*Wingardium Leviosa*,” said Ginny, and the weight of the cauldron vanished from his hands. “What did you ever do without me?”

“Dropped a lot of heavy things on my feet,” Harry said, hooking the chain over the notch on the tripod hob designed for it. “There, that should hold.” He snapped his fingers over his shoulder, and the blue fire in the jar in the kitchen went out. Another snap, and the same fire was burning under the cauldron, though now it was uncontained, merely licking up the cauldron’s sides.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Ginny asked, walking around the cauldron and eyeing the flames warily.

“No, I’ve told it not to burn anything, and only to make the potion and the cauldron hot. You’d still get burned if you touched the cauldron, I can’t change that, but you won’t get hurt by the flames. Here.” On impulse, Harry reached into the fire and extracted a handful. “Try it.”

Ginny reached out and laid her hand in the flames, and her expression went from wary to wondering. “It tickles,” she said. “Like it would if you’d used a Flame-Freezing Charm. I know Hermione did, when she set this up two weeks ago, but you made a new fire here, and all you had to do was—” She snapped her own fingers.

“It’s pretty cool, isn’t it?” Harry smiled at her, enjoying the look in her eyes as she ran her fingers through the fire. “Here, hold on a second—take your hand out—” He concentrated on the fire, willing a very specific set of things for it. “Now try.”

Ginny lowered her hand into the blue flames once more, and frowned. “This is different. It doesn’t hurt, but it feels like something I should know what to do with, something I’ve touched before…”

Idly, her other hand came up, and she squeezed the flames between her palms.

The flames responded, narrowing themselves between her hands, bulging out at her fingertips and wrists.

Ginny gasped and looked up. “*What* did you tell it?” she demanded.

Harry grinned at her. “To do for you anything it would for me. Go on, give it a try.” He pulled his own hand away, not without a tinge of regret; Ginny’s skin was soft and warm and held a delicate smell of roses that he knew must come from her soap, but seemed somehow to be an inherent part of her.

“Anything?” Ginny squeezed the flames again, and they fountained out between her fingers. “Of course, now I know what this feels like. Clay, my clay when it’s wet, only this isn’t wet, and it doesn’t need to support weight…”

“Chairs, please,” Harry said under his breath to the ceiling, and sidled around behind Ginny so that he could gently press down on her shoulders, seating her in the chair that had appeared between them, as she concentrated on the blue flame in her hands. That done, he pulled over the matching chair that had appeared for him, and settled down to watch.

In quick succession, a hippogriff, a dragon, and a mermaid were crafted from Ginny’s handful of flame, and just as quickly crushed back to anonymity as soon as they were finished. Ginny’s face was radiant, as though she’d found something she’d only dreamed of, and Harry suspected clay didn’t respond nearly as well to her wishes.

Surreptitiously, he called up another set of fireballs, one in each hand. One was red, the other yellow, and he set them floating in midair beside Ginny’s chair so that she could reach them if she

wanted.

She did want, it seemed, and with the addition of color, her creations grew more and more impressive. A yellow centaur galloped about the room and fired an arrow at Harry's head, making him duck and Ginny giggle; a red fire-rose blossomed between them, its stem the green she'd made by mixing a pinch of blue and yellow together; and finally, as she waved her hand in a great arch, a flaming rainbow spread itself across the room, the bands of color blending gently one into the next.

"Harry, thank you," Ginny said softly, staring up at the rainbow's arc. "I've been so busy with classes and DA and Quidditch that I haven't had much time to sculpt, and it's never been like that, not ever. I love clay, I think I always will, but there are things you can't do with it... but maybe that's part of the challenge. To make things look that beautiful, even though they're planted in what's possible." She laughed a little, passing her hand through the violet band of the rainbow. "But I suppose it's nice to play with the impossible sometimes."

"I like anything you make, possible or impossible," Harry said, watching the firelight play on Ginny's face, "because everything you make is beautiful." He smiled. "But that's probably because you're so beautiful."

"Flatterer," Ginny said automatically.

"It's not flattery if it's true. And tonight's Halloween. I won't get to go to the feast, so would you celebrate a little with me right here?"

"Of course." Ginny stood up. "What did you have in mind?"

Harry's smile expanded. "I was hoping you'd ask."

He clapped his hands twice, and the rainbow began to spin. Ginny's soft "ah" of wonder turned into a wordless squeak as the blue flames suddenly rushed upon her, and the rest of the colors deluged Harry—

And then they were clothed in fire, Ginny in a long robe of blue and a coronet of gold set with green and red stars, Harry in black with red at his collar and cuffs.

Ginny looked down her nose at him. "Show-off," she accused.

"Every chance I get." Harry offered her his arm. "My lady."

She took it. "Are you ever going to get tired of saying that?"

"Probably not."

Together, they walked through the kitchen and into the main room. "Dance floor, please," Harry said to the ceiling. "And music. Something slow."

The floor shimmered itself into hardwood, the lights dimmed around them, and a soft piece featuring woodwinds and strings began to play. Ginny twined her fingers in Harry's, and he set his hand against her waist, and they danced, around and around the room.

The rest of the Pride would arrive after the feast, full of stories and jokes and eager to hear how the prank planning was coming along. After that would be the den-night, marking fourteen years from the fateful Halloween Voldemort had marked Harry, fourteen years since Harry's parents had died.

What would they think of me now? Harry wondered, guiding Ginny deftly around the room. *I've been expelled, but unfairly, and I'm keeping up with my work... sort of.* His mind sheared away from the pile of homework stacked up in his bedroom, which he'd have to get to within the next few days.

I'm running an illegal student club, but it's one we need, and we're doing so well. Even the more timid or less talented members of the DA, such as the young Slytherin named Elayne or the excitable Tessa Mallory, were beginning to blossom with careful guidance and lots of reassurance.

I have a girlfriend. Possibly the most beautiful girlfriend ever. And she's even a redhead, Dad—Padfoot's been teasing me ever since he found out, about 'carrying on the family tradition'...

He met Ginny's eyes and felt her smile warm him from within, almost as if he'd swallowed a handful of the fire they both wore.

And I'm doing the right thing, Mum. I'm fighting for the people who can't fight for themselves.

I think you'd be proud of me. I think you'd think I'm doing well.

He allowed himself one sigh.

I just wish I knew.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 18: It's Magic, You Know (Year 5)

Chapter 18: It's Magic, You Know

Dolores Jane Umbridge usually woke up feeling fresh and ready for the day, but on this November morning, she felt decidedly odd. Sticky, almost. As though some gooey, lumpy substance were covering her from head to toe. But that was absurd...

She opened her eyes and began to scream.

She and her bedroom were both coated in what appeared to be semi-liquefied slugs.

Umbridge floundered out of bed and screamed again as her feet slogged in a puddle of the foul mess on the floor. Whimpering in horror, she waded to the door and threw it open.

Her office was worse than her bedroom. Gray slime soaked every visible surface, except the piece of parchment in the center of her desk. Which had not been there when she'd gone to bed.

Breathing shallowly through her mouth, Umbridge approached her desk.

The parchment was a letter, and a rather short one at that, though the handwriting was incongruously elaborate.

Dear Minister Fudge,

Your pet toad looked hungry, so I dropped it off some food. Baby food, since it seems to think we're all babies.

Isn't it time you left Hogwarts alone?

Sincerely,

A Concerned Student

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"So what exactly happened to Umbridge today, Dumbledore?" Arthur Weasley asked over dinner. "I know something must have, because Percy said Fudge was in a towering rage—I'd imagine he'll try again to hamstring you tomorrow, some new decree or other..."

"He cannot remove me as Headmaster without usurping the power of the Board of Governors, and I like to think that as long as I remain at Hogwarts, the staff and students will not give up," Dumbledore said, reaching up to give Fawkes a tidbit of the potatoes au gratin. "Besides, would I have had anything to do with the pranksters so bedeviling Dolores Umbridge? I, the somber old man with no concept of fun or laughter at all?"

Danger choked on a bite of carrot. Remus patted her back and raised an eyebrow at Dumbledore.

“If it wasn’t you, Albus, it was Minerva,” Aletha said, setting aside her fork. “Not even Harry or the Weasley twins would go as far as whoever’s behind these pranks without some sort of official imprimatur.”

“Really, Aletha, I would have thought better of you than to impugn Minerva’s good name in such a way,” Dumbledore reproved lightly. “Can you honestly imagine my Deputy Headmistress allowing her students to play pranks?”

“In these circumstances, yes,” Sirius said bluntly. “Because that’s the only way you’re going to get rid of Umbridge, is by hounding her out. Either that, or prove to Fudge he’s wrong about Voldemort.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I only wish I knew how.”

“Have you thought at all about Barty’s suggestion?” Moody asked, taking a swig from his hip flask. “I’ll admit it sounds foolhardy, but it may be the best chance we’ve got at luring him out in the open. Of course, that’s always assuming he doesn’t know it’s a lure...” His magical eye swung around the room, as though wondering which of those assembled might be reporting to Voldemort on the sly.

“Or that he knows,” Dumbledore completed the sentence, “but believes himself able to defeat whatever we have planned.”

“What am I missing?” Molly Weasley asked, refilling her glass with a flick of her wand. “What sort of lure are we talking about here?” She had no sooner finished speaking than her eyes widened with certainty. “No—you can’t mean—”

“Nothing’s decided, Molly,” Remus said wearily. “And if we do go through with it, we’ll keep Ron and Ginny out of it if I have to sit on them myself.”

“But that you’re even considering it—dear heavens, I knew things were bad, but I can’t believe they’re this bad! There must be some other way!”

“That’s what we keep saying,” said Aletha, indicating herself and Danger. “But I’m starting to believe them, Molly. I don’t want to, but I am. If we don’t get Voldemort in the open, and soon, we’ll be in very deep trouble.” She glanced at Sirius, who nodded. “He’s setting up to take a run at Azkaban.”

“Dear God in heaven,” Molly whispered, her hand seeking Arthur’s automatically.

“They’ll all be mad by now,” growled Moody. “Or most of ‘em. Trouble is, they were mad to start with. Some of ‘em might even have enjoyed being with the dementors. Like calls to like.”

“And Voldemort will have the dementors in the moment he can prove that he will give them more scope than the Ministry,” said Dumbledore heavily. “Without the influence of the dementors, and

with outside help, Azkaban is laughably easy to escape.” A sudden smile touched his lips. “As two of our number know from experience.”

“There are days I can’t believe I did that,” Remus said, sharing a look with Sirius across the table. “Not that I ever regret it, but if I’d had any idea of the risks I was running, the danger I was getting myself into—”

Moody and Sirius guffawed, Aletha coughed into her napkin, and Danger slid under the table without even the pretense of a dropped fork as Remus turned a shade of red a Weasley would have envied. Arthur’s lips twitched, but Molly glared at him, and he stopped.

“I must come here for meals more often,” Dumbledore remarked, giving Fawkes another tidbit. “I have obviously been missing fascinating conversations.”

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“You want to know about the Silver Sword?” Corona frowned. “I can tell you as much as I remember, but I always thought that was just a legend. A magical sword that chooses the best leader for the wizarding world in a time of crisis... it sounds too good to be true.”

“Do you recall the drawbacks to the use of the Sword?” Dumbledore asked, nodding to Brian, who had agreed to monitor the DictaQuill taking notes on the session in return for being there. The young wizard tapped the Quill twice with his wand, and it sprang upright and awaited a voice.

“I...” Corona frowned. “Perhaps I had best just tell the story from the beginning, the way it was told to me.”

“Perhaps.” Dumbledore nodded calmly, concealing his pleasure that she had volunteered the full story rather than him having to ask for it. By his estimation, someone telling a story because they wanted to, rather than because it had been asked of them, was less likely to forget some crucial detail, accidental or not.

Corona closed her eyes. “This is the story of the Silver Sword,” she began in a sing-songing tone, leaning forward as though trying to captivate an audience. “The Sword of the Great, as it was sometimes called. For this was no ordinary sword, oh, no! This sword had belonged to a great warrior once on a time, a great leader of wizardkind, and the tale went that only a leader as great as he could safely take hold of its hilt, on peril of his life. But since no wise man wished to risk himself in such a cause, the Sword lay gathering dust in the armory of the House of Beaufoi.

“But there came a time when war raged across all of Europe, and the isles of Britain were not immune. And as Muggles and the magical mixed more freely in this time than they do in our own, so the Muggle war had its counterpart in the magical world, for a Dark wizard saw the chaos and thought to use it to seize power over his own kind. And both wars raged fiercely for a time.

“At last, the leaders of wizardkind gathered together in secret. They must have a great general, they decided. One leader to bring them all together, one light to fight the coming darkness. And so

it was decided that the Sword of the Great should be brought forth, and that each man in turn should try to take it up.

“But when the sword was unveiled, and the great name written on the blade was exposed, the hearts of the wizards quailed within them, and none would be first to put his hand to the hilt. Finally, an old man, who in better times sweetened lives by the buying and selling of honey, made a suggestion.

“‘My friends,’ he said, ‘we do not use magic for nothing. Why can we not use our magic to ask this sword to bestow itself upon any one of us who is worthy to carry it, and pledge that him we will follow, and so will all those who follow us?’

“The plan was voted a good one, and so it was done. Each leader signed his name to a pledge, giving his word and that of his descendants after him to follow the one who carried the Sword, and then together as one the leaders cast their spell. A long spell it was and difficult, for it had many particulars. The man it sought must be able to lead other men, but he must care for their lives. He must be both a great warrior and a great thinker. And he must have at least one child living, so that his line would not end if he were killed. All this and more the spell required, but at last it was finished, and the Sword awoke.

“The hilt of the Silver Sword shimmered with the gleam of Mars, the light of the ancient god of war. It arose from its place on the table and turned as though regarding those who had called to it. Great was the fear of the wizards there gathered that they had awakened something too powerful for them to control, that the Sword might turn upon them and slay them all for their presumption, and almost to a man they cowered back.

“Almost—but for four men. Those four, the Sword inspected gravely, for each was valiant in his own right. One was the Sword’s own keeper, the young head of the House of Beaufoi, who had proved his manhood by avenging his father’s death; the second came from the great swamps, and was known for his feats of strength and quiet bravery there; the third was a man of the West Lands, who crafted strange devices like a Muggle but had a genius for outwitting his enemy in battle; and the last was a craftsman and sculptor, a fine flyer and very strong in magic.

“Such were the choices of the Sword of the Great, and long did it hover about each man. At last, though, it laid itself in the hand of the man from the West, and he raised it above his head, and all those gathered acclaimed him as their leader. He took the other three who had been unafraid to be his lieutenants, and he brought strength back to the hearts of wizards and witches of good will, and they cast down the Dark One and his minions and laid bare his strongholds.

“And when the war was done, the man from the West touched the blade of his sword and smiled, and went alone into the North. And when he returned, his hands were empty, and so was his scabbard. His lieutenants asked him what he had done with the Sword of Decision—for so it was now called—but he only smiled. ‘I have laid it in a safe place and suitable,’ he said, ‘to come forth if ever again there is need for it. But I shall tell you three of that place, that the Sword may not be lost forever should my spell fail.’ And he gathered them to him secretly and told them of that place.

“But the House of Beaufoi is now no more, and the swamps have taken back what was theirs, and the young craftsman has returned to his beloved earth, and the children of the man from the West know not of their forefather’s great legacy. Much which was known is now forgotten, and the Sword of Decision is lost to us. Alas for our fate should an enemy ever again rise which threatens all of wizardkind...”

Corona trailed off and opened her eyes. “I remembered it,” she said in wonder. “All of it, every word.”

“We often remember our childhood stories in that way,” Dumbledore agreed, glancing at Brian, whose nod confirmed that the DictaQuill had recorded Corona’s tale. “I thank you very much for being willing to recall this one for me.”

“But what good will it do you?” Corona frowned. “Even if the story were true and the Sword of Decision real, that would mean it had been lost for hundreds of years. And how could you ever convince enough wizards to come together to recreate the spell that was cast on it?”

“Oh, there could be ways,” Dumbledore said, accepting the scroll Brian held out to him. “There could very well be ways.”

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Upstairs, Tonks laid an awkward hand on Aletha’s gently curving belly. “Does it hurt?” she asked, looking up at the older woman. “I mean, not that I want to try it—not right now, I mean—but I was just wondering—”

Aletha set aside the desire to laugh. “It can hurt,” she said truthfully. “There’s morning sickness, though I seem to have avoided that this time around. Some women have mood swings, or cravings for odd foods. So much extra weight can make your back ache, and of course the actual birth...” She shivered a little in memory. “At least this time, I won’t have to make do with Muggle medicines. Not that they aren’t effective in their own way, but they’re so draconian. With a good potion, I’ll be able to control how much pain I feel. I don’t want to cut it off entirely, because pain can actually be a feedback tool.”

Tonks was nodding. “Exercise gives you the good pain,” she said. “But if you slack even for a day or two, you get the bad kind, because you’re out of condition. And these muscles don’t get a lot of conditioning, so...” She winced.

“As if you’d never lifted anything heavier than a quill,” Aletha supplied, “and suddenly you had to push a loaded cart for miles at a time. You’d make it, probably, but you’d be exhausted and hurting everywhere by the time you were done.”

“Maybe I don’t want to try it after all,” Tonks said, her face thoughtful as she rubbed her wedding ring. “But...”

“But?” Aletha prompted after a moment.

“But I don’t know. I know I don’t want kids until after this is all over—not that you’re wrong to have done it or anything,” Tonks added hastily, “but I couldn’t handle it. Not my first time. And I’m not positive I want them even after it’s over. I mean, what would I do with a baby? I’m an Auror. I didn’t apprentice to learn to change diapers.”

“But part of you does want children,” Aletha finished, nodding. “Most women do. Some don’t, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But that desire runs very deep in most of us.” She chuckled. “And that is a good thing, because the human race would never continue otherwise. Not with all the pain and the work involved, and that’s just the beginning. You spend years of your life on these ungrateful brats, and just when they finally start to get interesting, they leave!”

Tonks laughed too, but shakily, and it died away in a moment. “So it’s all right not to be sure?” she said. “I mean, I know it is, but I want to know—Merlin’s stones, I don’t know what I want to know anymore!”

“It is normal and perfectly fine not to be sure,” Aletha reassured the younger woman, and felt a tiny throb of pain in the back of her heart. *Oh, Andy, I wish you were here. You should be doing this for your daughter, not me—*

But we do what we can for the ones who went on before. Whether that is to carry out their work or to help those they had to leave behind.

“So,” Aletha said, breaking herself out of her reverie. “If you want to know all the gory details, I’m in a perfect position to tell them to you, having been through the process once and, proving that memory is imperfect, about to do it all again.”

Tonks pulled herself up into a chair and leaned forward, her expression the epitome of hanging-on-every-word.

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“I’m so happy about your new brother,” Natalie said to Meghan at the DA meeting that Sunday evening. “Will he be a cub?” Long familiarity with Meghan’s stories about her family made the word sound natural in her mouth. “A part of a Pack and a Pride, like you are?”

“Of course. What else would he be?” Meghan levitated a target shaped like a battered old hat into the air and waved her wand in lazy arcs, making the hat bounce through the air.

“I don’t know.” Natalie’s tongue stuck out the corner of her mouth as she concentrated. “I just thought... maybe...” She fired a stream of sparks at the hat, and it chimed as a few of them hit, scoring her a “soft” hit. “I thought maybe you wouldn’t be a Pack anymore. That you’d just be a family.”

“I don’t know if we can,” said Meghan thoughtfully, spinning the hat in a circle over Natalie’s head. “Mama and Dadfoot grew up in normal families—well, Mama did, Dadfoot’s family was stranger than ours—but they’re Pack now, bone and blood. And I haven’t ever been anything else

than Pack. I wouldn't know how to be 'just a family'."

Natalie fired again and missed. "I've talked to Graham some," she said, glancing towards another corner of the room, where Harry was working with Graham one-on-one, coaching him through some of the earlier lessons the DA had learned. "He sees a lot, living there where Harry is. He says he never understood some of your stories before, but now he does."

Meghan giggled. "Do you ever see the Slytherins trying to figure out where he goes?" she asked, then jumped as the hat chimed loudly, signaling a solid or "hard" hit. "Hey!"

Natalie smiled, less shyly than she would have a month before. "You weren't paying attention," she said. "We're supposed to take advantage of that."

"Hmph." Meghan whirled the hat into a slashing three-dimensional pattern. "But do you? They've tried following him, but he just changes which way he's going, and by the time they figure out where he's going now, he's gone. He never goes into any of the places that will let him back into the Den when they're watching him, and by now, all they know is that he can get to wherever he's going from two or three different places—and they knew that already!"

Natalie shot three times, scoring two soft hits. "Professor Umbridge wants to get him alone, you know," she said. "She thinks she could get him to say that Professor Dumbledore kidnapped him, to make everyone think You-Know-Who is back."

"Well, she isn't going to," Meghan said staunchly. "The one time she tried taking him out of class—you remember that, the second day he was back?"

Natalie giggled. "First Peeves distracted her," she said, shooting as she talked, chimes punctuating her speech. "And while she was trying to get him to stop, Professor Dumbledore came by and saw Graham just standing in the hall, and took Graham up to his office, because Graham was out of class during class time."

"And when *Professor* Umbridge tried to find out where Graham was, all Professor Dumbledore would say was that he'd sent him back to where he ought to be," said Meghan in satisfaction, "and she couldn't find him anywhere, and none of the other teachers would help her at all. And she didn't know enough to look for Maya, or ask her any questions." She glanced over at the older girl, whose new watch sparkled on her wrist as she levitated a shoe-shaped target for another student to shoot at.

Natalie nodded. "And then Graham wasn't in class for three days, but somehow he had all the homework done when he turned up again..."

"And since she can't prove any of the teachers were doing anything wrong, she can't do anything about this," Meghan finished, ending her charm so that the hat-target fell into her hand. "Ten soft hits and three hard," she read aloud off the back of the target. "That's pretty good."

"But I can do better." Natalie took the target from Meghan, reset it, and levitated it herself. "Next

time, I will.”

Meghan rose on her tiptoes, took a deep breath, and let her wand merge with the target as it bobbed and wove elusively. *I have to hit that*, she told herself. *Nothing else matters.*

Her first stream of sparks slammed into the target’s upper right corner.

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“Oh, I give up!” shouted Selena Moon, flinging her wand away from her as the target above her evaded her sparks yet again. “What good is it, anyway? We’re just kids! We can’t possibly do anything important!”

The entire room had gone silent. Harry straightened up slowly from where he’d been showing Graham the precise twisting movement for the Body-Bind, feeling eyes moving to him. *I have to say something. I can’t just let that go.*

But what do I say?

“We’re just kids,” he repeated Selena’s words. “You’re right about that. Well, some of us are adults,” he conceded with a nod to Fred and George, “but we’re not experienced, and we’re not fully trained. But I don’t think that means we can’t do anything important.”

He took a few steps into the middle of the room, the attention of the DA trained on him. “Every wizard who ever held a wand started out just where we are,” he said as he walked. “Students. Learners. And some of them were probably fumble-fingered nitwits who couldn’t hold their wands straight if their lives depended on it.” That surprised a laugh out of a few people. “But they practiced. They trained. And they got better slowly.”

Harry drew his wand and brought it to aim at one of the wall-mounted targets in the fast, fluid motion Padfoot had trained into him over the course of two summers and a school year. “I wasn’t born knowing how to do that,” he said, lowering it again. “I didn’t just wake up one morning and know it. I had to learn it. And it took a long time.”

He looked around the room, meeting gaze after gaze, blue, brown, hazel, gray. “We’re trying to learn a lot in a short time here. That means we’re not going to be very good at it at first. But we’re getting better. Think about it.” He turned to Colin Creevey. “Colin, try and disarm me.”

“*Expelliarmus!*” Colin shouted without hesitation, swinging his wand into line with Harry.

Harry brought his other hand up just in time to catch his wand before it went flying, and staggered back a step as the main force of the spell hit him. “Good shot,” he said when he thought he could talk without croaking. “Could you have done that before the DA?”

Colin shook his head hard, his eyes wide as he realized he’d nearly disarmed Harry Potter.

“Elayne.” Harry turned to the younger of the Slytherin girls, who paled as he called her name.

“Show me an Orbis Block.”

Elayne squared her shoulders and lifted her wand. “*Oppiliorbis* ,” she said softly but firmly, and the yellow disk appeared in midair.

“*Auris Vellicare!*” Harry announced, concentrating on making it a small spell, not too powerful, just enough to hit her block and bounce—

The beam of fuchsia light disappeared into the disk without a trace.

Huh. Guess she blocks better than I thought. No need to tell her that, though.

Elayne was staring open-mouthed at her own wand, and Harry pointed at her. “That’s what a Death Eater would do,” he said. “He’d stare. He’d be amazed. Because in his mind, we’re just little kids. We can’t fight back. We’re helpless. When really—”

He spun around. “*Expelliarmus!*” he shouted at Selena.

She dodged and shot back at him. “*Stupefy!*”

“*Oppiliorbis!*” Harry staggered back two steps with the force of the Stunner hitting his block. “There, you see?” he said, looking straight at Selena. “You *can* do this. All of us can.”

He turned, once more meeting each pair of eyes as he passed it. “We’re as strong as we let ourselves be. As strong as all of us together. And we’re not just kids. Not anymore. Kids sit around and let adults decide their future. We’re deciding our own future. We’re deciding to fight. And you know what that makes us?”

“Strong!” shouted Lindsey Jordan, murmurs of affirmation answering her.

“Wizards and witches!” called Heidi, the Hufflepuff fourth-year who always paired with Justin Finch-Fletchley. A small cheer greeted her answer.

“An army,” said Luna.

The room went silent.

“An army,” repeated Padma Patil, as though she were trying the words on for size. “Dumbledore’s Army. Isn’t that what we’re called?”

“That is what we’re called,” said Danielle, the tall blonde Ravenclaw, nodding to her Housemate. “And I think it’s time we start acting like it.”

She stepped into the middle of the room, bowed to Harry, and swept her wand up to salute position, her gripping hand just below and in front of her chin, the wand itself upright in front of her face. “I fight with you,” she said.

Harry nodded his head in acknowledgement, and Danielle lowered her wand and stepped back into the crowd.

Ron walked out to where she had been and faced Harry. “I fight with you,” he said, bringing his wand to salute. Harry nodded again, and Ron returned to his place.

One by one, few by few, the members of the DA stepped onto the open floor and saluted Harry. Not all of them, he noticed—Zacharias Smith and Michael Corner were standing in the back of the room together, muttering to each other, and Cho and her friend Marietta were whispering agitatedly together, Cho pointing at Harry, Marietta waving her arms around.

The sight of Cho off to one side, not ready to trust him, stung Harry a little, and he turned away from her blindly, nodding to Colleen Lamb. Colleen bowed her head briefly in return, then stepped aside to make room for the person behind her.

Harry felt his smile return, and he didn’t bother looking back at Cho as Ginny drew herself up proudly and saluted. “I fight with you,” she said.

The index finger of her left hand wiggled back and forth, and Harry nearly choked.

In Pride hand-sign, that meant, *Take what I just said two different ways.*

xXxXx

“So, today in class, we’re going to be discussing some spells you might use in a fight,” said Professor Alice Longbottom, leaning on the corner of her desk. “In the unlikely verging on impossible event that you might someday be attacked by another wizard.”

Her class of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff fifth years, including the translucent one in the back row, sniggered.

“Who can tell me some of these spells?”

Hands went up like rockets. Alice pointed at the first one she’d seen. “Miss Granger-Lupin—just one, please, to start with.”

“*Protego*, the Shield Charm,” Hermione recited, looking very eager. “It deflects spells back at the caster, and stronger versions can even protect you against physical objects. But it only lasts a moment, so you have to cast it again and again.”

“Good. It’s always important to know both the strengths and the weaknesses of any spell you cast. Mr. Finch-Fletchley, another one, please.”

They had worked through the basic self-defense spells and had a short discussion about the merits and drawbacks of each approach, and Alice had her mouth open to start talking about offensive spells when Harry Potter’s ghostly form suddenly waved at her frantically from the back.

Alice closed her mouth on the words she'd been about to say. "Quills out, everyone," she ordered instead, and shook her head sharply at the sounds of disappointment, flicking her eyes towards the door. "Quills out, and I want a foot and a half on the discussion we've just finished," she repeated, pitching her voice to carry. Harry, in the back, wiped his brow dramatically, then thumbed his nose as Dolores Umbridge stepped through the door.

Alice kept talking, and silently crossed her fingers that Umbridge would simply go away. "What side did you choose in the discussion? Why do you like it? What are some of the best arguments of the other side, and why are they good? Write quietly for five minutes and I'll let you discuss out loud."

"Oh, you had a discussion, dear?" Umbridge said with a small smile, bustling up the side of the classroom to join Alice—and to Alice's private horror, Harry Potter followed close behind her, mimicking her every move. "What was it about?"

"Different methods of self-defense," Alice said shortly, keeping her words clipped so as not to burst out laughing. "Shields, blocks, dodging, tactical withdrawals."

"Lovely, lovely." Umbridge peered at the closest student in the front row, Alice's own Neville, who slid an arm politely around his paper and kept scribbling. Harry, too, leaned over Neville's desk, 'accidentally' overlapping his midsection with Umbridge's head. "You followed the curriculum, I take it?"

"Of course," Alice lied without blinking an eye. The "Ministry-approved curriculum" for teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts reposed where it always did, in her second desk drawer, buried under as much other paperwork as she could find.

I can read that thing without cracking a smile—but this, I don't think I can handle. Harry was now ducking back and forth through Umbridge, sticking an arm, a foot, a head through her before his entire self went through, and Alice had to look away before she lost her composure.

"Well, in that case, I see no reason to stay." Umbridge made for the door with more speed than dignity, shedding her invisible playmate about halfway out of the room. "Enjoy your lesson, boys and girls!"

Alice fixed Harry with the mother's eye that served her so well for Neville, and Harry turned slowly to face her, trying an ingratiating grin.

Nice try, boyo, but you haven't faced down classes of brand-new Auror apprentices so shiny they squeak. Alice flicked a finger in an almost invisible signal for the boy to go sit down, and Harry nodded and obeyed.

One of these days I'll tell you how close you came to making me lose control in front of Dolores Umbridge.

But I think I'll wait until I'm not your teacher anymore.

“Quills down,” she said, and smiled at the sighs of relief. “Now, let’s talk about offensive spells, things you can legally use to stop another wizard from hurting you or someone else...”

xXxXx

“Draco, I need your help on this,” Ginny said firmly. “Harry has to know!”

“It’ll only hurt him, Ginny. He can’t do anything about it and he knows that. It would be cruel to talk about Quidditch with him right now.” Draco paced up and down the library a few times, his brow furrowed. “If we’re going to get Ron up to speed as our Keeper, we’ve got to do it ourselves.”

“How? Wave our wands and say poof, there, it’s done?” Ginny snorted. “He has the skills. You know that and I know that. It’s just that he hasn’t played in long enough that he keeps thinking he doesn’t, and when he thinks it...”

“It becomes reality, I know.” Draco picked up a book and flipped through the pages. Then again. Then again.

“What are you doing?” Ginny asked, looking up at him.

“Someone drew pictures on this book. Look at it.” Draco turned the book so Ginny could see and riffled the pages. A little cat jumped into the air, again and again, trying to catch a butterfly.

“None of the pictures move,” Ginny murmured. “Not on their own. But when you put them together fast enough...”

“It’s Muggle magic,” said Draco, flipping the pages the other way to watch the cat jump in reverse. “Not everything comes through a wand. You need to be able to do other things too. Like cooking, or sculpting, or music—”

He froze for an instant. “I think,” he said carefully, “that I’ve solved our problem. Maybe. Possibly.”

“What?” Ginny demanded. “What is it?”

“No.” Draco shook his head at her. “No, no, no. Not yet. I can’t tell anyone. Except—wait, Luna. I’ll need her help. ‘Scuse me—”

And he was gone, out the door into the main room.

Ginny blinked after him. “All right, then,” she said. “I’ll just... stay here.”

xXxXx

Maya Pritchard sat on the end of her bed, brushing her hair. She’d spent several nights recently sitting by a different bed, reassuring her cousin simply by her presence that he was safe and no

longer trapped. She didn't mind it in and of itself, but her vigils made for tired days for her, and she might not have tests this year, but that didn't make the work any easier.

I think I need to get to bed early tonight. As early as I can and not look too silly...

A sudden, echoing crack made her jump and nearly drop her hairbrush.

“Kady is sorry, miss!” said the high, squeaky voice of a house-elf, and the creature scurried out from between the beds, bobbing a curtsy and holding out a slip of parchment. “Kady has a letter for miss!”

“Thank you,” Maya said automatically, accepting the parchment. It was addressed to her in Graham's handwriting, and despite herself, she flinched. *Please, no—not another night—Graham, I love you dearly, but I doubt I can take another night awake—*

She sighed deeply, then opened the letter.

Maya,

I am all right, but you may wish to come downstairs and observe what is about to happen. Meghan has told me about this custom, and I want you to see it too. It is called a den-night. Bring your nightclothes and anything you need to sleep. No one will see you coming down the stairs.

Graham

Maya blinked a few times at the parchment, then slipped it into her pocket and began gathering her things. If Graham said no one would see her, she believed him.

I don't know how it could be done, but I believe him...

She believed him even more when she nearly ran into Alicia Spinet on the stairs. She started an apology, but Alicia's eyes slid right past her as though she weren't there, and the seventh-year frowned, then shrugged and moved on.

As though I am—not invisible, but un-noticeable, perhaps.

She waved her watch at the spot on the wall she'd been shown, and felt the familiar thrill as the stone wall grated back, exposing the slide beyond. The trip was as swift and exhilarating as always, and she fell onto the bed beneath with a little whoop of pleasure.

Graham was waiting at the bedside, neatly dressed in dark blue pajamas, a match for her own light blue nightdress. “Thank you for coming, Maya,” he said, hugging her. “I would have felt awkward without anyone here... ‘of my own’, I suppose you'd say.”

“What do you mean?” Maya asked, brushing Graham's hair out of his face. *He needs this trimmed. His mother should have done it, but I suppose she was just too busy being thankful he was alive...*

“Come and see.” Graham waved to the door.

Maya stepped out into the main room of the place Harry Potter called the Den, and blinked in surprise. Eight people—Harry and his closest friends, she quickly realized—looked up at the opening of the door, and Harry himself got to his feet, hand out and a welcoming smile on his face. “Maya, glad you could make it.”

Maya nodded, shaking Harry’s hand and trying to look around the octagonal room without making it clear that was what she was doing. The other times she’d been in this room, it had been large and bare with a hard wooden floor. It was still large and bare, but now the floor was cushioned, as soft as any mattress, and pillows and bedcovers lay in disorder about the lounging people, all of whom were wearing pajamas...

The word for what she had been invited to crashed into her mind, and she valiantly suppressed a giggle. This was obviously very important to Harry and his friends, and to Graham, and she would not let them see her laughing.

But she couldn’t help but find it funny that she was, apparently, a guest at a co-ed all-ages slumber party.

Draco Black coughed a little, and Maya quickly withdrew a few paces to where Graham was waiting for her by the wall. Her cousin was sitting down, knees to his chest and back to the stone, and Maya slid down the wall into the same position.

“Be welcome, all, to this den-night,” Draco said with the cadence of a traditional proclamation. “We are Pride now. Pride together.”

“Pride forever,” the other seven chorused, low but in perfect unison. Maya felt a tiny shiver go through her.

Ginny Weasley sat up straight, her face suffused with pride. “Who will tell a story?” she said, her voice a triumphant fanfare. “Who will remind us what it means to be Pride?”

“I have one,” said Neville Longbottom, and heads turned to face him. “Do you remember the time...”

“Meghan says they do this at least once a month,” Graham murmured to Maya as Neville told his story. “More often, if there’s a special occasion. They always know that there’s a time and a place where they will all be together, or if they’re not, they can think about the ones who aren’t there.” He shivered a little.

Maya slipped her arm around her cousin and pulled him close. “You just wanted me here so you wouldn’t have to sleep all alone again tonight,” she teased, her fingers finding the ticklish spot just under his arm.

“Ack—no—no—Maya—stoppit!” Graham pushed her hand away and caught his breath, but his

eyes still danced. “I know a story, if you don’t!”

“And what story do you know?”

“I know about the time you wanted to pet the turtle,” Graham said smugly.

Maya bristled indignantly. “Just because I was three years old, and I had never seen a picture of a fire crab before—”

xXxXx

Two dens ran simultaneously, one beside the other, and each watched the other with some wariness but more recognition of a kindred thing. By the time Harry spoke the ending words and the lights dimmed in the room, the two had half-merged into one, Meghan moving her pillow and blankets out from the center of the Pride to sleep within arm’s reach of Graham.

Maya’s only, sleepy regret was that she had had no one else to trade stories with, no one connected specially and intimately with her.

Perhaps some other time...

xXxXx

Dolores Jane Umbridge normally invigorated herself by taking a deep breath of the fresh morning air, but on this November morning, her deep breath turned into a wheeze and frantic coughing.

Something in her rooms smelled truly foul, and she had a horrible suspicion it was herself. But when she tried to sit up, her nose came close to the walls, and she shoved herself away in horror. This made her tumble backwards out of bed onto the carpet, and a fresh wave of stink rose up around her.

Coughing and choking, she stumbled out into her office, but even there the stench continued. It seemed to only get worse everywhere she moved—it was as though everything in her quarters had been somehow contaminated!

The piece of parchment sitting innocently on her desk did nothing to improve her mood. Once again, it was a letter, done in the same beautiful handwriting as before.

Dear Professor Umbridge,

Living up to your initials, I see. Good luck finding someone who can stand you long enough to help you counter this.

Don’t you think it’s time you left Hogwarts?

Sincerely,

A Concerned Student

Umbridge crumpled the letter in her hand and ground her teeth. “I know who you are,” she muttered to herself, “and I will have you in the end.”

She sat down at her desk, ignoring the smell, and unlocked the top drawer, taking out the scroll on which she kept all her most important information.

Such as who was related to whom, in what way, in her world, which now included Hogwarts. And who owed her favors, and why.

She would have Harry Potter in her grasp, sooner or later. And then he would pay for every insult and slander she and dear Cornelius had endured.

And this scroll held the key to making that happen sooner, rather than later.

She perused the lines carefully, one stubby finger pointing out her place. *Dear Harry was romantically interested in Miss Chang of Ravenclaw, and Miss Chang sets great store by the friendship of Miss Edgecombe—oh, but there may have been a falling out, as Miss Chang reacts badly to the mention of Mr. Potter’s name... and that links neatly back into the stories I’ve been hearing of an illegal student club...*

Two possibilities there. Perhaps best to pursue only one, but perhaps both of them would bring better results...

She sighed in the pleasure of anticipation, then put away the scroll and took out another, this one dealing with the proper cleaning of things.

First things first. Make myself presentable once more.

After that... we shall see what we shall see, shall we not?

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Facing Danger

Chapter 19: When We Shall See with Clearer Sight (Year 5)

Chapter 19: When We Shall See with Clearer Sight

Ron sat beside the cauldron, watch in his hand, while Hermione stirred carefully clockwise. “Five seconds,” he warned. “Three, two, one, stop.”

Hermione lifted the stirring stick free and laid it down on their desk. “What’s next?” she asked, coming around to look at the instructions in their text.

“Er...” Ron ran his finger down the list, looking for the bit they’d been doing. *Cacao leaf, did that, shaved Augurey talon, did that, crushed hedgehog spines, didn’t do that—here we are.*

“Here,” he said, pointing at the place, just as Hermione came in from the side to do the same.

Their fingers met on the page.

“Sorry,” said Hermione quickly, snatching her hand away. “Sorry, it was an accident—”

“No, it was my fault—”

“As amusing as I find your flirtations, Weasley, Granger-Lupin,” said Snape icily from above them, “they will not get your potion brewed. Ten points from Gryffindor.”

Ron bit down hard on the inside of his lip as Hermione flushed.

Snape peered into their cauldron, wafted a bit of the steam up to his face, and sniffed. His eyebrows rose. “Passable,” he said flatly. “As was,” he added in a lower tone, leaning over the desk as though castigating them, “the job done by whoever took it upon themselves to discomfort Dolores Umbridge in this latest pass.”

Automatically, Ron glanced left, towards the table where Draco and Neville were working. Snape followed his look and snorted. “I suppose I should not be surprised,” he said louder. “At your usual level of work, Weasley, I doubt you could produce a simple Swelling Solution on your own. Do attempt to recall that O.W.L.s are done individually.” He turned and stalked away to criticize the level at which Parvati Patil had set her fire.

Ron glared at the black-robed back, visualizing the effect of a cauldronful of hot potion suddenly poured on that greasy head.

“Quidditch next week,” Hermione whispered. “Just think about beating Slytherin...”

Ron thought about it, and about the look on Snape’s face afterwards, and suddenly hot potion seemed less appealing. “Are you sure?” he asked, fumbling in the bag for the hedgehog spines. “You haven’t been to practice lately. I keep dropping the Quaffle.”

“Oh, you won’t. Not in a real game.” Hermione squeezed his arm. “I have confidence in you, Ron. You’ll do fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Heartened, Ron bent over to start measuring the hedgehog spines. Out the corner of his eye, he saw Hermione moving, but figured it was none of his business.

He might have been more interested if he’d known she was winking at Draco.

xXxXx

Harry licked his lips, stirring his body cautiously. He’d come very close to his two hours this time, and he could feel it in how stiff his muscles were.

I am going to be so glad to go to class again.

And I never thought I’d say that.

But class was over for the day, there was still an hour until dinner, and Ginny had agreed to meet him in the Forest.

And if we catch something, then we don’t have to go in for dinner. Or maybe I can have her over for it. Umbridge hasn’t started taking roll at meals yet...

Harry rolled over onto his stomach and arched his back, first down, then up. “Better,” he said, coming to hands and knees. “Much better.” One foot under him, then the other, and he was on his feet. After a detour to the bathroom for a drink of water, he loped over to the Quidditch pitch and shut the door firmly behind him.

The goal hoops seemed to beckon, but he shook his head. “Not today,” he said aloud to them. “I’d just be thinking about the team.”

Ron, Ginny, and Draco had tactfully refrained from discussing Quidditch practice in front of Harry for nearly two months. It hadn’t seemed to occur to any of them that he saw Angelina, Alicia, Katie, Fred, and George on a regular basis through the DA, and was therefore perfectly well-supplied with news about the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

“Ginny makes a fair Seeker,” Angelina had said at the meeting the week before. “Not in your class, of course, Harry, but as good as anything Slytherin’s got. Higgs left last year, so they’re fielding someone brand-new. Ginny’s year, as it happens. Kid called Carrow.”

Blaise Zabini, practicing the Reductor Curse a short distance away, had turned sharply at the mention of this name.

“How is he?” Harry had asked casually, glancing towards the small ‘labyrinth’ in the corner where they practiced close-quarters work. Graham was in there at the moment with the rest of the second and third years, playing tag with Combat Club wands.

“As a Seeker, he’s passable. I think Ginny’s got him beat. But as a person...” Angelina had left it hanging.

Harry shook off the memory and stepped into the broomshed. *None of them will get close to him, except maybe Ginny, and she can handle him.*

“Thank you, Salazar ,” he said aloud in Parseltongue, grimacing as he did. *Have to ask Alex if there’s some way to reset these.*

The back of the broomshed split open, and Harry stepped forward and let the magic carry him into the tube. This one was significantly larger than the rest, as though it had been designed for something that wasn’t human.

Maybe it was. The password’s in snake, and Sangre was Slytherin’s to begin with. Though why he’d bring her into the Founders’ private place...

Could he already have been planning what he’d do? Built in secret ways to hurt them, attack them, even while they were building the school?

Harry shook off these thoughts and fumbled in his pocket for his Invisibility Cloak. *I love how small this thing crumples. You’d think a cloak big enough to cover a person all over would make a bigger lump...*

Invisible, he stepped out into the weak sunlight of a November afternoon and peered towards the castle. Small black shapes milled about, but he was only interested in one—the one coming towards him, with long hair shining the same color as the setting sun.

She’s beautiful. How did I never see that before?

Harry shook his head. *Never mind. I see it now. And I’m not going to stop seeing it if I can help it!*

He turned and started for the Forest, already planning. *We can just run for a while, hunt if she wants to, find Sangre and tell her what’s happened, though I bet she knew before I did...*

A familiar spot at the Forest’s edge caught his eye, a place where the grass was still green, even this far into November, and he stopped just for a moment to bow his head.

I still miss Siss sometimes. But Letha was right—it doesn’t hurt so much anymore. I can think about the good times we had, and what she’d say about things that have happened since, like me and Ginny...

Harry chuckled, pulling the Cloak off as he got between the trees. *Siss’d probably have nipped me for being stupid enough to moon over Cho for two bloody years. She never did have a high*

tolerance for idiots.

He stowed the Cloak in his pocket again, found a good-sized tree to hide behind, and changed just in time, as Ginny strolled into the verge of the Forest, her hand on her wand and her eyes wicked. “Oh, Wolfie,” she sing-songed as she passed his tree. “I have a surprise for you...”

Wolf huffed and bounded out of concealment, hurling himself at the backs of Ginny’s knees. She squealed and collapsed on top of him, and Harry quickly changed back and twisted to catch her in his arms. “Nobody,” he said firmly, “is allowed to call me Wolfie.”

“Nobody?” Ginny pouted prettily. “Draco calls Hermione Neenie.”

“Well, if you want to be my twin sister instead of my mate...”

Ginny shut him up effectively before he could continue that heretical notion.

Harry was panting like Wolf after a hunt when they finally broke it off. “Keep doing that and you can call me anything you like,” he said breathlessly.

“Anything?” Ginny grinned. “Even my sweet Wolfie-poo?”

“Well...”

Ginny slung an arm around his neck and pulled his head down to hers.

“I’ll think about it,” Harry said when he could speak again.

xXxXx

The weather was cool and crisp, the hunting had been good, and the companionship was excellent, if slightly unnatural to Wolf’s instincts. Harry had booted these instincts to the back of Wolf’s mind, where they were currently curled up, sulking. Nothing was going to ruin his evening with Ginny, nothing...

Lynx turned her head and yowled uneasily. Wolf sneezed as the wind brought him the scent she’d obviously caught. Human, young, male, nearby, and badly frightened. And now that he knew what to listen for, he could hear the quiet whimpers of someone who didn’t have the strength left to pretend he wasn’t crying.

I should stop making pronouncements. God, or Fate, or someone else—much more likely someone else—has a sense of humor. Wolf cocked his head and glared at the sky. You’re not nearly as funny as you think you are, you know that?

The sky did not answer, but Wolf was sure that somewhere, Alexander Slytherin was sniggering at him.

Lynx flirted her small tail at Wolf. Follow? she asked silently. See who and what?

Wolf sniffed the breeze again. The scent was familiar, but only in a desultory way. He didn't know this person, or at least not well. Still, the unknown was almost certainly a Hogwarts student, and it couldn't hurt just to look...

He nodded and started forward, Lynx flanking him, her fur on end as the scent got more acrid. The sound of running water reached their ears, and suddenly they were looking out over a small stream, burbling over stones along its way.

A boy lay crumpled by the side of the stream, his shoulders shaking. There was no blood-scent coming from him, so he wasn't hurt, but the stench of fear rose off him almost palpably. And not just any fear, Harry realized with a start inside Wolf's mind—no, it was a very particular kind of fear, one he knew himself...

He pulled back through the underbrush and retransformed, pulling his chain out of his robes. Lynx nudged her head through it as soon as he'd made it long enough. **What is it?** she asked, lying down in the fallen leaves and poking her head back through the brush to peer at the dark-haired boy. **Someone you know? I don't recognize him.**

Maybe when I see his face. Harry slid back into Wolf's form and lay down beside Lynx. **But I know what he's afraid of. Here.**

He touched the memory within his mind gently, drawing it out where Lynx could examine it. **Feel that. Smell it. Do you think it matches?**

Almost exactly. Lynx drew her lips back from her teeth and hissed softly. **Someone wants to do to him what they did to Graham. Cage him. Lock him up, until he loses his mind, or his spirit. Graham might have, if you hadn't found him, you know. He was very close.**

I know. Wolf refrained from mentioning the nights he knew Graham spent on the Quidditch pitch, with its ceiling like the Great Hall and the artificial breezes that swept through it. **We need to know who this is before we can work out how to help him...**

There's an easy way to find out. Lynx let an image cross her mind.

Wolf recoiled in shock. **Are you crazy?**

Maybe. But if he's as tired and scared as his scent says he is, he might well think he's imagining things. And as long as we don't leave any evidence on him, he can't prove otherwise.

Wolf grumbled. **I think there's a Pack law about alphas not being allowed to be insane.**

In which case, you're disqualified, Mister Voluntarily-Faced-Voldemort-At-The-Age-Of-Eleven.

...you fight dirty.

All girls do. Shall we go?

xXxXx

Theodore Nott had never been this far into the Forbidden Forest before. Part of his mind was hysterically listing off every carnivorous beast Professor Hagrid had ever taught them about, but a larger portion was starkly positive that being devoured would be a better fate than going back to the castle and facing the letter lying on his bed.

It would hurt a lot, but then it would be over. And at least animals don't torture you first. Unless eating you alive counts. But even then, you'd bleed to death so fast...

“Mmrrrr?”

Theo snapped upright so fast he heard his robe tear.

Slit-pupiled brown eyes looked into his from a distance of less than a foot.

“Gaaahhh!” Theo scooted backwards frantically, suddenly far less sure he wanted to be eaten. He could just see the tips of teeth poking out of the big cat's mouth—*what is it? I've never seen a cat like that before*—and they looked *sharp*.

And then the cat's lips curled back, and he could see a lot more of its teeth.

Theo felt down his side for his wand, wondering if he could hit this thing with an Impediment Jinx before it pounced—

The cat snarled, its front claws flexing in and out, its back end slowly wiggling the way Theo had seen his mother's cat do when it was about to pounce on a mouse—

A sharp growl, and a larger form interposed itself between boy and cat. Theo gulped, staring at this new threat, and a memory from third year Defense class floated back into his mind. “*Who can tell me which of these creatures is the werewolf and which the true wolf?*”

It doesn't really matter right now—either one can kill me...

The wolf turned its head to look at him, and Theo blinked at the intelligence in its eyes—its *green* eyes. He'd seen eyes like that somewhere before...

The cat stalked out from behind the wolf and approached him, its eyes—just as intelligent as the wolf's, Theo realized suddenly—fixed on his wand hand. Slowly, he uncurled his fingers and brought his hand out empty. “I don't want to hurt you,” he said, hating the squeak in his voice. “Just...” He shivered, realizing he should have brought a cloak. *But it won't matter in a minute.*

The cat was almost to him now, its gaze wondering and intent. Theo fumbled open the neck of his robes, shivering even harder with the combination of the chill air on his chest and the knowledge of what was about to happen. “Do it fast,” he said, closing his eyes for a second, then quickly

opening them again—waiting was bad enough, waiting in the dark would be worse. “Please.”

The cat stopped short, blinking. Then it turned back and made eye contact with the wolf. Theo stifled a hysterical laugh as his gaze picked out a gleam of gold in the air between them. *Wonderful, now I’m imagining animals that wear necklaces...*

The cat turned back to him, leapt forward—Theo braced himself—

And landed squarely in his lap.

A rumbling purr swept through the outsized feline body, shaking Theo with its force, and the tip of a tooth scraped against his collarbone as the cat rubbed its face against him.

This can’t be happening. Wild animals don’t do this—

So maybe they’re not wild animals. Maybe they’re tame. Or something else entirely.

The wolf padded forward and sat down beside him, then flopped over on its side in the leaves with a sigh. It lifted its head to bump against Theo’s hand, and Theo automatically scratched between the pointed ears.

Whatever they are, they act friendly, and that’s more than I usually get—more than I get from anyone—

A raspy cat tongue washed his chin, and Theo felt himself starting to shake again, more tears coming to his eyes, after he’d thought he’d cried himself out—

“It’s not fair,” he whispered, curling his other arm around the cat, feeling its purr intensify as though in response to his tears. “It’s not fair. He’s my *father*. He’s supposed to take care of me, not—not use me like a counter in a damned game! I don’t want this! I never wanted it! And I don’t even know what I do want, because I spent too long trying to want what *he* wanted, and now I don’t even know who I am...”

The wolf whuffed against his hand, the cat—*lynx*, his mind finally identified with the perversity of thought—purred louder still, and Theo lost the little control he’d had left. “*It wasn’t even my fault!*” he screamed aloud into the air. “I didn’t have anything to do with it, not a *thing*, and he knows that, and he doesn’t care! He just needs someone to blame, because otherwise his precious Dark Lord will blame *him*, because he was the ranking one there, and I’m handy because he took me there once and showed me what was going on, so now he’s going to claim it was me...”

Another paroxysm of shivering swept over him, and he felt the wolf sitting up, leaning into his side as though to warm him. “I almost wish I had done something,” he said dully. “I wanted to. It was wrong, it was awful, but I couldn’t do anything, not with all of them watching—I wish I knew who did do it, I’d at least shake their hands before it happens to me...” A painful laugh forced its way out of him. “Maybe they’d come back and do it again for me. Doubt it, though. Pritchard’s worth a lot more than I am.”

The lynx yowled sharply as the wolf stiffened under his arm, and Theo blinked and looked at them. “What—did I say something...”

Something on the wolf’s face caught his eye. A thin, jagged line of white fur, above and between the eyes—the green eyes, surrounded by slightly lighter circles on the dark fur—

Dark hair. Green eyes. Glasses. Lightning-bolt—

“Potter!” Theo blurted.

The wolf snarled and lunged at him. The lynx dived out of the way, hissing, as Theo hit the ground hard, paws planted on his upper arms and gleaming teeth an inch from his throat. *Oh God I was wrong I don’t want to die—*

“Harry, NO!” shouted a girl’s voice.

The wolf’s rippling growl made its sentiments entirely clear.

Theo felt a hand in his wand pocket, and caught just a glimpse of red hair out the corner of his eye—*why am I not surprised?*—before the hand withdrew, taking his wand with it. “Let him up,” Ginny Weasley ordered. “He knows he can’t hurt us.”

The wolf snorted, then let its lips fall back over its teeth. Its head went forward, and a cold nose nudged Theo’s chin, hard. The message was clear. *Stay still or I will deal with you myself.*

Theo froze in place, and the wolf leapt off him, shook itself, and rippled in an eye-blurring instant into a person who wasn’t even supposed to *be* at Hogwarts anymore.

Harry bloody Potter. I just cried my eyes out right in front of him—and now he knows I knew about Pritchard, and Pritchard’s his sister’s friend—

Potter’s wand was in his hand, pointing at Theo. “You can sit up,” the other boy said, his tone brusque but not unfriendly. “Sorry about that. I was... surprised.”

“So was I,” Theo retorted, pushing himself upright. “You’re Animagi? Both of you?”

“You have a problem with that?” Weasley said, moving a few steps away from Potter, covering Theo with her own wand.

Theo’s mind whirled back in time. “Who was the cat?” he asked. “The one Lovegood brought to see Black, when he was staying with us, summer before last. Who was that?”

Potter and Weasley exchanged glances. Potter shrugged. “Hermione,” he said. “She was the first of us to get it. I was second.”

“You’re just going to tell me?” Theo said in disbelief.

“You’re going to get Obliviated anyway,” said Weasley. “So you don’t go running off to Umbridge and tell her Harry’s still at Hogwarts.”

“Why the hell would I do that?” Theo demanded. “I don’t even like Umbridge. I want her gone as much as you do.”

“I doubt that,” Potter said, but his eyes were thoughtful behind the glasses. “What did you know about Graham Pritchard?”

Theo flushed at the painful reminder that he’d been crying like a baby two minutes before. “Just where he was,” he said roughly. “And that I couldn’t do a goddamned thing about it. I wanted to—I would have if I could—”

“You could have told somebody,” Potter said. “You could have told Dumbledore.”

“You think he’d have believed me?” Theo snapped. “Me, a Death Eater’s son? You have it so easy, Potter—you’re the big hero, The Boy Who Lived, everyone listens to you, thinks you’re special—”

“Not now they don’t,” Potter said quietly, but his tone cut Theo off short.

“Dumbledore would have listened to you,” said Weasley into the silence. “No matter whose son you were. He’ll listen to you now, if you want to come back to the castle and ask him for help. There are places you can go, places you can hide where even your father can’t find you—”

“Wait,” Potter interrupted, looking intently at Theo. “What side are you on, Nott? Or don’t you know yet?”

Theo looked away. “I don’t want to be on a side,” he said indistinctly, hating the way his voice tried to break on him. “I didn’t want any of this.”

“None of us did,” said Weasley.

The feeling in her voice jerked Theo’s head back around. “I don’t need your pity!” he shouted at her. “Why don’t you just leave me alone?”

“Because we’re trying to help you, if you hadn’t noticed!” Weasley shouted right back. “But if you don’t want it, that’s fine—we can just leave you here, let you work it out on your own—”

“Stop it,” said Potter.

Theo closed his mouth over his first word. *How does he do that?*

“So you don’t want to be on a side,” Potter went on, sitting down on the ground, his wand never wavering from its direction towards Theo’s chest. “You managed to piss one of them off, though. Not your fault, but it still happened. Which pretty much puts you on the other side. Our side.”

Theo snorted. “Too bad I’m not a shining warrior of the light like you.”

“No, but you are a Slytherin,” Potter said. “Maybe we can make a deal.”

A deal... a deal. I can do deals. For the first time since he’d opened the letter from his father, Theo felt like he was on firm ground. *I must have something they want. Maybe I can get through this after all...*

“What’re you offering?” he asked, crossing his arms.

“Protection,” said Potter. “Even from your dad.” He looked smug. “He can’t lock up what he can’t find.”

“And what would you want from me?” Theo was surprised to find that he cared very little about the answer to this question—*I’ll do anything, anything, just keep me safe...*

Potter’s smirk got bigger. “Actually, the same thing. But this would be you protecting somebody else...”

xXxXx

Severus Snape opened the door of Albus Dumbledore’s office. “You wanted to see me, Headmaster?”

“Yes, Severus, please have a seat.” Dumbledore was positively beaming. “I believe there might be a way for young Graham Pritchard to return to his dormitory without undue fear for his safety.”

xXxXx

“So you get the Den to yourself again,” Ron said to Harry a day or two later. “And Nott’s on our side now?”

“Sort of. Mostly he just wants everyone to leave him alone.” Harry’s tone could have been used as a dehydrator for the entire Hogwarts lake. “I don’t have any idea what *that’s* like...”

“Dumbledore Obliviated him about Harry, and about us being Animagi,” Ginny put in. “He thinks I was out for a walk and ran across him by accident.”

“What were you doing out in the Forest, anyway?” Ron stopped. “Wait, forget I asked, I don’t want to know.”

Ginny giggled. “You don’t want to know we were doing this?” she asked, sitting down in Harry’s lap. “Or this?” An arm went around his neck. “Or—”

“Ginny, be nice,” Hermione said from behind Ron. “You’re setting off all his ‘protective older brother’ instincts, but they’re conflicting with all his ‘that’s my best friend’ instincts, and the ones that say ‘that’s my alpha’...”

Ginny pouted. “You mean I can’t even have one little—”

Ron made a strangled sound and covered his eyes. “Mum’s gonna kill me,” he moaned. “And Dad. And Bill and Charlie and Percy—I was supposed to be watching you!”

“And doing what?” Harry inquired. “Keeping her from ever looking at a boy?”

“Other way around, probably,” said Hermione. “Keeping boys from ever looking at her.”

Harry glanced down at Ginny’s figure, then up at her face. “Wasn’t going to work, mate,” he said.

Ron only moaned.

Ginny climbed off Harry’s lap and crawled over to Ron. “Stop it,” she said briskly, pulling his hands off his face. “Stop. Now. Stop.”

Ron looked at her. “You really don’t understand,” he said. “You don’t get it at all, do you?”

“Not really. Maybe if you found somebody to snog, I would.”

“What’s this?” asked Draco, coming in from the library, Luna behind him. “Ron’s looking for somebody to snog?”

“The Patil twins have been watching you a lot lately at DA meetings,” Luna said to Ron. “And Lavender Brown. She keeps sneaking down to Quidditch practice when she thinks nobody’s looking. So does Amanda Smythe.”

“How do you know that?” Draco asked, turning to look at Luna.

Luna shook her head. “Girls have to have their secrets,” she said.

“Oh, come on, just tell me...”

“I suppose I wouldn’t mind snogging one of them,” Ron said thoughtfully as Luna darted back into the library, giggling, with Draco three steps behind. “They’re cute enough. I probably wouldn’t want a Patil, though—they look too much alike, I’d never be sure which one I had...” Sudden panic flashed across his face. “They’ll be watching the match, won’t they? The Quidditch match?”

“Everybody goes to Quidditch matches, Ronald,” said Hermione tartly from behind her book. “Of course they’ll be watching.”

“But that means they’ll be watching *me* ...” Ron went a funny shade of puce.

Harry’s nose twitched at the sharp, biting scent of helpless fury wafting to him from—

Hermione?

He glanced at his sister over Ginny's shoulder and saw a pair of hazel eyes boring holes in Ron's side, and suddenly several things he hadn't quite believed all fell into place.

Ginny laid her head on his shoulder. "This," she murmured into his neck, "could be a problem."

Harry shrugged, turning so that Hermione couldn't see his face. "Maybe he needs a trial girl, like I did," he said quietly. "To show him what he doesn't want."

"Maybe. But Hermione's not as forgiving as I am. And she's been waiting a long, long time."

Harry looked back over his shoulder again. Ron was lying on his stomach, a pillow over his head. Hermione seemed to have returned to her book, but her shoulders were occasionally shaking, and the scent wafting from her now was just barely short of despair.

And I'm the alpha, so I'm supposed to deal with this somehow...

Harry shook his head. *Life would be so much simpler if I'd just stayed with the Dursleys.*

xXxXx

Ron found himself shaking harder than he would have believed possible as he followed his brothers onto the Quidditch pitch.

I'm going to muff it up. The thought was an ice-cold certainty at the pit of his stomach. *Slytherin's going to score so much we'll never catch them even if Ginny gets the Snitch—I'm hopeless, I shouldn't even be here—*

A finger flicked his ear. "Stop it," said Ginny sharply. "You're going to do *fine*."

Ron shook his head dumbly. *I'm going to look stupid in front of the entire school—I won't be able to help it—I might as well just quit now, they didn't really want me anyway, I was only ever a reserve—*

He straddled his broom with the rest of the team and kicked off at Madam Hooch's wave, headed for the goal hoops.

Why should I even bother trying? I know I'm going to fail. I always fail when things get tough.

You didn't that night when they rescued Graham, a tiny voice whispered inside him, sounding rather like Hermione. Or the day you and Harry saved Fleur's sister in the lake, during the Tournament. And you know you didn't fail becoming an Animagus, or you'd be dead...

As from a long distance away, Ron heard Madam Hooch's whistle, and the Quaffle rose into his field of vision like a bright red harbinger of doom.

Well, it doesn't matter about that, he answered the voice. *I'm dead now anyway.*

The voice didn't deign to reply.

xXxXx

“And it's Johnson with the Quaffle, Angelina Johnson for Gryffindor, faster than a speeding Bludger, down to the Slytherin end of the pitch and a pass to Bell, Katie Bell for Gryffindor, Montague tried but he couldn't get a handle on it, and another pass to Spinnet, Alicia Spinnet for Gryffindor—best Chaser team in the school, ladies and gents, if I do say so myself, and certainly the most attractive—”

“JORDAN!”

“Sorry, Professor, just telling the truth—ow—anyway, the other interesting thing about these ladies—Spinnet still with the Quaffle, dodges a Bludger, reverse pass to Bell—is that they're the only members of the Gryffindor team today—pass back to Spinnet and quick pass to Johnson just in time there—not named Weasley, four Weasleys on the pitch today, I think that's a school record—and Johnson SHOOTS—”

Boos and cheers mingled over Lee Jordan's disgusted tones. “No good, it's no good, Bletchley has saved it and it's back to Montague, Montague for Slytherin, starting back up the pitch, don't look now but—OUCH, he didn't look, that's a Bludger to the head by Fred Weasley and Montague has dropped the Quaffle, but Warrington has recovered it, Warrington for Slytherin, on his way to challenge Keeper Ron Weasley, seen a few times as a reserve in past years but here on his first outing as a first-stringer—”

Hermione turned to Draco. “It's time,” she said.

“I think you're right.” Draco stood up, faced the Gryffindor stands, and waved his hand in a circle. Parchment rustled as most of Gryffindor House pulled out the scrolls Neville and Meghan had been distributing all through the game so far. Luna hummed a note softly, and Draco nodded to her.

Hermione got to her feet, squared her shoulders, and began to sing.

xXxXx

The world had narrowed and slowed down tremendously. The only thing Ron could see was the Quaffle rushing toward him in Warrington's enormous hands, and he *knew* he was still going to miss it, he *knew*—nothing in the world could make his hands and his mind fast enough to block it—

From very far away, he seemed to hear a clear voice singing.

*Weasley is our king,
Weasley is our king,
He never lets the Quaffle in,*

Weasley is our king.

Was she out of her mind, whoever she was? “Never lets the Quaffle in”? He never did anything else...

*Weasley can save anything,
He never leaves a single ring,
That's why Gryffindors all sing:
Weasley is our king.*

There was more than one voice, he could hear vaguely now, but the pure tones of the first one were still the clearest in his ears. They couldn't possibly mean what they were singing, but it was nice to hear...

*Weasley is as tough as sin,
He never lets the Quaffle in...*

Warrington's hands went back, and Ron scowled. He wanted to hear how the song ended! No stupid Slytherin was going to cheat him out of his song!

He sent his broom shooting across the goal hoops and snatched the Quaffle out of the air.

Screams of delight almost obliterated the song, but the last two lines rang clear to his ears, sung by that sweet and joyful voice.

*Weasley will make sure we win,
Weasley is our king!*

Something snapped inside Ron's mind, and suddenly he was back in the moment, listening to the cheers and staring at the Quaffle between his hands.

I did it. I saved it. Me, all by myself...

Well, me and whoever that was singing.

He turned to the Gryffindor section of the stands and raised the Quaffle high, and the roar nearly raised the nonexistent roof.

I have to find out who that was.

But later. After the match.

He tossed the Quaffle to Alicia and resumed guarding the hoops, listening with one ear to the singing of the Gryffindors and letting himself grin at the words.

*Weasley is our king,
Weasley is our king...*

Harry perched on the top of the stands, enjoying his freedom; he'd never have been allowed to do this in his body. He would have preferred to be out there on the pitch, on his Firebolt, looking for the Snitch, but this way he got to watch Ginny do it.

She was a good flyer, but he'd already known that. She had good Seeker's instincts, too, never letting herself get distracted by the main action of the match. Keeping an eye on it, yes, and dodging a Bludger when Dursley backhanded it towards her, but her attention never lingered too long on any one spot. She was sweeping the pitch, back and forth, around and around—

Harry stiffened. There it was. The Golden Snitch, hovering right behind Ron's head—

And Ginny didn't see it.

Harry leaned forward, not taking his eyes from the Snitch as it darted away from Ron, zoomed ten feet straight up, then out in a straight-line path towards the Slytherin goals. "Come on, Ginny," he hissed. "Come on, see it, see it, see it..."

Ginny's eyes were still on the other end of the pitch. Carrow was flying lower than she was, and closer to his own end—if he spotted the Snitch now, he'd get to it before she did, and the match would belong to Slytherin, despite Ron holding them to three goals in forty minutes of hard-fought play and the Gryffindors' seven answering goals—

He clenched his fists and thought, for a moment, of seeing if he could fly without a broom in this form. He was insubstantial, he didn't weigh anything, he ought to be able to fly if he wanted it enough, and it would be easy just to zoom over to Ginny's broom, point her in the right direction, and zoom away again—

No. Harry made himself sit back up. No. Ginny'd want to do this herself. She'd want to win the game fair and square. Or lose it that way.

Ginny's head turned, slowly, so slowly, her eyes darting back and forth across the pitch.

But I think this time she's going to win.

Legs locked around her Cleansweep, both hands free, Ginny plummeted, causing shrieks from girls all across the stands. Montague screamed abuse at Carrow, who shot towards Ginny's position, looking frantic—he was gaining on her fast, he had a better broom, but she was a better flyer—

Ginny clasped her hands together and brought them to her chest, as though she were a maiden in an ancient tale sighing over her lover. But no lover could ever have made the sound that rose from the stands as the Gryffindors and their supporters realized what she'd just done.

"GINNY WEASLEY HAS THE SNITCH!" Lee Jordan roared into his megaphone. "IT HAS BEEN THE MATCH OF THE WEASLEYS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN—FRED AND GEORGE

WEASLEY WITH SOME ASTOUNDING BEATING, RON WEASLEY WITH AN AMAZING TURN ON GOAL, AND GINNY WEASLEY WINS THE MATCH FOR GRYFFINDOR, 220-30!”

Above the jubilant screaming rose the sound of song.

*Weasleys can do all the things,
They Seek, they Beat, they block the rings,
That’s why everybody sings,
Weasleys are our kings.*

Harry flowed into Wolf’s shape and let out a long, loud, triumphant howl. Watching Ginny win the match had felt as good as winning it himself. Almost better.

Almost.

xXxXx

The door from the red bedroom into the main room of the Den slammed open. Ginny and Harry, tucked into the opposite corner, both jumped. Luckily, in the same direction.

“Hermione?” Ginny said tentatively.

“What’s wrong?” asked Harry.

Hermione, her face set, ignored them both, storming across the Den and into the green bedroom. As the door slammed behind her, Harry heard a half-muffled sob.

He turned back around. Draco was standing in the door of the red bedroom, looking very uncomfortable.

“Ron,” Ginny said, her tone making it a statement rather than a question.

Draco nodded. “And Lavender,” he said. “It’s disgusting, really.”

“Let me at it.” Ginny slid off Harry’s lap and stood up. “I’ll bring you back pictures, love,” she said over her shoulder, before disappearing past Draco.

The brothers looked at each other for a few moments. “Want me to try?” Harry asked.

“I don’t think you can make it any worse,” said Draco.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“You’re a braver man than I am.”

They shared a brief smile. Then Draco stepped back into the red bedroom, and Harry turned to the green.

“—isn't *fair!*” Hermione's voice half-shouted from beyond the door. “I've been waiting *years* for this, and that *tart* just comes in and—”

“Deep breaths, sweetheart,” said a low, soothing feminine voice. “You need to get yourself calmed down before you can do anything about this.”

Harry stopped with his hand on the door handle. *That sounds like Alex's girlfriend... maybe I shouldn't interfere...*

“And you might want to ask your big brother for a little help,” the woman went on. “He's waiting outside right now.”

The door was yanked open under Harry's hand, and Hermione, red-eyed and disheveled, threw herself into his arms. “Harry I think I'm in love and he doesn't love me back and I don't know what to do!” she wailed into his shoulder, all on one note and in one breath.

Harry glanced at the portrait on the wall. The woman lounging in Alex's chair was definitely red-haired and bespectacled, and just as definitely amused, but in a sympathetic way. *Get her calmed down first*, her hands suggested in flawless *Pride-sign*. *Then we can talk about it.*

Harry nodded and patted Hermione on the back with one hand, freeing the other to make a simple query. *Who are you?*

“Come in and close the door,” the woman suggested. “It'll make things more comfortable. And then we can get to know each other a little. Start with names. Mine's Anne.”

“Just Anne?” Harry asked, guiding a sobbing Hermione to the bed.

“For right now. You two work this out, and then give me a call.” She stood up and walked out of the painting, leaving the chair empty.

“Why can't he see it?” Hermione demanded of Harry's robes. “Why does he have to be so *stupid?*”

“Because if he wasn't, he wouldn't be him?” Harry tried. “And you wouldn't... er, love him?”

Hermione went into a fresh wave of bawling. Harry cursed silently and stroked her hair. “I mean, you wouldn't care so much about him,” he tried again. “Because you *like* him the way he is, even if it drives you up the wall too.”

A large, watery sniff. “There's so much about him I wish I could change,” Hermione said thickly. “But I feel horrible for even wanting it. It's like saying I can't l-l-love him the way he is... except I already *do!*” The word trailed off into another wail. “And I can't *stop* it! I've tried!”

“Then it's probably supposed to happen,” Harry said, recalling a conversation with Padfoot that had sounded a bit like this. “And if it's supposed to happen, then the rest of it will happen. You just have to give it time.”

“I’ve been giving it time for the last *five years*, Harry.” Hermione had graduated from weepy to exasperated, which was definitely a step up in Harry’s book. “How much longer do you think he needs?”

“Er, well...” Harry floundered for a second. “I suppose longer than five years. Or maybe something different needs to happen. Something he’s not used to.”

“Something he’s not used to?” Hermione sat up, glaring at him. “Like some little tart drooling all over him and pawing at his robes?”

Harry bit his tongue to stop his first two responses. Unfortunately, the thought of the places it had been recently wasn’t helping—

Or is it?

“What they’re doing is hard to resist, the first time you try it,” he said truthfully. “For a boy, anyway. And probably for a girl, too. It feels really good. And that good feeling sort of washes away everything else, unless something really bad comes along.” The thought of Cho and her vitriol put a sour taste in his mouth. “And depending on how much of it you do, and how much you like it, that good feeling can last a long time. But it is going to run out. And when it does...”

“What?” Hermione demanded. “When it does, what?”

“When it does, Ron’s going to realize he doesn’t really know Lavender,” Harry said, letting experience speak through him. “He’s going to find out she doesn’t understand a lot about him. She hasn’t done a lot of the things he’s done. She wouldn’t understand denning, or Animagus, or how the Pride works—I bet she’d have screamed if she’d seen you and Ginny in your challenge-fight. He’s going to look at her, and he’s going to realize that all they have in common is the snogging. And he’s going to want something more.”

“Are you sure?” Hermione breathed. “Are you positive?”

“Yes. And you would be too, if you thought about it instead of getting mad at him for something he can’t really help.” Harry grinned at her. “We’re blokes, Hermione. Slaves to our—”

He never even saw the pillow coming.

xXxXx

Anne poked her head back into the picture frame and smiled. “Your problem children are enjoying themselves,” she said over her shoulder.

“My problem children? *My* problem children?” Alex peered around her. “Ah, I see what you mean.” Hermione was prostrate on the bed, shrieking with giggles as Harry tickled her mercilessly.

“I think we’ll get through,” Anne said sedately. “Yes, I think we’ll get through just fine.”

“After this next little bit you’ve got planned, I’m not so sure,” Alex grumbled. “Evil woman.”

“You knew that already.”

Alex shrugged. “Simply restating the obvious.”

xXxXx

Dolores Umbridge paced up and down her office, a bitter taste on her tongue. Everything was against her. The students had stopped bothering to wait until she turned her back to laugh at her, the teachers treated her with barely concealed contempt, and Harry Potter—

If I could only find him. If I could only bring him to heel. Surely, surely, when they saw the example I made of him, they would learn what I can do—they would begin to fear my anger!

A soft, almost hesitant tapping on her door made her start. “Yes, come in,” she called after a moment to even her breathing.

There was no response.

Dolores gripped her wand and moved towards the door. “I said, come in,” she repeated in a sharper tone.

Again, no response.

She flung the door open. “This is not funny, whoever you are—”

The corridor was empty.

Dolores growled under her breath. More tricks, more pranks, more jokes at her expense...

She turned to go back inside and stopped.

A small slip of parchment was stuck to her door.

Dolores peered at it and felt her heart speed up. Quickly, she pulled it free, hurried to her desk, and examined it more closely, to make sure it said what it had seemed to say. Her heart speeded up as a smile crept across her face.

How perfect... how exquisite...

The note was brief, only two lines long, but two lines Dolores knew she would remember her whole life through.

Meet me by the library tomorrow at noon.

I can help you find Harry Potter.

whydoyouneedtoknow
FanficAuthors.net

Facing Danger

Chapter 20: Escapades and Escapes (Year 5)

Chapter 20: Escapades and Escapes

“So she’s been here three months,” Hermione said, pulling her cloak tighter around herself as a gust of cold air swept down the corridor. “In that time, she’s expelled Harry, made Defense classes a mockery, put Professor Trelawney on probation—not that she’d be much of a loss, from what you tell me about Divination—”

“But Mr. Moony told Harry we were right about the...” Ron stopped abruptly. “Thing,” he concluded lamely. “You know, the one with Harry and Neville and You-Know-Who in it?”

“That’s right, I’d forgotten.” Hermione made herself smile at Ron, cursing inwardly at the awkwardness of the expression—*not that he’d notice, he never does...*

“Something in your shoe?” Ron asked.

“No, I’m fine.”

“You were making a face...”

“I said I’m fine!”

“But what does the prophecy have to do with Trelawney teaching at Hogwarts?” Neville asked. “Just because she made a real one once...”

“Dumbledore wants to keep her safe,” said Draco tautly. “In case Voldemort decides he wants the prophecy from its original source.”

Hermione edged up beside her twin and matched his pace, wishing she dared touch his cheek and try to soothe him, but his straight back and folded arms all but shouted ‘leave me alone’.

“But she doesn’t remember it,” said Ron, looking bewildered. “She goes over funny when she makes a prophecy, and then she goes back to the way she usually is and doesn’t remember thing one about making it. I bet she doesn’t even know she made the one about Harry.”

Hermione nearly stumbled as heat seared across her chest. Ron swore, Neville winced, and Draco hissed under his breath, yanking his pendants out. “Whoever this is, I’m going to—” He stopped, eyes fixed on the medallions. “Harry,” he said.

Hermione pulled her own pendants free and flipped through them until she came to the brightly pulsing wolf carving. “Harry,” she agreed. “We should—”

A familiar chill swept over her, and her eyes blurred slightly. She leaned against the nearest wall, concentrating on the message blazing its impatient fire across her mind. “I will be so glad when

you can come out of there,” she muttered.

“What?” said Ron and Neville together.

“Harry’s talking to her,” said Draco, slowing a bit. “What is it?”

Hermione stopped dead, blinking. “Harry, that doesn’t make any sense,” she said. “Try it again.”

In response, she got a very clear feeling of frustration and the sound of the Den-door opening, and the sense of being overlain by something else vanished.

“What doesn’t make any sense?” Ron demanded, in the same moment as Neville said, “What’s going on?” and Draco’s, “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t really understand it.” Hermione caught her breath, then moved into a half-jog, the boys behind her. The hospital wing was the closest entrance to where they currently were. “At least I hope I didn’t...”

xXxXx

Dolores Umbridge sat in her office, going over her notes once more. It had taken more time than she liked to bring her informant to the point of giving her anything useful, but they had built trust slowly, doing favors for one another, and she thought she might at last have all she needed.

I know Potter leaves his hiding place on occasion, and I know I can be led to where he is. If she would only have told me where, or why... but no, she fears retribution by means of blood magic. Foolish girl. If only she knew how weak Potter’s stomach truly is, how he runs in fear from even the slightest hint of pain...

Dolores smiled as she thought about how she could use that.

Give him the options. Tell us what Dumbledore is planning, or suffer. As I told Cornelius, I expect him to break immediately, and if he does not, the Cruciatus leaves no physical marks. But once we have the information we need...

Well, we can hardly have him telling the world what went on, can we? And in the hands of determined and desperate people—like Potter’s criminal godfather or his tame werewolf—even the strongest Memory Charm can be broken.

A more permanent solution will be in order.

Dolores giggled, stroking her wand with one finger. *I know just the thing, too...*

xXxXx

Neville sat on the floor in the yellow bedroom, his eyes closed, knees hugged to his chest. Years of dreary hospital visits swirled around his mind, intermingled with parched deserts, dying

jungles, and a nightmare he'd thought was gone forever. A nightmare of screams and shouts and gleeful, cackling laughter, laughter that deserved the name 'maniacal'.

He hadn't had that dream since the day he'd left for Hogwarts, the day he'd been dragged down platform nine and three-quarters by the tiny whirlwind which had turned everything in his life upside-down. Even when the dementors had come too close those few times in his third year, and he'd heard the screams and the laughter again, it hadn't brought the dream back, and so he'd pushed it out of his mind, dismissed it as unimportant, refused to think about it.

Until now.

Now he knew.

"Neville?" whispered a voice close at hand, and Neville opened his eyes dully.

The room was dusky, but he knew the silhouette kneeling beside him. "Meghan," he said, acknowledging her presence without making it clear if he wanted her there or not. *I'm not even really sure myself...*

"Please, can I stay with you?"

For once, the little-girl tones in Meghan's voice were not at all assumed, and Neville felt like a heel. *Here I am scared to death, and I'm fifteen years old. She's twelve. We're all just expecting her to deal with it like we do, because she always can...*

Except when she can't.

He scooted back until he was sitting against the bottom of the bed, then opened his arms, and Meghan scrambled into his embrace and began to cry.

"I know now why Luna didn't want to see anymore," she whispered between sobs. "Because I can feel just a little bit of what everybody is feeling, and it's awful."

Another wave of shame rolled over Neville. "I'm sorry, Pearl," he said in her ear. "I never meant to do that to you."

"It isn't your fault. I didn't know it would happen either." Meghan rubbed her face against his arm. "I think it may be the Den. It kept Harry's mind safe from Voldemort back before the blood bond—maybe it holds in all our emotions that same way, and I can feel them because they're bouncing back and echoing and getting louder. And because we all feel the same way about this."

"The Ministry isn't going to like it," Neville said, thinking aloud. "Twelve prisoners escaping from Azkaban all at once."

"Maybe it's a good thing," said Meghan, though she shivered as she spoke. "Maybe it will mean the Ministry will have to see Voldemort is back..."

“They’ll work out some other way it could have happened,” Neville said, depressingly sure of what he was saying. “Even though all the prisoners who escaped were Death Eaters.”

Meghan gulped and clung tighter to Neville, and he tightened his own arms around her, gritting his teeth against the sound of remembered laughter. *You don’t get anywhere near her*, he thought fiercely towards the laugher. *Not one step, or I’ll kill you.*

Not that I wouldn’t anyway.

Bellatrix Lestrange. The name flowed in a way it shouldn’t have, far more beautiful than the person it described. *Bellatrix Black Lestrange...*

It seemed impossible that the delicate girl he was holding, or her fearless always-laughing father, or her quick-thinking cool-headed brother, could be related to *her* .

And if we want to talk about relations, there’s someone else who’s going to have a harder time of this than I will.

“How’s Draco?” he asked Meghan’s back.

“Upset.” Meghan lifted her head to rest its side on his shoulder, freeing her mouth for speech. “He’s locked himself in the green bedroom and won’t come out. Luna’s in the bathroom—she was being sick, but now she’s done. Hermione’s with her. Ron and Ginny are in the red bedroom talking to their mum on Harry’s Zippophone.”

“So where’s Harry?”

“He said he was going to go flying...”

xXxXx

Harry leaned forward farther and farther on his Firebolt, making sure to lean in at the same time—if he rammed into a wall at the speed he was going, not even Meghan would be able to help him.

So. What does Voldemort have on his side? The Ministry sticking its fingers in its ears and going “La la la not LISTENING”, Umbridge doing her best to discredit Dumbledore every which way, whatever new Death Eaters they’ve recruited, all the ones who never got caught, and now a whole load of the ones who did...

He pulled out into the middle of the pitch, did two Sloth Grip Rolls in rapid succession, and started circling the other way. *I don’t want to sound defeatist or anything, but aren’t we just a little outnumbered? And wasting time and energy fighting people who ought to be on our side?*

As big as the pitch was, it still felt stifling, and Harry would have loved nothing more than to zoom down into the shed, hiss the password at the back wall, and shoot his Firebolt up that passage as fast as it would go...

Wait a second. Why don't I? I'll be going so fast there's no way Umbridge would know it's me, and that's if she's even looking out the window—I'll feel loads better after I do it, I really need some fresh air, it's only for a few minutes...

The Firebolt plunged towards the grass of the pitch, its head pointed at the broomshed built unobtrusively into one wall.

xXxXx

Draco sprawled face-down on the green bedspread. He'd had a bout of sobbing panic already, and was now moving into the dreary phase of his reaction...

Something wrong when I know exactly how I react to the news that my father's running around loose.

He opened one eye and squinted at the moss-colored expanse in front of him. *I dreamed of being a Slytherin once. Of being the person I would have been, if nothing had ever changed. Draco Malfoy, and proud of it.*

I'm Draco still, and proud of who I am...

Half a smile made it onto his face. *Two out of three. Not bad.*

But if Luna's vision is right, I'm going to die awfully soon, and after doing something so horrible that she says she never loved me. Something so awful she'd rather go away with my father. What could I do to her like that?

And how much of him is in me? Draco lifted one hand into his field of vision and glared at the too-pale skin and the fine down of blond hair on its back. Is it just looks, or is it something deeper? I've felt like him before, when I lose control, when I get really angry—I feel it snap inside me, and I don't care anymore about who I'm fighting, I just want to hurt them and make them keep hurting for a long time...

Music suddenly blared out beside him, and he yelped, sitting up. *What—where is that—what is it?*

His eyes roamed the room, while his ears analyzed the sound. *Two chords, four beats, two different chords, four beats... it's hard, driving, it pushes...*

A harsh voice began to sing.

*Don't come on so cocksure, boy
You can't escape your genes*

Alex's girlfriend walked backwards into the frame on the wall, her hair tied back and her arms crossed across her chest. She wore an Egyptian costume, and it was she who was singing.

There's no point in feeling pure, boy

Your background intervenes

Draco stared at her, unsure quite what to feel at the moment. The woman extended an imperious hand, beckoning.

*Now listen good and listen straight
You're not the master of your fate*

Alex stepped into the picture, also in Egyptian garb, his face rebellious. The woman circled him, still singing.

*To this you must be reconciled
You'll always be your father's child
At times acclaimed, at times reviled
You'll wind up doing just what I'd have done*

Alex moved away from her, watching her distrustfully. She grabbed his shoulder and leaned in, singing straight into his face.

Like father, like son

Alex pushed her away and took over the song.

*Don't assume your vices
Get handed down the line*

He stalked across the portrait, glancing back at her angrily every so often.

*That a parent's blood suffices
To condemn the child's design*

On the extreme opposite side of the space, he whirled to face her.

*I've done wrong, I can't deny
But at least I know that I
Shouldn't blame that on my stock*

He sneered at her.

*This may come as quite a shock
But I'm no chip off any block
A glance out at Draco.*

*I wouldn't wish those words on anyone
Like father, like son...*

The music trailed away, and Draco applauded. The pair took extravagant bows.

“Just thought you might need some musical encouragement,” the woman said—*Anne, that’s her name, Anne, Hermione told me.* “Or a reason to laugh your head off.” She squinted at her costume dubiously. “I don’t think I make a very good man.”

“Better than some people,” Draco said, flopping down on the bed again. “Nice song. Do you do that often?”

“What, make fools of ourselves?” Alex asked, sitting down. “All the time. It’s quite the rage this season, you know—*aie!*” He ducked away from Anne, who had just swatted him on the back of the head. “Stop hitting me!”

“Stop deserving it.” Anne leaned on the back of the chair. “Ridiculous presentation or not, it’s true, Draco Black. You are who *you* are. No one else. Now get out of here for a little while. You’re just going to wear yourself out worrying.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Draco saluted from flat on his back, then sat up and marched to the door.

“Don’t go through the red bedroom,” Alex called after him. “Ron and Ginny are in there.”

“Right.” Draco stopped at the door. “So where should I go, then?”

“Thou shalt not go through the other common rooms,” said Anne sententiously, “nor shalt thou go through the hospital wing. The Headmaster’s office is right out!”

Draco groaned. “All right. All right. I get it. The kitchens it is.”

“I got first pick for Heirs,” Alex confided to Anne in a loud whisper as Draco shut the door behind himself.

Despite himself, Draco laughed. The way Alex and Anne played reminded him of someone...

Well, a bunch of someones. Moony and Danger, Padfoot and Letha, even me and Luna when she’s not seeing disturbing things.

He snorted, opening the kitchen door. *And now I’m back where I didn’t want to be, thank you very much, oh marvelous brain. One of these days I’m taking an eggbeater to you.*

Through the passage he slid, then pushed his way through the kitchen door and trotted into the entrance hall, with no particular destination in mind, just to keep moving, to stay away from the feelings, the thoughts, the—

“Oh!”

Draco’s train of thought ended with a jarring thud. He was sitting on his rump near the marble staircase, gasping for air, with Amanda Smythe nearby in like condition. “Sorry,” she panted out after a moment. “Wasn’t looking...where I was going...”

“No, I’m sorry,” Draco said, recovering his breath and pulling himself to his feet. “Let me help you.”

“Thanks.” Amanda took his hand and lifted herself gracefully up. “I heard the news,” she said, looking at him directly, with no evasion in her green eyes. “I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m as safe as the next man. If, of course, the next man is Harry Potter.”

Amanda laughed. “I’m still sorry,” she said after a moment, the words erasing the smile from her face. “I love my parents so much. I can’t imagine what it would be like to have one of them hate me and want to hurt me.”

“I love my parents too,” Draco said, sitting down on the bottom step and scooting over to make room for Amanda. “Lucius is just... an accidental relation, you could say. Blood and nothing more.”

“That’s true. But it still hurts you. I can see that.” Amanda squeezed his shoulder. “So I’m still sorry. And you can’t make me not be.”

“I... wasn’t trying to.”

Amanda raised her nose loftily. “Meh,” she said with great dignity. “Meh, I say!”

“Meh, you say,” Draco agreed. “What does ‘meh’ mean?”

“Anything I want it to!” Amanda’s nose stayed in the air.

“And what do you want it to today?”

“That is none of your business.”

“But you’re saying it to me. That makes it my business.”

Amanda’s eyes narrowed. “Meh,” she repeated.

“An all-purpose monosyllable,” mused Draco. “I think I like it.”

“I’m so glad,” said Amanda, lowering her chin. “There was much thought of pleasing you when it was christened.”

Draco frowned, then grinned as his mind ran the misquote to earth and found a pleasing rejoinder. “As bamboo shall draw the panda, so this ‘meh’ shall draw Amanda.”

“Oh, very good!” Amanda applauded, and Draco felt an odd sensation under his ribs, not unlike the one he felt when he kissed Luna...

Oh, no. No, no, no. Get up, walk away, get out of here right now. You are the next best thing to

engaged, Draco—not to mention, less than two years from being dead! You cannot be seriously thinking about this girl!

Draco took a bow from the seated position.

I suppose if our hearts listened to reason, we wouldn't have literature.

xXxXx

Dolores' back twinged. With a sigh, she stood up and stretched it, then began to walk back and forth across the office.

The plan would be a far better one if I were sure where Potter spends his time. The girl seems to think he remains in the Room of Requirement, but I doubt that, or why would it not respond to my need to find him and deliver him to me?

A lone flyer over the Quidditch pitch caught her eye, and she stood for a moment, watching the student zoom back and forth, loop fantastically tight, and swoop in and out of the goal hoops.

Perhaps it is time for another new rule. No students are allowed to fly unless during approved Quidditch practice. And I will find whoever that is and give him a week's detention.

With order thus restored to her world, Dolores returned to her desk.

Now, the girl insinuated the presence of many people. A large organization, this, and obviously spread out over all the Houses. Just as well. The more discontent we can crush at once, the better...

But we need Harry Potter. Without him, everything falls apart. And with him...

Dolores smiled, her mind's eye already painting her the picture.

With him, we have the world.

xXxXx

Harry stepped out of the Quidditch pitch into the main room and shook his head briskly. "All right?" he asked Luna, who was sitting rather forlornly at a small table in the middle of the room.

"Yes. Or I will be. It was just..." Luna shivered. "When Mr. Moony told us those names, I could see them all, the people they were and the things they did and what they've become, after so long in Azkaban." She swallowed convulsively. "And I saw what some of us might have been, if we were like them."

"Do you mean evil, or trapped with dementors?" Harry asked, unable to stop himself.

"Yes."

How helpful. “Where’s Hermione?”

“In the kitchen.” Luna waved towards it vaguely. “She said she would heat me up some applesauce.”

“Oh. Um, I’ll go help her.” Harry was already moving towards the door. Hermione in the kitchen wasn’t quite an unqualified disaster, but under certain circumstances it could come close.

He opened the door hastily, and Hermione jumped and looked around. “What?”

“Just...wanted to see if you needed help.”

Hermione made a face at him. “Wanted to see if I’d destroyed your kitchen, you mean.”

“Well, only a little. You don’t blow things up anymore. Much.”

Hermione sniffed audibly and turned back to the pot she was stirring. “This is for Luna,” she said. “So don’t you touch it.”

Harry edged up to the stove and peered into the pot. “That’s a lot for just Luna.”

“I want some too.”

“Then there should be enough for three.”

Hermione elbowed him out of the way. “Greedy. Get your own.”

“Ow. Fine, I will.” Harry went to the cupboard to get out bowls and spoons. “Ron and Ginny still talking to their mum?” he asked over his shoulder.

“As far as I know. They haven’t come out. Neville and Meghan did, but only to go over to the music room. Have you seen Draco?”

“No. And he’s not in the green bedroom, either, the door’s open.”

Hermione shrugged. “He probably left, then. Maybe he went to talk to someone.”

“Like who?”

“I don’t know. Come up with your own answers once in a while, why don’t you?”

“But asking you is so much easier.” Harry dodged a spoon thickly coated with applesauce. “Are you scared?” he asked quietly, dropping his casual air.

“Some,” Hermione admitted. “Especially after third year.” Her hand went to her cheek. “I love Draco, and I love being twins, but I wish that had never happened.”

“I don’t,” said Harry, setting the bowls on the table.

“What?” Hermione whirled to face him. “You—you—”

“That night made you stronger, Neenie. You did your first Animagus. You saved Draco’s life, twice. And you bit a Death Eater.” Harry grinned, and saw an answering smile, though weaker, on Hermione’s face. “If all we had were good times, how would we ever get strong? I don’t want the bad times. But I’m sure as hell not going to lie down and let them trample on me.”

Hermione nodded. “You didn’t start the fight,” she said. “But you’re going to finish it.”

“That’s the Snitch. Now, how about some applesauce?” Harry picked the top bowl off the stack and held it out. “Philosophy makes me hungry.”

xXxXx

Sirius shut the door behind him, leaned against it with his eyes closed, and tried not to pass out.

“Honey, I’m home,” he said quietly.

“So I see,” said Aletha’s voice from beside him, making him jump. “Cloak.”

Sirius got his feet under him again and undid his cloak’s fastener, the green leaf pin Hermione had got him for last Christmas. A certain age group at the Auror Office had been looking at him with more respect since then, he realized dimly...

Rustling as Aletha hung the cloak on its hook, then the sound of her footsteps coming back. “We heard,” she said, her hands starting to trace around his chest. “How bad was it?”

“Mmmm.” Sirius leaned forward into her arms. “Can’t think when you do that.”

“I’ll have to stop then—oh!” She squealed in surprise as he pulled her close.

“No, you don’t,” he mumbled into her hair. “Don’t ever stop.”

“If you don’t want me to stop, we need to find somewhere to sit down. I spent all day on my feet too, and your son is starting to make his presence known, so my back is none too happy with me.”

“My son, is he?” Sirius slid a hand down Aletha’s front, getting only slightly distracted along the way, until he located the slight flare of belly, which he patted. “Attaboy, Marcus. Give your mama some grief.”

Aletha slapped him lightly on the back of the head. “Stop that. He doesn’t need any encouragement.”

“Well, need it or not, he’s getting it.” Sirius kissed Aletha’s ear. “God, I’m glad I have you. I don’t think I could do this job without you.”

“I’m always glad to help,” Aletha murmured. “Now, about that sitting down...”

“Just lead me. It’s dark and I can’t see.”

“That would be because you have your eyes shut.”

“So?”

A long-suffering sigh. “Never mind.”

xXxXx

Meghan strummed a chord on her guitar, changing it rapidly up, down, down, up, up. Beside her, Neville idly picked out a melody. A note and up a fourth, down step-wise twice, back up a third and two steps up then back down...

“I know that song,” Meghan said, stopping what she was doing. “Play it again.”

Neville complied.

Meghan began to hum to herself, tapping out a rhythm with one finger. Slowly, her face grew wicked.

“What are you thinking?” said Neville nervously.

“I’m thinking we need to talk to the rest of the Pride,” Meghan said, standing up and setting her guitar aside. “I have just the start of an idea—it needs other people to make it work...”

xXxXx

“Toilets,” said Luna when Meghan had explained her ‘start of an idea’. “Seven toilets.”

“Why toilets?” Neville asked, then flushed pink. “Oh. Wait. Never mind.”

“But where are we going to find seven toilets no one uses so we can prank them?” Harry asked, setting aside his applesauce bowl. “We don’t want somebody else getting caught by this. It has to be Umbridge. It’s too good not to be.”

“Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom,” Hermione said promptly. “We can even get Myrtle to help. She’d do anything you’d ask her, Harry.”

Harry put his head down on the table. “Don’t remind me.”

Ron and Ginny chose this moment to make their appearance, and were just as enthusiastic about the idea once it had been explained. “We’ll need good timing,” said Ron, doodling on the table with his wand, the basic layout of the halls around Myrtle’s bathroom taking shape. “And a lot of Animation Charms. That’s going to use up most of the stock we have with Fred and George.”

“What is it there for, if not to be used?” Ginny asked. “And we know exactly how to do the

timing.” She handed Harry back his Zippophone. “We have four of them. That ought to be enough.”

Luna smiled. “Now all we need is a hex that makes someone have to use the toilet right away...”

xXxXx

Hermione dug happily through the shelves in the Den’s library. “I think the Room of Requirement pulls books from here,” she said over her shoulder. “This copy of *Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed* has the same little nick on the corner as the one I read upstairs...”

“How far do you reckon the requirement bit goes?” Ron asked, taking books as Hermione handed them to him. “I mean, if we required Umbridge all tied up, d’you think—”

“Ugh, Ron, of course not.” Hermione swatted him on the shoulder. “It takes things that are elsewhere in the castle and brings them to where they’re needed.”

“Umbridge is something that’s elsewhere in the castle,” Ron pointed out.

“In the same condition they’re in when they left the places they started out at,” Hermione said impatiently. “I really don’t think a room is going to be able to get rid of Dolores Umbridge for us.”

“Be nice,” Ron said wistfully.

“Yes, it would.” Hermione piled one last book into his arms and steered him towards the armchairs in the center of the room. “It would also be nice not to have a war, not to have to come down here every time we want to see Harry, and to have—”

She stopped herself short, horrified at where her tongue had almost gone.

“To have what?” Ron asked, dropping the books heavily on the table.

“To have you care a little about anything around you,” Hermione snapped, aware she was being too mean but praying it would cover up her lapse. “Would it kill you to show some consideration?”

“According to you, I wouldn’t know,” Ron shot back. “I never tried.”

He turned and stormed out of the room.

Hermione sank into one of the chairs, picked up the book on the top of the pile, and methodically beat her head against it several times. Then she opened it to the index and began looking for the word she needed.

Toilet... toilet... let’s see, tinder, toads, toffee... torch, whoops, too far... here we are. Toilet.

Flipping to the first of the indicated pages, she started to skim the spells listed.

Her mind tried to escape its task. Firmly, she pulled it back. *I am working. I have no time for childish games. Besides, Ron's already interested in someone else. I don't chase other girls' property.*

But he isn't hers! insisted a little voice in her mind. *Or anyway, he shouldn't be!*

Hermione ignored the voice and continued working.

She wondered how long it would be before she didn't hear it at all, even when she wanted to.

xXxXx

Dolores Jane Umbridge awoke the next morning in fine fettle. Her informant had indicated that there would likely be a meeting of the treacherous group this evening. At that time, she would capture Harry Potter and discredit Dumbledore forever. Headship of Hogwarts would be hers, and the future of wizarding Britain assured in order and stability.

She felt so good that she allowed herself a small swagger in her walk as she descended the stairs towards breakfast.

xXxXx

"You're covered," Neville whispered as Umbridge strutted into view in the second floor corridor.

Ginny took careful aim. "*Balneo !* "

xXxXx

Dolores stopped, frowning.

How odd. I didn't have to do that when I left my quarters, and they're only one floor up from here. Should I go back?

She looked around and smiled. A girls' toilet was just down the hall from where she stood.

What luck.

Hurrying down the hall, she pushed the door open wide and entered.

xXxXx

Across the hall, under the Invisibility Cloak, Hermione tapped her open Zippo twice against the wall.

Stage One is complete. Stage Two, go.

xXxXx

“Hello,” said a melancholy voice.

“Aaahh!” Dolores leapt back, her heart pounding, as a sad-faced ghost zoomed out of one of the stalls.

“Do you need to use the toilet?” the ghost asked. “Don’t use mine, please, I was just getting ready for a good cry. I’m Moaning Myrtle. At least that’s what they all call me.” She sniffled. “How would you like to be called that?”

“I don’t think I’d like it, dear,” said Dolores, edging along the cubicles. She couldn’t stand ghosts, but this one seemed harmless—she’d just do what she needed to do and get out quickly—

“Aren’t you looking for Harry Potter?” Myrtle asked, wiping away a tear before it could spot her glasses. “He comes in here sometimes, you know.” She giggled, a very hollow sound. “I think he likes me.”

“Does he.” *More proof that he’s mad, in case I needed it.* “If you’ll excuse me, Miss Myrtle, I rather need to—”

“Oh, I understand.” Myrtle sniffed again. “That’s another thing I can’t do anymore. Ever since I died. You’d never think I’d miss it, but I do...”

Dolores tuned this out and ducked into the cubicle, barely repressing a shudder.

When I am Headmistress of Hogwarts, the first thing I will do is banish all the ghosts.

xXxXx

“You set it up, right?” Draco’s voice whispered through the Zippophone.

“Well, if I hadn’t, I couldn’t do anything about it now,” Hermione hissed. “Yes, of course I set it up.”

“Both of you shut it,” Ron’s voice overrode them. “Neenie, get in close. Listen for the flush, then count five, then set it off.”

Hermione bit back an indignant comment about knowing what to do without being told and simply said, “Right.” Tiptoeing across the hall, she put her ear to the door.

xXxXx

Dolores turned a deaf ear to Myrtle’s prattling, until a familiar name caught her attention.

“...Potter was here earlier. He’s so sweet sometimes—he wanted me to help him with something...”

“Harry Potter was here?” Dolores demanded, hastily letting her robes down and shoving open the door of her cubicle. “When?”

“Oh, yesterday.” Myrtle shrugged. “Or the day before. Time doesn’t mean so much when you’re dead.”

“Think very hard,” Dolores said urgently. “When, exactly, was he here?”

“Well, it can’t have been more than two days ago,” said Myrtle, floating lower and lower in the air as she thought, “because two days ago there were a lot of girls in here, and they didn’t notice the labels, so they can’t have been there then, and Harry put them there.”

“Labels, what labels?”

“These labels,” said Myrtle, floating over Dolores’ cubicle and pointing. “Look at the top of the tank.”

Dolores turned and went back into her cubicle to look.

Pasted across the top of the tank was the word “Dopey”.

Dolores ground her teeth. *Juvenile, disgusting, and pointless. No surprise that Potter did this.*

“You forgot to flush,” Myrtle pointed out, hovering above her.

For a second, Dolores was tempted to leave the toilet unflushed and storm out, but her hand went to the lever automatically. *Myrtle has helped me. I now know of another place Harry Potter can sometimes be found. And where he once was, he may return again. There is no reason to make a mess in Myrtle’s home.*

She pushed down on the lever. “Now think carefully, please, Myrtle,” she said, looking up at the ghost as the toilet flushed with a loud whoosh. “If you can remember when Harry Potter was here, it could be very helpful to me. And I reward those who help me. What do you say?”

“I say...” Myrtle floated up to the bathroom’s window to look out. “I say...”

xXxXx

Five.

Hermione bent down and touched her wand to a certain stone in the floor. “*Eo* ,” she whispered.

xXxXx

Dolores jumped as the sound of rocks smashing together reverberated through the bathroom. “Earthquake!” she screamed, running from the cubicle. “An earthquake!”

“But it’s not moving!” Myrtle screamed back, her hands over her ears. “It’s just—”

The noise stopped.

Slowly, Dolores took her own hands away from her ears. “What was it?” she wondered aloud.

The door of the far toilet cubicle burst open, making her shriek.

“Heigh-ho!” bellowed the toilet, which bore the word “Doc” across the top of its tank.

Six other cubicle doors opened simultaneously. “Heigh-ho!” chorused six other toilets, each labeled with a word—Dolores could see “Grumpy,” “Sleepy,” and her own “Dopey” from where she stood—

“Heigh-ho!” sang the three of the toilets closest to the end, marching out of their cubicles and down the row.

“Heigh-ho!” sang the next two, falling into line behind the first ones.

“Heigh-ho!” sang the last two, one of whom was Dopey. Dolores edged out of the way as the toilet left its cubicle.

“Boo!” screeched Myrtle suddenly, shooting directly at Dolores’ face. Dolores screamed and ducked back—

Falling onto the open seat of Dopey, which was waiting behind her.

The toilet seat contracted around her, holding her there.

The door of the room opened as if by magic.

“Heigh-ho,” sang the toilets, marching towards the door, “heigh-ho, it’s off to school we go...”

Dolores fumbled inside her robes for her wand—if she could just get the charms off herself, the toilets would be easy enough to deal with afterwards—

“Need help, Professor?” Myrtle said loudly in her ear, causing her to jump.

Her wand clattered to the bathroom floor.

“Oh, don’t worry about this,” Myrtle said, swooping down to it lovingly. “I’ll take very good care of it.”

Dolores moaned aloud over the whistling of the toilets.

xXxXx

Hermione was using one hand to hold open the door and the other to stifle her giggles. As

Professor Umbridge was carried past, she had to switch to using a foot to hold the door, because she couldn't hold back her laughter with one hand anymore.

This is priceless. I hope she leaves after this, because we'll never top it.

xXxXx

The toilets paraded down the stairs and around the entrance hall once, then into the Great Hall, all the time singing lustily.

“Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, heigh-ho, heigh-ho...”

Those students who were Muggle-born or half-blood sang along.

“Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, heigh-ho-hum.”

Two or three teachers trotted behind the cavalcade, alternately calling half-stunned reassurances to Umbridge and trying spells ineffectually on the toilets. The rest had taken themselves out of the Hall. Probably, Harry thought from his perch on the Gryffindor table, so they wouldn't laugh themselves sick in front of the students.

He'd never been so glad that no one could hear him when he was walking, because if he'd been audible, he would have been scaring the owls out of the Owlery with his guffaws.

The toilets changed key. Umbridge's moaning did not.

“Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's off to school we go...”

xXxXx

Finally, Dumbledore appeared on the scene—the *final humiliation, to have to be rescued by that doddering old man*—and dealt with the trouble quickly and competently. Two waves of his wand and Dolores was free, two more and the toilets were still, a final three and they were gone.

“This incident will be investigated to the best of my ability,” Dumbledore said gravely. “And the perpetrators will be dealt with as fully as their crime deserves. I would ask you all now to have a seat and eat your breakfast. You have a day of classes to attend.”

As the students straggled back to their tables, Dolores caught the eye of her informant and gave her a stern look.

The girl nodded once, slowly.

Excellent. The meeting will be tonight.

Straightening her robes, Dolores walked up the Hall to take her seat at the High Table.

Tonight, everything I had hoped this job would bring me will be mine. I will have the power, I will have the prestige, and most of all—oh, yes, most of all—I will have Harry Potter. He will be mine.

And when I am finished with him, no one else will ever want him again.

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Facing Danger

Chapter 21: Share Your Deepest Feelings (Year 5)

Chapter 21: Share Your Deepest Feelings

“All right, everyone,” Harry said, raising his hands for quiet. “Today we’re going to try something special. A full-scale mock battle, like Combat Club was, but with a twist.”

“What sort of twist?” said Roger Davies, the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain, attending his fourth meeting of the DA. Every few meetings, one or two new attendees trickled in, and Harry’s heart gave a queer double thump as he looked again at the crowded Room of Requirement, then at the list on the wall with its bold heading of “Dumbledore’s Army”. Names nearly filled the parchment, and Hermione had been talking about working out a Lengthening Charm to add space for new members.

If we keep growing like this, by next year we’ll be our own House. The DA House. Wonder what animal we’d have as mascot? Maybe a manticore, it’s as funny-looking as we are...

Harry pulled himself out of his thoughts. “Invaders and defenders,” he answered Roger. “Half of us will be defending the objective. They can only shoot to incapacitate, or to wound, to start out with. The other half, the invaders, will be shooting to kill from the start.”

“No one’s ever taught you the meaning of the word ‘subtle’, have they, Potter?” Blaise Zabini drawled from the back, drawing snickers.

Harry felt a surge of anger. “Takes one to know one, Zabini,” he said a bit more harshly than he’d intended, and the laughter got louder. “You volunteering to lead a team?”

It was the first time he’d ever seen Zabini taken aback. “Er—what?”

“He asked if you want to be captain,” Ginny said, turning to look at Zabini where he sat with one arm around Colleen Lamb. “And I think he’s going to be leading the other team himself. Right, Harry?”

Harry stared at her for one instant, then looked up to see every eye in the room fastened on him. “Of course,” he said, hoping the shock still vibrating his nerves didn’t carry over to his voice. He hadn’t been planning on taking part at all, he’d thought he would sit out and referee—

But maybe it’ll be good for me to get in there and fight again. I’ve been keeping up with my sparring, magic and non, but I haven’t been in any of the running fights in at least a month and a half. I need to stay in practice.

“So if you’ll all take out your Galleons,” he went on, pulling his own from his pocket. “In a second, half of them will go off, a random selection, and that half will be Zabini’s team. Don’t give him any trouble.”

A few mutinous looks greeted him, but nobody grumbled out loud.

“All right, then.” Harry drew his wand and put its tip against his Galleon. “*Proteo inusitatus semis!*”

xXxXx

“A good match,” Blaise said some time later, shaking hands with Harry. “Of course, it had a flaw.”

“What kind of flaw?”

“With Harry Potter, the true champion of their beliefs, at their head, how could your defenders lose even their mock Hogwarts against the invaders and their leader?”

“Why don’t you just say Voldemort and be done with it?” said Ron, causing waves of shudders all around the room.

“Perhaps another time,” Blaise said, his eyes not leaving Harry. “If you had not led the defending force, but the attackers...”

“You want to swap sides and play again?” Harry asked.

“If everyone else is amenable.”

“How about it, everyone?” Harry said, turning to catch people’s eyes. “Want to change sides and go again after a breather?”

The DA cheered and clapped, some of them bouncing up and down in place.

“Sounds good. Ten minutes!” Harry glanced at the wall, which immediately sprouted a large hourglass.

“Whoa,” said Anthony Goldstein, sitting down hard. “I thought I was going to learn to fly, that last one hit me so hard. Good shot, Macmillan.”

“Thank you.” Ernie nodded to the Ravenclaw. “I expect we will both do far better on our Defense O.W.L.s than we ever could have without this sort of practice.”

“We’ll do better on N.E.W.T.s as well,” Alicia said. “Just think of Umbridge’s face when we all get our scores back!”

“She’ll be expecting Ps and Ds, and we’ll get Es and Os!”

“She thinks we haven’t learned anything, and we’ve learned more than we would in normal classes!”

“She’ll scream!”

“She’ll flip!”

“She’ll croak!”

“Perfect!” Lee held out his hands as though displaying a newspaper. “Can’t you see the headline in the Prophet? ‘Toady Umbridge Croaks’!”

The DA collapsed into helpless laughter. People lay on the floor howling, drumming their heels and waving their hands, gasping for air.

“Lena, breathe, love,” Roger wheezed after a few minutes, catching a coughing Selena Moon by the shoulders. “You can do it, just breathe...”

“Don’t you usually want her not to breathe?” Parvati said wickedly. “I mean, it breaks the suction.”

This set everyone off again. Despite the large presence of Roger’s Housemates in the DA, Selena was the one who had brought him for his first meeting, as they’d been dating since the Yule Ball the preceding winter. Roger had originally attended the ball as Fleur Delacour’s date, but her charms had apparently worn off at some point during the night. Harry made a mental note to remind Ron and Ginny that this might happen to Bill.

“She’s turning blue, though,” Roger said, chuckling a little at himself. “And House pride only goes so far. Come on, love, breathe... deep and slow, in, out, in, out...”

Selena coughed a few final times, drew one deep and slow breath, then grinned at her boyfriend. “Isn’t it a bit early to be telling me that?” she said.

“Oooooooooo,” the girls chanted together, while all the boys groaned in sympathy. Roger looked petrified for one second, then grinned back at Selena, though the grin was a little shakier than it could have been.

Just then, the hourglass rattled against the wall. Harry looked up to see the sand filling the bottom half. “Let’s go, people!” he called out. “Defenders are now attackers, attackers are now defenders! Same teams, same captains! Defenders, get inside Hogwarts, attackers, follow me!”

xXxXx

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Meghan said in a half-whisper, so as not to be overheard by the excitedly chattering DA. “He wants us to win at Hogwarts! It’s what he’s trying to do, or part of it—prove we can still win, even against the Death Eaters, even when they want to kill us and all we want to do is stop them, even if he’s not there with us!”

“Yeah, but this time his team lost,” said Ron. “Harry hates losing anytime, even when he knows he should’ve.”

“And thus, he goes off and sulks.” Draco glanced at the firmly closed door of the model Hogwarts still occupying one corner of the Room of Requirement. “Does he have any idea how bad this looks?”

“I don’t think he cares,” said Hermione with a sigh. “On a personal level, I don’t blame him, he deserves some time to rest and get over losing—but everyone expects him to be our leader, to be out here taking apart the battle like he always does, and they’re going to start wondering why he’s not pretty soon.”

“Let me deal with it,” said Ginny. “Luna, can you see him?”

“He’s chasing his tail in the little Great Hall,” Luna said. “Growling a lot.”

“Excellent.” Ginny started for the door.

xXxXx

Wolf had just changed tailchasing directions for the seventh time and was working himself up towards number eight when a hissing ball of fur slammed into his back. He yelped, rolled to throw it clear, and came up Harry, facing a panting Ginny. “What was that for?” he demanded.

“For you being silly. So is this.” Ginny stepped in close to him, reached up, and slapped his ear.

“Ow!”

“You can’t always win,” Ginny said tartly. “Isn’t it better to lose here, in training, than it would be out there in real life?”

Harry growled instead of answering.

“Besides, win or lose, you still get the prize.” Ginny reached up again, but this time her hand had a loop of gold around it. “I’ve been wondering something,” she whispered. “When we share pendants, we know each other’s thoughts... can we feel each other’s feelings, too?”

Harry looked down into milk-chocolate eyes and felt his bad mood slide away like ice on a rooftop. “I don’t know,” he said, pulling his own pendant chain from under his robes. “There’s only one way to find out.”

“What a terrible thing for us.” Ginny ducked inside the chain he held out to her, and dropped her own around his neck. “But we all have to make sacrifices sometimes, don’t we?”

xXxXx

THUD.

Ginny pulled away with a little gasp. “What was that?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go find out.” Harry quickly unlooped a pendant chain from around his neck, felt the other one come free as Ginny did the same, and conjured a small ball of fire over their heads. “Fix your hair.”

He emerged from the front door of the model Hogwarts swiftly, left hand tucking the pendants away, wand already in his right. “*Accio Map* .” The battered parchment soared into his hand. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” he recited rapid-fire as another dull *THUD* shook the walls. “Come on, come on, show me—”

He swore, four other voices echoing his an instant behind.

“What?” demanded Zacharias Smith. “What is it?”

“Umbridge.” Harry pointed at the door. “She’s right out there, with a load of Slytherins—you know the ones I mean,” he added as Blaise glowered and Selena glared. “And she’ll be in here in a second. She’s found us.”

Bitter anger fumed up inside him again. This would be a true defeat, worse than any training game—they’d all be expelled for this, the *Prophet* would play it for everything it was worth, Dumbledore would lose any credulity he might have had left, Fudge’s hold on government would be cemented—

“What do we do now?” someone asked, a high, worried voice. One of the younger girls, Harry thought, and fought against letting the anger spill out at her. This wasn’t her fault.

No, it’s mine, for being too sure the castle would protect us, too sure we could never be found here. I should have had people watching the Map all the time, or sentries. I won’t make that mistake again.

Assuming, of course, he ever got a chance.

He looked up at the DA, at the worried and frightened faces all around him, all looking to him. Panic swelled up in him—the pendants under his shirt flared hot in response—

No. I can’t. He swallowed, then reached out to one side, and a thread of courage twined around his heart as Ginny’s hand slipped into his. More threads joined it as he saw the Pride ready to one side, Ron flexing his wand hand, Neville standing behind Meghan with his pendants around both their necks, Draco between Hermione and Luna holding both their hands.

“We wait,” Harry said, and his voice was clear and unshaken. “If we had the chance, I’d tell you to run. There’s no shame in retreating if you’re this outmatched. But we can’t get out of here.” He let a little of the anger surface, the portion directed at himself. “You’ll all remember this, I’m sure. Never let yourself get blocked into a corner, no matter how well hidden you think you are.”

Fred and George snorted in unison and came to stand beside the Pride, the blonde Ravenclaw Danielle hand-in-hand with Fred. Lee Jordan and Maya Pritchard joined them, then Lindz Jordan

and Dean, Seamus and Lavender—Parvati and Padma and Marietta Edgecombe, Su Li and Terry Boot, Michael Corner and Anthony Goldstein and Kevin Entwhistle—

“She can find us,” Harry said, watching his troops, Dumbledore’s Army, assembling in battle order. “And she can try to break us. But that decision lies with us.” Roger and Selena, Blaise and Colleen, Matt and Amanda Smythe, Graham and Natalie, Colin and Dennis Creevey, who squeaked as a rumbling *BOOM* made the floor vibrate. “No matter what she does to us, as long as we are loyal to each other and to ourselves, she can’t win.”

Angelina and Alicia nodded together. Katie Bell was comforting Hannah Abbott and Eloise Midgen, while her friend Leanne hugged Tessa Malloy and Demelza Robins handed a tissue to little Elayne Kreger. Justin Finch-Fletchley held Heidi’s hands, and Ernie Macmillan seemed to be edging closer to Susan Bones every second. Zacharias Smith stood a little aloof, but his eyes were fixed on Harry, showing only a hard curiosity.

“So I guess what I really want,” Harry said as Ginny squeezed his hand, “is just to thank you all. For being here, for believing in me, for showing we can do this. Thank you, everyone.”

Another echoing *BOOM*, but as it died away, Harry thought he heard another sound, much more familiar, the grinding of stone on stone—and everyone’s eyes were fixed on the wall behind him, most of them very large and round indeed—

He turned to look.

A fireplace had materialized behind him, and beside it glowered a hole, about waist height on Harry, a bar set into the wall above it.

“Does that go where I think it does?” he said aloud, glancing down at the Map.

The one word *Yes* gleamed as though it had just been written.

Harry’s chest loosened all at once as a wave of relief/disbelief rolled over him from the Pride.

The DA all seemed to recover their ability to speak at once. “What is it?” “Where’d it come from?” “Where does it go?” “Can we use it?” “Is it safe?” “I’m scared of the dark!” “I’m scared of holes!” “I’m scared of—”

“QUIET!” Harry bellowed, cutting through the noise. “There isn’t much time. That passage will take you somewhere safe, somewhere you can get back to your common rooms—you can claim you never left, no one will be able to prove you did—but we have to *move*, people. Come on, let’s go! One at a time, make a queue, go as soon as the last person’s clear!”

George was the first to move, scooping Dennis Creevey off his feet and carrying him bodily to the tunnel. Fred followed with Tessa Malloy, Danielle shepherding Natalie and Graham behind them, and then the DA was queuing up, whispering and staring and hanging back a little but moving.

The Pride spread out, Ron and Neville standing one either side of the hole to give the smaller ones

a leg up if they needed it, Draco hurrying up and down the line answering questions as best he could, Hermione and Meghan gently chivying people into position. Luna was staring at the door, her eyes unfocused.

“What do you see?” Harry asked, approaching her, Ginny still beside him.

“She’s starting to break through,” Luna reported dreamily. “All our wanting the Room *not* to let her in is still holding her off. It won’t hold much longer, though. The fewer of us there are, the weaker that gets.”

“So we could have just stayed here, *not* wanted her enough, and she couldn’t have found us?” Ginny asked, her hand tightening on Harry’s as a third *BOOM* shook dust from the timbers of the door.

“Can’t be,” Harry said, shaking his head. “We never wanted her to find us, but she did anyway.” He frowned. “How did she, though?”

“Someone is not here,” Luna said, turning a little to get a different vantage point of the inside of the door, though Harry knew she was looking through it at the people on the other side. “Betrayed and not betrayed, tricked and not tricked, the black swan is fallen from the sky...”

“The black swan,” Ginny repeated under her breath. “There’s a ballet, with a sorcerer’s daughter...”

“Talk about it later,” Harry said, glancing back at the line, half the length it had been and shrinking rapidly. “We have to go...” His words were cut short by a fourth *BOOM*, this one accompanied by a sharp *crack*. “We *really* have to go. *Reparo!*”

The wood of the door, which had begun to splinter, popped back into place, but Harry knew it was only a temporary fix. “Go on, Luna,” he said, letting enough snap into his tone to make it an order. “We know all we can right now. You have to get to safety.”

“Yes, sir.” Luna nodded to him, then trotted over to join the end of the line.

“You go too,” Harry told Ginny. “I’m the last one out.”

Ginny’s shoulders squared, her chin came up, and her eyes flashed. “I’m an alpha too, you know, Harry Potter—”

“A war operation can only have one leader,” Harry said softly. “And right now, that’s me. Tomorrow, it could be you, but right now we don’t have time to argue about it. You can be second to last out, but I will be the last.”

“If you’re just trying to protect me—”

“Of course I’m trying to protect you. I—” Harry stalled on the word. “I care about you a lot,” he substituted, backing away from the door, which had just cracked again. “But I have to care about

everyone, the whole Pride, the whole DA, and protect them all. And that includes you. So go . I'll be right behind you. I promise."

"As long as you promise." Ginny leaned up and kissed him quickly on the lips. "I'll be waiting for you," she whispered, then ran to catch up with the line.

The cracks on the door were visible now, and Harry thought suddenly of the den-night story of Danger discovering she was a werewolf tamer. He couldn't help but laugh.

She and Moony made it through that, and I think we will too. The DA was almost gone, Amanda was just climbing into the hole, Blaise and Colleen were the only people left in the room who weren't Pride—

The door splintered, the fragments blowing inwards under the force of the spell.

"*Protego!*" Harry shouted, and his shield blocked the two Stunners shooting in at him. "*Stupefy, Stupefy, Expelliarmus!*" One of his attackers went down, two more yelped indignantly as their wands flew from their hands, but more were crowding into the gap—

"HARRY!" shrieked Ginny's voice behind him. "HA—"

Her second scream cut off in the middle. Harry snapped his head to one side and let out a whisper of breath in relief as he saw Ginny fighting Ron furiously. *They didn't get in some other way, they haven't got her—*

"Get her out!" he shouted, whirling back to the fight just in time to block a Disarmer and a pair of Body-Binds. "Get her out and lock it behind you!"

"What about you?" Ron shouted back. "We can't leave you!"

"Get the list and go! That's an order!" Harry went to one knee, shielding himself against a barrage of spells, then diving to one side to avoid new ones and firing back at the forms shrouded by wood dust in the doorway. Faintly, he heard Ginny's muffled screams dying away, then the grating of stone against stone and the gentle thump as the passage sealed itself.

They're safe. They're all safe. Umbridge won't have anything on them, she can't prove who they were or that they were helping me, and she'll have me, so she won't bother with them—

Maybe, if the Room helps me, I can hold them off long enough to get to the passage myself—

"*Absumo animum!*" cried a shrill voice.

But why should I bother? Harry's wand drooped slightly. Why should I keep trying? I can't do anything right. I always get everyone in trouble.

He stared at his hands, overcome by doubt and guilt. *Why am I even fighting back? I deserve to get caught, I deserve to be punished, for being such a horrible person—*

Red washed over him and knocked him backwards, and black swarmed around from behind to claim him.

It was almost a relief.

xXxXx

“Let GO of me!” Ginny shrieked, clawing at Ron’s arms as they skidded down the long slide. “Let go, let go, I have to go back!”

“Why, so you can leave us without an alpha?” Ron caught her wrists in one hand and brought them down to pin them at her sides. “So you can make us decide what to do next, and probably do it wrong?”

“You don’t have to do anything next! Just go back to the common rooms and stay there—”

“So we’re not allowed to help Harry?” Ron split his feet open and braced the bottoms of his trainers against the walls, scudding them to a halt. Ginny writhed in his grasp, but he had a hand in her hair, and she couldn’t squirm too hard without pulling it painfully. “Or don’t you think you’ll need help? There were at least ten of them there, Gin, and it was all Harry could do to hold them off long enough that we could get away—if we’re going to take him out of wherever they’ve got him, we’ll need all of us. We’ve done it before, we can do it again, but that’s us, all of us! Not you alone!”

She snarled at him for one second, then suddenly crumpled and started to cry, and Ron pulled her close and took his feet off the walls, letting them start to slide again.

“We’ll get him back,” he whispered into her ear. “You watch. This is our home ground, and nobody steals our alpha from us here.”

Ginny hiccupped. “I know,” she said shakily. “It’s just... it happened so fast...”

“I know. But that means we can unhappen it fast too. You watch.” They were starting to slow down, getting close to their destination, and Ron scooted down so that his feet would hit the floor first when they landed. “We’ll get him back,” he repeated. “You’ll see.”

Behind his back, he crossed his fingers and prayed he hadn’t just turned himself into a liar.

xXxXx

“They don’t see us,” Elayne whispered in awe, staring out at her common room and the students sitting in front of the fire, reading or talking or eating sweets. “We’re right here, and they don’t see us at all...”

“That’s right,” Draco said, helping her climb out of the hole. “And they won’t see you for a little while yet. Can you get to your dorm quickly? Or do you see your friends anywhere here?”

“My friends are the DA,” Elayne said softly. “But I sometimes sit with those girls.” She jerked her head towards a small knot of students near one of the water-swirled windows. “I don’t think they’d notice if I came over and sat down...”

“If they’re not your friends, then never mind.” Draco gave her a little push into the room. “Just go to your dorm and get your homework or something...”

“We’ve been together,” said Matt Smythe, sliding past Draco and out into the common room. “Working on that one tricky bit from Charms today. I’ll get my book and we’ll start going over it together.”

Elayne flashed him a smile, and he returned it, then hurried off towards the boys’ dorms.

“Thank you,” said Selena to Draco as she left the tunnel. “You’re very kind to them.”

“If things had gone differently for me, I could have been them. Stuck in a House with a bad reputation, and just trying to do my best.”

“Or not sure how to do that, and settling for less,” added Blaise from behind them. “Though one of my yearmates, at least, seems to be learning.”

“Yeah, well, keep an eye on him, will you?”

“Always.” Blaise stepped out into the common room, drawing a piece of paper from one pocket and his wand from another.

Selena nodded to Draco, who climbed quickly back into the tunnel. “Stealth mode, thank you, Salazar,” he murmured, and the hole in the Slytherin common room wall sealed itself once more.

They should be safe now. There won’t be any evidence they ever left their common room—well, not unless they have a portrait like we do, but Umbridge won’t listen to a portrait, especially not if it’s telling her they left and never came back when she can see clearly where they are!

Neville had undertaken to guide the Hufflepuffs back to their dorm, and Luna was handling the Ravenclaws. Meghan was instructing the Gryffindors how to open their passage, and Hermione was using her experience as alpha to keep the crowd of nervous students under control.

And Ron and Ginny will be here when they’ll be here. And once they are...

Draco bared his teeth and looked down at his pendants. They were warm with the overall worry of the Pride, but no more than that, and the wolf cub’s carving held no light. He hoped that meant that Harry had gotten away, not that he’d been rendered unable to feel fear or anger.

But whichever it means, we’ll find him.

This time, Umbridge has gone too far.

Minerva McGonagall knocked briskly on the door of Dolores Umbridge's office, her face stony. In any other circumstances, she would have discounted a wild tale brought to her by a student of an attack by a staff member on another student. But in Minerva's opinion, Dolores Umbridge was capable of almost anything, especially where Harry Potter was concerned, and Hermione Granger-Lupin would never have lied about something so important.

I sent a Patronus to Albus, but of course he is away, on one of his endless trips... where does he go that is so important? What can he be doing? It will take time for the Patronus to find him, time for him to understand the message, time for him to return here...

And it was taking time for Dolores to answer her door. Far too much time, in fact.

Minerva knocked again. "Dolores!" she called. "Dolores, let me in!" She paused, listening. "I know you're in there," she said sharply. "I know you're not alone." Another pause. "Dolores, I am taking out my wand—"

The door flew open. Minerva froze.

"So nice of you to tell me, dear," said Dolores, smiling fixedly, her own stubby wand pointed straight at Minerva's chest. "*Do* come in."

Minerva stepped stiffly into the tiny office, incongruously grateful that Dolores had not obtained the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. It would have been more humiliating, somehow, to be ushered at wandpoint into the office where she had once laughed with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. Their memories, and that of Alastor Moody, would certainly have been quite offended by Dolores' decorating.

And why am I bothering about that now, when Dolores herself and several of her tame students are holding their wands on me? Minerva's eyes narrowed as she took in the crests embroidered on robes. *Slytherins, all Slytherins, except for the girl in the corner—a Ravenclaw. She must have played on their dislike for Albus and Harry Potter, offered to give them extra powers...*

"I assume you're looking for Harry Potter, Minerva?" Dolores laughed brittlely. "Here he is. Over here. Bring her over, Warrington, and be polite—she is a teacher, after all..."

Minerva came around the corner of the desk and felt her heart shudder. Harry Potter lay on the floor behind the desk, his eyes half-open, his breathing labored and heavy. He twitched as though in the throes of a bad dream, but he looked as if he were not asleep but delirious, or perhaps in the drowsy state produced by certain illegal potions...

"What have you done to him?" she demanded, whirling on Dolores. "What is this?"

"Oh, just a little spell I found all on my own." Dolores giggled, the high-pitched sound seeming precisely calculated to irritate Minerva beyond all bearing. "It's not illegal—it might be, if

anyone who made laws knew about it, but you see, I *am* the law here at Hogwarts. And young Mr. Potter is a lawbreaker of the highest degree.” She regarded Harry’s restless form with a nauseating look of affection, and bent to pat his cheek. “*Such* a naughty boy...”

As her hand touched Harry’s face, his eyes snapped open, and he screamed.

Minerva took a half-step forward, but the burly Slytherin beside her dropped a hand on her shoulder in warning. She barely controlled a hiss of fury at him, and told her body sternly that changing into her Animagus form would *not* help, satisfying though it might be to sink her claws into her prey. Her job at the moment was to observe Harry.

Dolores took her hand away, and Harry’s cry subsided. He was still shaking, though, and suddenly he flung out an arm. “Get away!” he shouted, his voice slurred. “Leave me alone!”

“Perfect,” Dolores cooed. “Absolutely perfect...”

Minerva shuddered, trying to keep her mind away from a little green-eyed boy and his delighted laughter as she batted with her paws at his messy black hair. “What have you done to him?” she repeated, using the voice that worked so well to compel truth from her students.

“It’s a very simple spell, as I said.” Dolores picked up a quill from her desk and began to brush her fingers along the feather. “Here, let me show you...”

She bent down and drew the soft end of the quill across Harry’s throat.

xXxXx

Pearl galloped along the corridor, conscious of weight on her back but not letting it slow her—the king stag was in trouble, they had to save him from the hunters, even the eaters were with her in this—two humans and two smaller eaters ran beside her, and a large eater bounded ahead, her fur on end and her scream a sound of pure fury as she launched herself at the door—

Meghan changed back, yanked her wand free of her robes, and slammed herself against the wall, letting Hermione, Draco, Ron, and Luna flood past her and inside. Neville paused in the hall only long enough to make sure no one would see Umbridge’s door open, then charged into the office, and Meghan flung herself around the doorjamb and into the room after him.

She had only time to see a confused mass of robed bodies before a hissing, spitting shape struck her on the shoulders, and she fell, hearing the whistle of a spell above her. “Thanks, Neenie,” she panted, rolling over—

To see *grey* -striped fur, and a spectacle-marked face.

“Professor!”

Professor McGonagall waved an imperious paw behind herself, then began the change back into her human form. Meghan ducked behind her as it finished. Automatically, she shifted into what

she thought of as her healing-looking way, sliding a hand through the rips in McGonagall's robe to touch skin and get a better view. Her eyes widened.

Oh no, oh no, her heart isn't working right—she saw something that made her so angry or so upset that it hurt her there—

Meghan leaned into the power around Hogwarts, drew what she needed, and strengthened the faltering beats of the Professor's heart. Then she added a tiny surge of extra power, and sent a similar pulse out to the Pride through their pendants.

I'm not a good fighter yet, maybe I never will be, but I can do this.

The battle was over very rapidly after that.

xXxXx

Umbridge bent down and drew the soft end of the quill across Harry's throat.

Harry's back arched, his teeth clenched, his hands closed into fists. "Moony, no," he moaned aloud. "No, please, what'd I do, I didn't mean it, don't, don't..." The words trailed off into a sound that was half a child's pain-filled cry, half a wolf cub's forsaken howl.

"It takes the input from his senses and magnifies it by a factor of a hundred," Umbridge said, stroking the quill across her own fingers again. "Every little draft is a freezing wind, every seam of his clothing a dull knife. So when I touched him with the feather's barbs..." She giggled once more. "And it adds the occasional random input as well. I assume he thought he saw someone or something called Moony a moment ago—I can't imagine who it could have been..."

McGonagall stood rigid, her own hands clenched. "How *dare* you," she forced through her lips while keeping her teeth clenched together. "How *dare* you. What has he done to you?"

"Besides defy my authority, then make vile game of me in front of the entire school?" Umbridge asked, dropping her girlish manner in an instant. "Besides attempt to drive me away from the place I have sacrificed and fought to help? Oh, no, Minerva, don't try to make him the innocent martyr here. He knew what he was doing, and he will pay for it. He is already paying, but he must pay in full. And that cannot happen here."

She checked her watch. "My contact will not be ready for another hour, but better early than late. Warrington, I'm leaving you in charge, with Dursley as your second. I'll modify her memory myself, just before I leave, but you'll have to move quickly once that's happened. Stun her, as many of you as can manage the spell, and then one of you discover her in the corridor. It will look as though her heart simply failed, not uncommon in a witch of her age, and by the time the Healers get through with her, the Memory Charm will have taken full hold."

"Where are you taking him?" McGonagall asked sharply.

"Somewhere safe, and that is all you need to know," Umbridge said with authority. "Even the best

Memory Charm can be broken, and Dumbledore will doubtless put his best effort forth on you. *If* he is able to put forth effort on anything by the time you're found." She smiled widely. "Personally, I hope the Healers patch you up just enough so that you can join him in Azkaban. I understand those with weak hearts never last long around dementors."

Harry whimpered, and Umbridge looked down at him, her smile becoming fond. "It hurts, does it?" she said softly. "That's good. That means you're learning." Her wand, still in her hand, came up to touch the quill. "Now then, as for our leaving—no one in the Ministry would dare question me, so I may as well use the simplest method. *Portus!*"

The quill trembled in her hand and glowed blue for an instant, then was still, and Umbridge laid it on Harry's chest. "And now," she said, looking up at McGonagall with undisguised glee, "now to take care of you—"

The scream of a hunting cat tore the air, and the door of Umbridge's office slammed open. A shrieking red-haired devil charged in, wand out, eyes wild, with Hermione and Draco on her heels, and Ron and Luna a step behind them.

"Get them!" Umbridge shrieked, dropping to her knees beside Harry. A flash of blue light, and they were gone. McGonagall twisted away from Warrington, shrank into her cat form, and raced around the room just in time to fall on Meghan's shoulders, knocking her flat before Dursley's spell could fell her—

"I think we have seen enough," said Dumbledore. "Come with me, Miss Weasley?"

Ginny nodded wordlessly and put her hand in Dumbledore's. A moment later, they were soaring upwards through darkness, and then they were standing in Dumbledore's office again, having just raised their faces from the rune-carved stone Pensieve. McGonagall sat to one side, speaking quietly into Draco's Zippophone. The Pride sat or stood behind Ginny, Hermione's burning hot chain around everyone's necks (Ginny had found herself unable to control her magic even enough to stretch her own chain). Their faces, as she turned to look at them, held the same vicious anger she could feel on her own.

"Can you find him, Professor?" Ron asked the question for them all.

"I believe I can." Dumbledore turned to a shelf behind his desk and took down a golden quill and a scroll of parchment. "During the summer, while he stayed with his relatives, I gave Harry a Portkey for use in case of emergency."

"I've seen it," Ginny said. "It's shaped like a little gold phoenix. He wears it on his pendant chain, with the locket he and Mr. Moony exchanged when they did the blood-bond."

Dumbledore nodded. "Indeed. That talisman, besides being a Portkey, holds a charm resonant to the one in this quill. When activated, the quill will describe the location where the talisman can be found, and by derivation, the location where Harry currently is."

He tapped the quill twice with his wand, and it rose up, hovering over the parchment, then began to write rapidly.

“Albus!” Mr. Padfoot crashed through the door of the Headmaster’s office, followed closely by Mrs. Letha, Mr. Moony, and Mrs. Danger. “What the hell is going on?”

“Exactly what I told you is going on,” McGonagall snapped, standing up. “Dolores Umbridge has overstepped her bounds beyond all belief—kidnapping a student from school grounds, placing him under a spell that amounts to torture—”

“Torture?” Mrs. Danger’s face paled.

“What is it?” Mrs. Letha demanded.

“Can we find him?” Mr. Moony asked calmly, cutting through the rest of the sounds in the room.

“I believe so,” said Dumbledore, looking down at the quill, which had stopped writing. His eyes widened. “Or perhaps not, or at least not in the way I had thought.”

“What’s wrong?” Mr. Padfoot asked, coming to the desk. “What is that thing?”

“It should have located Harry, through the Portkey talisman he wears with the pendants you created. Instead...” Dumbledore turned the parchment around so that everyone could read it.

The talisman is currently located in the Headmaster’s office at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, one foot from the front right corner of the Headmaster’s desk.

Everyone’s eyes turned to Ginny, who would not have been surprised if she’d gone up in flames like a phoenix. “Me?” she said weakly. “I’m not Harry.”

“No, but...” Dumbledore looked past her. “Hermione. Why did you expand your chain to share Miss Weasley’s experience in the Pensieve, rather than letting Miss Weasley do it?”

“Ginny’s chain isn’t working for her, Professor. She can’t make it grow or pass through her neck or...” Hermione stopped, her face suddenly fearful. “Oh no.”

Ginny scrabbled at the neck of her robes, found the chain, and yanked it free.

Four pendants, a gold locket, and a tiny gold phoenix swung before thirteen appalled sets of eyes.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 22: Secrets and Spells (Year 5)

Chapter 22: Secrets and Spells

Nothing made sense.

His arms and legs throbbed as though he'd been beaten, while his head pounded to a different rhythm entirely. He'd opened his eyes once, but the intensity of the light had driven them shut again, and the sounds in the room thundered meaninglessly, rumbling into his ears in overlapping cacophony. He lay on a hard, unyielding surface, or perhaps he stood with his back against it, or perhaps he was suspended against it and any second he would start to fall.

But nothing mattered anyway, so why should he care?

“Here,” a voice boomed nearby, startling him into half-coherency, “let me show you.”

Agony blossomed across his neck, and his body tightened in response. His mind tried to shudder away from understanding, but the pain drove it home mercilessly. He'd done something wrong, something so wrong that he was being punished for it, and he couldn't even remember what it was. He knew who must be punishing him, though, for only one person held such authority over him.

“Moony, no,” he begged, half-sobbing at the fresh pain that speaking brought to his throat. “No, please, what'd I do, I didn't mean it, don't, don't...”

There was no answer, only more meaningless noise, and terror and anguish broke the last of his control and tore a child's cry from him. Only the worst crimes could merit being first punished and then abandoned. The Pack no longer wanted him, could no longer stand having him among them, and he had no idea what he had done to deserve it.

But you did, didn't you? whispered the voice deep inside. *You did something, you have to have done something, you always do something, make a mistake or act like a fool, and now you've finally got what you should have had all along. Nothing. Nothing at all.*

He whimpered, and the sound threw him backward in time to a night long ago. He had fought a great enemy then, fought and won, but he hadn't known it, for the fight had left him so exhausted that he had only been able to come halfway to consciousness, and his dazed mind had constructed a strange reality around him. He had thought himself a wolf cub, trapped and caged in darkness, and he had been terrified of the madness that struck a caged wolf.

But his Pack had come to him then, their scents and voices cutting through the darkness to tell him he was safe. He had slept in peace, awakened to his true self, human and healing, and all had been well.

It won't happen this time. Why should it? the voice mocked at him. *You're worthless. They won't*

come for you. They don't want you. They've never wanted you.

He started to take a breath to snarl at the voice, started to turn to find it and tear it apart—

And his world shattered in a swirl of color and light and endless motion. His chest and belly were being dragged out of him. He screamed and couldn't hear it for the echoing din all around.

“Let me go!” he thought he shouted. *“Let me go!”*

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a different voice began to laugh, soft cold laughter. *Poor little Harry Potter*, it whispered, *poor little hero, all alone at last, betrayed by the ones he thought he could trust...*

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“Panic will help nothing and no one,” Dumbledore said firmly, coming around his desk to take Ginny's pendants—*no, they're Harry's pendants, I'm just wearing them, and a fat lot of good they'll do him here*—in his hand. “I do not know how this happened, and I do not need to know.” He gave Ginny a small smile, then let the pendants drop back to her chest, where they thumped more heavily than they should have. “We will proceed by some other route.”

“We can start by using what we know of Dolores,” McGonagall put in. “This was unbelievably audacious, even for her. She would have needed a safe escape route, somewhere she could go where she would not be questioned, no matter what or whom she brought with her, or in what condition...”

“The Ministry!” Four or five voices shouted it at once.

“Unfortunately, that narrows our search but does not ease it,” said Dumbledore, frowning. “For any of us to enter the Ministry at this time will be difficult, given my standing with the current administration—although some of us might be more able to enter it than others.” He nodded to Mr. Padfoot, who had been just about to speak. “But our access will necessarily be limited.”

“Barty Crouch was just coming in as we were leaving,” Mr. Moony said. “He could probably get to most of the areas we can't. It would raise some questions, but if he can find Harry...”

“Let me call Headquarters now, then,” said Mrs. Letha, pulling her Zippophone from her pocket. “And I'll ask Molly to firecall Arthur. He's already there, he knows everyone, and if he moves quickly he might just be able to intercept Umbridge. Maybe not on her way to leave Harry wherever she's going to put him, but on her way out again, and that would tell us where she's been.”

Ginny felt Ron's arms around her, then Hermione's, and after a moment Ron's hug widened to include them both. “They'll find him,” Hermione whispered in Ginny's ear. “Your dad, and our parents, and everyone else. They'll find him.”

“And if they don't?” Ginny asked, barely recognizing her own voice, it was so harsh with tension.

“Then we will,” said Ron, tightening his arms around them once.

Ginny shut her eyes and willed herself to believe it.

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Winky was just coming down the basement stairs when she heard the voice in the kitchen and froze. It was her Master—

No, she corrected herself firmly, it wasn't. Not anymore. She had a new Master and Mistress now, and a lot of little Masters and one little Mistress, and the littlest Master had ordered her not to punish herself anymore for getting clothes from her old Master. She would obey, even though her whole being cried out for her to hurt herself for being such a bad elf, because the little Master was right. Hurting herself was doing what she wanted, so not hurting herself was the worst punishment of all, and Winky was a good house-elf and always punished herself the best way she could—

“Of course, I'll go right now,” said her Master's voice. “I'll find her if she's there to be found. And Potter, of course. I'll send a Patronus when I have something.”

The door at the bottom of the stairs swung open.

Winky froze into immobility, staring at the man who mounted the steps two at a time. She had served the Crouches too many years not to be sure of what she was seeing.

He is the Master—but not—

The man passed her by with never a second look and vanished into the hallway at the top of the stairs, and Winky drew a sobbing breath and shut her eyes.

Keep the secrets, hissed a deep part of her, old and strong and known. *Keep the Master's secrets. Always, always, always.*

Mistress must know! shrielled a newer, sharper voice. *You have a new family now, and they must know, you must tell them—*

Keep the Master's secrets...

He is not your Master now!

Keep the Master's secrets...

He will put your new Masters in harm's way if he can—

Winky opened her eyes, summoned up her courage, and popped into the kitchen.

Her Mistress had her head in the fire, but pulled it out only a moment after Winky's arrival. “Winky, there you are, I was just about to call you. We're going to have people through here in a

few minutes, we need the documents from the green shelf in the War Room, and—” She stopped, looking at Winky’s face. “Good heavens, what’s the matter?”

Winky shuddered all over once, then lurched forward to hold onto the Mistress’ robes. “The man who was being here,” she squeaked. “The one who is being my old Master—”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t tell you he was going to be here. It’s all right, dear, he’s gone now.” The Mistress bent down to stroke Winky’s head between her ears. “You mustn’t fret, he can’t hurt you any longer—”

“No, Mistress, you is not listening!” Winky cried, her fear of what might happen to her new family overcoming her temerity. “Mistress, he *is* being my old Master—but *he is not being the one he is looking like!* ”

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Harry stood in a dark room, staring into a bowl of water in which a man’s form could be seen, hurrying along a city street. “They think he’s likely at the Ministry,” the man said, his voice echoing out of the bowl faint but clear, “and they’ve asked me to find him if I can. I doubt it will be terribly troublesome.” A snort of amusement. “Poor Dolores. She has no idea who she’s been talking with all this time, no idea who’s going to meet her there... in any case, it should take no longer than an hour or two, my Lord. I will inform you the moment I have the boy.”

“Thank you, Christopher,” Harry said, nodding to the man on the other side of the bowl. “You may end it.”

“My Lord.” The man waved his wand once over the water, and the picture vanished.

Harry looked around at the room, at the masked faces all pointed towards him. “We should assume that there will be some resistance,” he said. “It would be best to deal with it silently, of course, but fighting may well become necessary, especially if Dumbledore has some means of locating the boy and attempting to retrieve him. However, our involvement must not be provable. Ministry employees must remain alive and unharmed at all costs.” This was directed at a certain section of the room, sternly. “They must not remember you, but any injuries must be traceable to Dumbledore’s Order. Do you all understand me?”

“Yes, my Lord,” rumbled through the room. Some of the figures in their long robes bent their heads or dipped shallow bows in his direction.

“Good.” Harry turned his head to regard the mirror on the wall, which showed his face—his paper-white, red-eyed, flat-nosed face—

He had no time to do more than stiffen in shock before he was running down a hallway, a familiar hallway—he’d been here before, or seen it, or perhaps only dreamed of it—

Dreamed, yes, that’s it, this is like the dreams I was having over the summer—

The door at the hall opened, and he was in a dark circular room—everything was spinning around him, doors blurring past, as he concentrated on his objective—

I don't even know where I'm going, this makes no sense—

The room stopped, and he hurried through the door directly in front of him, into a room filled with ticking sounds and shining lights, to the very end and through a second door into darkness again—

If this is a dream, maybe I can get out of it somehow—

His eyes adjusted with animal quickness to show him a tall room stacked with shelves from which orbs glowed dully in the blue flames of the candles all around—he was moving again, purposeful and swift, down the shelves which he could now see were numbered—

Come on, Harry, wake up. Wake up, wake up, you're dreaming, wake up—

He turned down the aisle between shelves ninety-six and ninety-seven, hurrying towards the end, his heart quickening in anticipation—it was here, soon he would know, know whatever he had not known fourteen years before, whatever had caused his ignominious defeat—

Fourteen years? But I was just a baby then—and I didn't lose—

He stopped dead, his eyes narrowing, head turning as he searched the darkness around him. “Potter,” he hissed, a smile stretching his lips. “Come out, come out, wherever you are...”

Harry's eyes flew open and shut again just as quickly. He was in his own body again, but still nothing made sense, everything hurt and the light was too bright and the noise was too loud and he couldn't move without feeling as though he was on a ship in the middle of a storm—

So things made sense while I was dreaming, but not now. He swallowed, trying to counteract the pain in his throat, but the movement only made it worse.

I wish I could shape dreams like Draco or Hermione or Danger can. Then I could get into a dream and things would make sense again. But then Voldemort might be there—how did I get in his head again, anyway? The blood-bond should have stopped it.

Fear shuddered through him. *Maybe Moony ended it, because he thinks I ought to be able to block Voldemort out myself by now. Or because he doesn't think I'm worth it anymore. Maybe I'm not. Maybe I should just give up and let whatever's happening happen...*

He started to let go, forcing himself to release his grip on rational thought, but then two simultaneous feelings flooded him—outrage, from the Wolf-part of his brain, and smug satisfaction, from—

Merlin's boots—

Harry dived into the outrage, hiding himself under its surface, and felt the satisfaction fade away

into the distance.

He was still here. Voldemort. Spying on me. He knows something's wrong with me, he knows I wanted to give up—I don't know if he knows I didn't actually do it, but he might—

He almost growled, but stopped at the last second. *I don't know what's going on, and I won't as long as I can't think straight!*

Wolf's outrage began to fade, but the clarity of thought it had brought to Harry's mind lingered for a moment. *There's something I could do, I think, to get away from this. Something that's like dreaming, but different. It might help me if I can just think of what it is, or at least how to do it...*

Words came to him, and he shaped them with his lips, afraid to speak aloud for fear he'd deafen himself.

“Ride a winged horse to Banbury Cross, to see a fine lady upon a white horse...”

xXxXx

Ginny sat huddled in the middle of the Pride, unable to think of anything except the one person who wasn't there, the one person who should have been.

You won't be able to help him, her doubts whispered. You're no alpha, you're just a silly little girl who thinks she can be—you have to be able to keep up with him if you want to be the alpha, and you're not and you never will be—this is even really your fault, if you'd bothered to see whose pendants you were taking, this never would have happened—

“Shut up,” Ginny muttered, her hand clutched around Harry's pendants. “Leave me alone.”

Trying to distract herself, she looked around the room. Dumbledore and McGonagall and the four adults of the Pack were off to one side talking quietly and urgently; the portraits on the walls were murmuring to one another, those who weren't trying to eavesdrop on the conversation; Fawkes sat on his perch, fixing Ginny with a beady eye—

The Chamber of Secrets exploded into Ginny's mind. “Professor!” she cried, jumping up. “Could Fawkes find Harry?”

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore said, turning to face her. “He has done so before. But Harry would have to call for him, or for some form of help. And even if he did, Fawkes cannot protect him from the spells placed on him. Nor from Voldemort's intrusions into his mind.”

“But Fawkes could take him these.” Ginny lifted the pendants, jingling them together. “We'd know where he is, then, and he'd be safe from Voldemort—and we could help him with Pride magic, with one of the jewels—” She stopped. “Why don't we just find him with a red one, like we did back when Malfoy kidnapped him and Hermione and Draco? Wouldn't that work?”

“It might,” Mr. Moony said, meeting her eyes. “But the Ministry's been under higher security

lately, including a limited Unplottable Charm. We're afraid that might throw off any attempt to find Harry with the jewels, unless we were at the Ministry itself..."

"And we can't go there," Ginny finished, slumping. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Mrs. Danger moved through the crowd quickly to catch Ginny's shoulders. "Don't you dare be sorry for thinking! Or for trying to help, either, young lady!" She shook Ginny gently, then pulled her into a hug. "I think you have one of the better ideas we've heard so far. Especially in light of what else we've just found out..." She glanced at Dumbledore. "It's not likely to be a secret much longer, is it?" she asked. "Not if everything works out the way we think it will."

"And they should know," Mrs. Letha added. "If they know the prophecy, they can know about this."

"Indeed." Dumbledore motioned for the Pride to stand up from the floor where they'd been sitting together, then waved his wand in a circle, conjuring chairs for everyone. "And when Harry is returned to us, there will be more to tell, but for now let us remain with the puissant facts of the situation." He beckoned Ginny to him. "If you will give me Harry's pendants, I will give them to Fawkes. It is entirely possible that Harry will think to call him, or do so inadvertently, and we must be ready."

Ginny nodded and pulled off Harry's pendants, brushing them past her lips as she did.

I love you, Harry Potter, she thought fiercely as she watched the phoenix take the gold chain in his beak. And I refuse to lose you to something this stupid.

"Now," Dumbledore said gravely when Ginny had taken her seat, "to the matter of Lord Voldemort's spy in the Order of the Phoenix..."

A loud *crack* startled everyone. Ginny whirled to see what was happening—you couldn't Apparate at Hogwarts, but it had certainly sounded like an Apparition—

"Mum?" Ron said in surprise. "*Winky* ?"

xXxXx

Harry pulled his shimmering silver leg free of his body and sighed in utter relief as the last of the bizarre pain vanished. "Much better," he said aloud, standing up. "Wonder what hit me?" He looked around. "Or where I am, for that matter."

But why should I care? I can't do anything about it, and even if I could, it wouldn't work, I can't do anything right—

Harry stopped, frowning. "That's not true," he said aloud. "Look what I just did."

Stupid, kid stuff, anybody could have done it. Why even bother? I'll only get caught again, and Umbridge'll be even madder at me for fighting back—I should have given up when I had the

chance—

Quick as thought, Harry shifted, his intangible body completing his Animagus transformation even faster than his human form could do it. *Help me*, he said silently to Wolf, and threw himself into the mindset of the form.

Wolf pawed the ground, his nose twitching. Giving up was an alien idea to him, as was lack of confidence in skills long since proven. He was a hunter, a fighter, strong and courageous, and he had fallen only against far superior numbers and strength. There was nothing wrong with that.

Yes, there is, yammered what he could now clearly perceive was a different voice, a completely separate entity from himself. *You're never supposed to fail, not ever, if you fail even once, that makes you a failure—you'll never recover, you might as well be dead, why don't you just lie down and play dead like a good little doggy—*

Wolf snarled, whipped his head around, and sank his teeth into—*something*. It glowed a nasty green, it had four sucker-covered legs and four arms tipped with sharp stingers, and it had been clinging to his back and pumping poison into him without his even realizing it—

No more!

With a fierce crunch of teeth, Wolf broke the *thing*'s back, then shook it until it stopped moving. He flung it away, watched it hit the far wall and slide down to lie broken on the floor, and howled in triumph. *My kill! My kill, fair and true!*

Harry slid back into control, Wolf's triumph still suffusing him. He howled once more for the sheer joy of it, then trotted over to examine what he'd killed more closely. A small sniff sent him recoiling in disgust. *Umbridge!*

But wait—this isn't her, and she couldn't make a creature to follow me when I go walking when she doesn't even know I do it—so what is this thing?

He looked back at his human body and stared. Thousands of blood-red worms covered it, swarming over every inch of skin and clothing.

What—are—those?

He approached his body cautiously, sniffed, and sneezed, backing up a few steps. *Umbridge again. Worse than the other one, even. Probably because it's still live—*

Live. Not alive, but live. Why did I say that?

Slowly, he stood up on two feet, looking back and forth between the sprawled creature and the red worms. "They're not anything alive at all," he said, thinking aloud. "They're made of magic. So am I, when I'm walking, so I can see them and affect them then. But if I was still in my body, I wouldn't be able to see them—"

No, but I'd feel them. I'd feel what they're doing to me. And if they're made of magic, and they're doing things to me, that makes them—

“Spells.” Harry reached down and picked one of the worms off his body. It squeaked and tried to escape, but he dropped it to the floor and stepped on it hard. “She had me under spells—has me,” he corrected, looking at the worms still coating him. “I should get them off...”

But I have to find out what's going on. Every minute counts. Once I know where I am and how to get out, I can come back, get rid of the spell, and get out.

He turned away, shook himself once all over like Wolf shedding water, and went to work.

The room around him was easily summed up—white and featureless, with a light in the ceiling and a door shut and probably locked. That was no bar to Harry when he was out ‘walking’, though. If it was intended to be gone through, he could go through it, and promptly did.

“So Umbridge had me under a couple of nasty spells,” he mused as he walked down the hall, noting its lack of windows and the low ceiling. “I suppose that’s her idea of fun.”

A stray wisp of memory teased his mind. Something someone had said after the Tournament, something about what Fudge could or couldn’t do...

Harry shook his head and kept walking. It would come in its own time.

The first three rooms he peered into had nothing in them, only the same blank walls and floor as his own, with a light on the ceiling. The fourth, though, had a bored-looking young witch sitting in it, a bowl of water on the table in front of her.

“...what she thinks is going to happen,” she was muttering as Harry poked his head through the door. “He’s just lying there, has been for a while, he’s not even talking anymore, not that I could hear him when he was... and ‘be ready to fight’, she says. Fight what? He doesn’t have a wand, I should know, I have it right there...” A jerk of her head indicated a side table, where, sure enough, Harry’s wand lay. “He can’t get out of that room, and it’s not like anyone knows he’s here...”

The witch shook her head irritably. “What do I care, though, she’s willing to pay overtime.” She summoned her bag with an idle flip of her wand and started digging inside it, eventually pulling out a copy of *Witch Weekly*. “I hope they’ve got a new Valentina Jett, it’s been ages...”

Harry snickered and pulled his head back out. *“He’s just lying there”? I bet that’s me. Or my body, anyway. The rest of me is most definitely not... and you’re going to find that out the hard way pretty soon, aren’t you?*

“What she thinks is going to happen,” he repeated aloud as he kept walking. “That’s got to be Umbridge. Wherever this is, it’s all about her, she’s the one in charge—”

He stopped. Then he started running, flat out.

There was one place besides Hogwarts where Umbridge was very definitely in charge of things.

xXxXx

“This,” said Dumbledore slowly, “makes sense of a great deal.” He laid a hand on Winky’s shoulder. “Winky, I thank you for telling us this. It may save lives.”

The house-elf nodded, trembling.

Dumbledore looked up at Mrs. Weasley. “Molly, does Arthur know about this?”

“I sent him a Patronus, but I don’t know how soon it will reach him,” Mrs. Weasley said, pale but unshaken. “I had to be careful what I said, as well. What if it got to him while he was talking to the man? I finally just told him not to trust anyone, and to go back to Headquarters as soon as he got the message—I know that’s left us without anyone we can trust looking for Harry, but I couldn’t—”

“Of course not,” Sirius said, cutting her off. “It’s not worth risking Arthur’s life to find Harry a few minutes sooner.”

“But that still leaves us with the question of how we *are* going to find him,” Danger said. “What if he’s not at the Ministry at all?”

Dumbledore smiled faintly. “That, I can assist with. Observe.” He drew a second quill from his desk, almost identical to the one that had written down Ginny’s location, and set it on a fresh piece of parchment. “I am a firm believer in keeping one’s friends close and one’s enemies closer. To that end, I presented a certain friend of mine with a small pin in the shape of a phoenix, and he, to needle Cornelius, has worn it constantly for the past five months.”

A tap of his wand, and the quill began to write.

The talisman is currently located at the Ministry of Magic, in one of the research areas of the Department of Mysteries.

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Harry slowed down as he heard voices coming from a room near the end of the hall he was running in. *That’s Umbridge... and I know I’ve heard the man before, but I can’t place the voice...*

“...fact remains that he is under my jurisdiction,” Umbridge was saying as Harry came to a halt outside the door. “He is neither coherent nor safe to allow around others, therefore he is clearly the responsibility of the Ministry.”

Harry froze, the wisp of memory from earlier coming into full clarity. *That’s right, Moony told me last year—if I were mad, dangerous to other people, the Ministry could take me away—of course, that’s what Umbridge was trying to do, she wanted it to look as if I’d lost my mind, so she could justify locking me up forever!*

“What if he were to have a sudden episode of uncontrolled magic in front of Muggles?” Umbridge went on. “Or even his fellow students at Hogwarts, who are not fully trained in magic and would be unable to defend themselves?”

Unable to defend themselves... now whose fault is that, I wonder? Harry snorted.

“Under the law,” Umbridge wound up, “it is very clearly the duty of the Ministry of Magic to keep him under control until such time as his malady can be successfully treated.”

“I’m not arguing that,” said the man’s voice, sounding rather weary. “I’m only saying that since I arranged for this area to be cleared for you tonight, so that Dumbledore’s people wouldn’t notice how much you were getting up to, perhaps I’m due a bit of consideration. All I want is to see him—is that really too much to ask?”

“You have no conception of the abilities this seemingly innocent boy is hiding,” Umbridge said shrilly. “He *bit* me while I was attempting to subdue him, and his teeth are far sharper than can be explained by nature alone! Look, just look at it!”

Harry winced. *I must have partially transformed... damn it, if she figures out I’m an Animagus...*

“Yes, that does look nasty,” the man agreed dryly. “You can Stun him or put him in the Body-Bind, whatever you like, Dolores. But I *will* see him.” A pause. “Whether you want me to or not.”

Why am I standing out here? They can’t see me. Harry snorted at his own forgetfulness and walked through the half-open door into the room.

“Are you threatening me, Bartemius?” Umbridge demanded, drawing herself up to her full height. “Do not forget who I am!”

“I haven’t forgotten who you are,” Mr. Crouch said wearily, looking down at her with a clear expression of disgust. “You’re a fool who’s attached herself to another fool, and I don’t know how he can stand your toadying, unless he actually believes everything you say about him, which would make him a bigger fool even than I thought he was.”

Umbridge sputtered in indignation. “I—you—how—”

“But I do owe you a debt of gratitude,” Crouch went on, ignoring the sounds Umbridge was making. “You’ve made a great deal possible for me, and I just wanted to say—”

A door at the other side of the room opened. “Barty?” Mr. Weasley poked his head inside. “Yes, I thought I heard you in here. And—” He eyed Umbridge with distaste, then nodded a jerky greeting to her.

“Here to help with the business, Arthur?” Crouch asked, waving Mr. Weasley into the room. “You know what I mean.” His right hand rose to his hair, smoothing it back, then quickly traced a jagged line down his forehead before dropping idly to his left sleeve.

Harry grinned, one hand going to his own forehead to touch his scar. *I knew they'd find me. Dumbledore doesn't leave his own behind...*

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Fawkes suddenly sat up and warbled a brief series of notes.

“Excellent.” Dumbledore smiled widely, his eyes acquiring their famous twinkle. “Do us that favor, old friend, if you would...”

In a flash of fire, the phoenix was gone.

“Harry called for him,” said Meghan. “Didn’t he?”

“Or something which had the same effect,” Dumbledore said with a nod. “Whatever it was, it will bring Fawkes to him, and with Fawkes will go the pendants...”

“And with the pendants, goes the locator,” Aletha finished. “And then we’ll know exactly where to go to get our little Wolf.”

“Not so little anymore,” Danger said softly.

“No. He’s not.” Aletha sighed. “As much as we might like him to be.” One hand rested on her belly. “That’s why I’m looking forward to this one so much. I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to have a child who stays where you put him...”

“Doesn’t last,” Sirius said. “Not for long, anyway.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Are you sure you should be here, Letha?” Remus asked.

Aletha rolled her eyes. “Remus, I’m pregnant, not ill. Besides, do you really think we’ll be fighting anyone tonight?”

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Harry gasped as his scar lanced with pain—

Wait, why do I feel it? I don't feel anything Umbridge's spell is doing to me, why do I feel this?

A rush of excitement, anticipation, gloating—

Is this some other spell? She can't have put anything on me, she doesn't know I'm here—

He twisted, looking around, but he could see nothing different about his soul-self.

Maybe it's my body, something's wrong, I have to get back—

He took off running, leaving Crouch and Mr. Weasley to deal with Umbridge.

Come to think of it, all I need to do is break the spell on my body, then get out of the room and down to where they are, they ought to have taken care of her by the time I get there, it's two to one and she thinks Crouch is on her side for some reason—

Harry darted through the fifth door on the right and stopped dead.

“Fawkes,” he breathed, staring at the phoenix, which was perched above his body’s head, crooning. Thick tears dripped from beady black eyes, falling onto Harry’s face, and the red worms all over him were fading into nothingness—

The spell, it's gone, I can go back in!

Harry laughed out loud and leapt into his body, closing his eyes to savor the feeling of sinking into comforting warmth. Fingers were *here* , hands were *here* , arms were *here* —toes and feet and legs were *there* —other things were all where they should be, and although everything was sore, nothing *hurt* —

He opened his eyes and smiled up at Fawkes. “Thanks,” he said a bit hoarsely. “Thanks a lot.”

The phoenix warbled for a moment, then bent his head and plucked something out of his feathers. A chain, Harry realized, a gold chain like the Pack and Pride wore—and on it there were—

“Pendants?” He blinked as a tiny locket came into view. “Wait a second—those are mine! Then whose—”

He pulled free the set he was wearing and looked at them. *Battery and muffin tin—that's Mr. and Mrs. Weasley—*

His palm struck his forehead with an audible thump. *Of course. Ginny. We were sharing, and then we took them off, but we never bothered to make sure we had the right ones...*

Quickly, he removed the chain he was wearing, then tugged on the one around Fawkes’ neck. The phoenix made a chuckling sound as the metal slid through his feathers and flesh without harming him, and Harry chuckled with him. “Somehow I didn’t think that would bother you too much.”

His pendants went over his head and settled into place against his breastbone, and Harry drew a long breath and let it out slowly. “Better,” he said. “Much better.”

Exactly one second later, the metal went hot against his skin.

Of course. They're all scared to death for me. I wish I had a way to tell them I was all right—

Wait, I do!

“Can you take these back to Ginny for me?” he asked Fawkes, holding out the other set of

pendants. “And let them all know you’ve seen me, and I’m OK?”

Fawkes took the pendants delicately in his beak, bobbed his head, and spread his wings. Harry dodged the wingspread. *He’s bigger than he looks—of course, he’d have to be, to handle all the magic he’s got...*

The phoenix took off, circled the room once, and vanished in a spurt of flames.

There. Message sent. Now to get out of here...

Harry went to the door, put his hands on it, and focused his will on the lock. *Melt.*

A few seconds later, he pushed it open easily and stepped into the corridor, avoiding the puddle of hot metal on the floor. *Maybe it won’t hurt me, but if it dries on my shoe, it’ll make a lot of noise. Now, to get my wand back...*

xXxXx

Valerie Marks turned a page in her *Witch Weekly*, yawning. *This whole thing’s gone downhill since Valentina Jett stopped writing for them. Maybe I should try sending her a letter, asking if she’ll ever do another serial story...*

Suddenly, there was a hand over her mouth, and another one at her throat, something very sharp pricking her skin. “You didn’t search me very well, did you?” whispered a voice in her ear. “Or did you just not think I was going to be able to use it?”

Valerie whimpered, the magazine falling from her nerveless hands. *Oh God I wasn’t watching he got out and now he’s going to kill me I don’t want to die I don’t want to die—*

“Stand up,” the voice went on, deathly quiet. “Slowly.”

She complied, though her knees were shaking so badly she could barely support her own weight.

“Good.” Her captor pulled her against him with the hand still over her mouth and the elbow of the one holding the knife at her throat. “Now walk over here with me.”

Step by step, in awkward unison, they moved, until Valerie found herself in a corner facing the wall.

“Don’t make a sound.” The hand covering her mouth moved away. Valerie gulped but didn’t scream.

“Very good.” The voice sounded amused. “Tell me where we are.”

“Th-th-the Ministry of Magic,” Valerie stammered. “The D-department of Mysteries. Please don’t kill me, I was just doing what she said, I didn’t know—”

“Shut up.” The voice had turned deadly cold. “Put your hands over your ears and leave them there until I tell you to take them away.”

Valerie slowly lifted her hands and pressed them against the sides of her head. The knife at her throat slid away, and she was alone. A few seconds in which all she could hear was the frantic beating of her own heart, and then an instant’s flash of red light behind her—

And then nothing at all.

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“That was easy,” Harry said aloud, stowing his wand inside his robes. “Now I just need a lift home...”

His easy jog took him out of the room where the witch lay unconscious, quickly down the hallway, and almost to the room where he’d seen Umbridge, Crouch, and Mr. Weasley before he realized he could hear voices from within. Cautiously, he peered around the door.

“...can understand why you did it,” Mr. Weasley was saying, looking from Umbridge’s crumpled form on the floor to Crouch, who had his wand out, “but now she can’t tell us where Harry is, and this department is confusing enough when you know what you’re after. He could be anywhere—”

A silver bird, small and plump, shot through the wall and landed in front of Mr. Weasley. “*Arthur,*” it said urgently in Mrs. Weasley’s voice. “*Trust no one, no one at all—come home immediately—*”

“What in—” Mr. Weasley stared at the bird as it vanished. “That was Molly’s Patronus—what does she mean, ‘trust no one’?”

“She means that her message got here just a moment too late,” said Crouch, and suddenly his wand was pointing at Mr. Weasley. “I’m sorry about this, Arthur, but you’ve brought it on yourself, really. *Avada —*”

Harry slammed the door open. “*Expelliarmus !*” he shouted, his wand aimed at Crouch.

Crouch twisted aside, avoiding Harry’s spell but sending his bolt of green harmlessly into the wall, then shot again at Mr. Weasley. “*Dissupo !*”

Mr. Weasley tried to dodge, but the spell caught him across the chest in a flash of purple, and he collapsed to the floor bonelessly. Harry yelled angrily and fired a Stunner at Crouch, who threw up a Shield Charm and dashed from the room. “You’ll never leave here alive, Potter!” his voice trailed behind him. “The Dark Lord is on his way, and all his servants with him...”

Harry snarled once, then dropped down beside Mr. Weasley and put his fingers to the older wizard’s neck. A pulse beat there, faint but present, and Harry sighed in relief.

Then he got to his feet, gripping his wand more tightly.

He might be alone, he might have been under Umbridge's spells until just a few moments ago, but if Voldemort wanted him, Voldemort was going to have to fight for him.

And I won't be alone for long.

One hand on his pendants, the other holding his wand rock-steady, Harry Potter moved out into the Department of Mysteries.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 23: A Guess and A Gateway (Year 5)

Whoops and cheers rang out through Dumbledore's office as Fawkes reappeared, gold shining in his beak. Ginny held up her hands joyously. "Here, Fawkes!" she called out. "Right here!"

Fawkes dropped Ginny's pendants into her hands, circled the office once, and landed on his perch, where he began to preen a wing smugly. Ginny looped the pendants' chain around her neck and slid them under her robes, a silent sigh of relief escaping her.

Ron frowned, looking up at Fawkes. "Why didn't he just bring Harry back with him?" he asked. "If he can travel through fire instantly and all?"

Mrs. Danger, on the other side of the room, paled slightly.

"Fawkes did not offer," Dumbledore said gravely, tapping the magical quill with his wand to start it seeking Harry's talisman. "For good reason. The place through which phoenixes travel instantaneously is... unfriendly to the human mind. I can handle it, since Fawkes allows me a close connection with his mind as a shield, but Harry could not."

"Understood," said Mr. Padfoot. "But it still leaves out what I've been wondering." He turned to look at Mrs. Danger. "Why haven't you done something? Gone off in a dream and made a deal?"

"I asked," Mrs. Danger said, so quietly that Ginny could barely hear her. "I could have done it. But we would have paid a price. Too high a price."

"Too high a price? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I wasn't willing to trade one life for another!" Mrs. Danger shouted. "That I couldn't save Harry and let Arthur die!"

Ginny's pendants flared hot for half an instant with Ron's astonished fear. She was sure her own shock had set off everyone else's. *Dad? He would have died?*

"He might still die if we don't get there soon, I don't know, but that was the price I was told for saving Harry. At least, saving him this way. There were others... other prices, other deaths..." Mrs. Danger shook her head, clasp Mr. Moony's hand tightly. "I did what I thought was right."

"Then you did the only thing you could have done," said Dumbledore. "And we have our answer." He held out the scroll on which the quill had written to Mrs. Letha, who snatched it quickly and read it.

"The Department of Mysteries," she said. "He is at the Ministry, and so is Crouch, which means Voldemort—we have to get to him—"

"I will rouse the Order and follow you," Dumbledore said as the four Pack-adults hurried to the

door, Professor McGonagall behind them. “After attending to one other piece of business. Do try to leave a bit of the fight for me...”

The Pride buried snickers in their sleeves or other people’s shoulders.

Dumbledore closed the door of his office and turned to face them. “I must ask you now the hardest thing any teacher can ask of his students,” he said. “Or any commander of his soldiers. Obedience, for a little while, without question or protest.”

As if by magic, the Pride drew back, leaving Ginny at the fore. Her stomach quailed, but she forced herself to stand straight, feeling Ron at one shoulder and Hermione at the other. “Yes, sir,” she said simply.

“The command is this. Stay here, and do not attempt to become involved in this battle in any way. Even to the point of sending Harry strength, as you did last year.”

Ginny almost opened her mouth to shout indignantly, but she had given her word and the Pride’s, and her lips closed over the words unspoken.

“May we ask why, sir?” Hermione said beside her. “Or is there no time?”

“There is time enough for this.” Dumbledore looked weary, weary and old, but his words were firm. “I believe that Harry will face Lord Voldemort directly tonight, and he must know that he can do so on his own and survive. You will be with him as you always are, through your passive connection—I am no such fool as to try to deny you that—but you must not be active within his mind, or you may undermine his confidence and betray yourselves to Voldemort.”

“V-Voldemort knows about me,” Ron said, getting the name out with only a slight tremor. “He knows I was with Harry last time. I don’t think he knows about anyone else. I was trying to block him.”

“He may think that it was a freak accident, caused by the stress of the moment, then, not something you can invoke at will.” Dumbledore smiled, and his eyes showed a faint flicker of their usual twinkle. “I would prefer to keep you as a secret weapon until you are truly needed, you understand. And tonight I do not think you will be needed. But in times to come, you will be, more than you can imagine.”

“I don’t know,” Draco murmured. “I can imagine a lot.”

The Headmaster’s eyes twinkled brighter. “To your haven, then,” he said, waving a hand towards the fireplace. “Harry will join you there as soon as he may. And I believe I can say with some certainty that this is the last time you will be left behind.”

Indrawn breaths behind Ginny echoed her own mingled joy and fear. *I don’t want to be the damsel in distress who faints if a spell comes at her—but I don’t know if I’m ready to fight yet, either...*

But that’s why I don’t have to fight tonight. I’ll fight when it’s time. And then I will be ready.

“Go,” Dumbledore urged, holding up his arm. “The sooner you are safe, the sooner I can take word to Harry that it is the case.”

Ginny flapped a hand behind her, but she knew it wasn't needed. Neville was already opening the panel, and she could hear the Pride lining up, getting ready to slide down into the Den. She just had one more question.

“Professor?”

“Yes?” Dumbledore looked away from Fawkes, who had alighted gently on a blue-clad wrist, to meet Ginny's eyes.

“Can we tell the rest of the... some people we know about this?” Ginny forced her flush down and prayed Dumbledore wouldn't notice her lapse. Of course, he would, but she could hope he wouldn't say anything, at least not out loud...

“Rumors will already have spread,” Dumbledore mused, to himself more than to Ginny. “Yes, Miss Weasley, tell them what you know. Bear in mind, though, that if they have accepted your command, they have also accepted mine. And my orders stand. No student leaves this castle tonight.”

“Yes, sir.” Ginny gave a quick nod of her head, then spun and headed for the Den entrance, her mind buzzing. Harry had the Galleon that was the key for the DA's Protean-Charmed talismans, but Hermione had set that charm in the first place, and Ginny had watched her do it. It wouldn't be hard for either of them to substitute another of the Galleons for the original key.

Not hard at all.

And if this is our last night on noncombatant status... we should spend it planning.

By the time her head broke the surface of the water in the Den's bathtub, Ginny was already planning some of what she would say to the DA when they arrived in the Room of Requirement.

Especially if Dumbledore meant what I think he did when he said what Harry's going to have to do tonight...

xXxXx

Harry found a dark spot in the corner of a room full of planets to get his back to the wall and think. *Crouch obviously isn't on our side anymore—maybe he never was. He said Voldemort and the Death Eaters were on their way here. That fits with what I saw in that vision. But there was a second vision that went with the first one, a vision about looking for something, something Voldemort wants...*

He drew his wand, pushed himself away from the wall, and drifted across to the door. The apparent lack of gravity in here had startled him at first, as well as unsettling his stomach, but it was no worse than being in a steep dive on a broom. Besides, if anyone came in here after him,

he'd know about it.

Probably from the sound of them losing their lunch.

Harry stepped through the door and staggered a bit as his weight fell on him again, but he recovered quickly and closed the door behind him. Then he looked around.

This is getting scary.

The room around him was the exact twin of the one in the vision he'd shared with Voldemort. Twelve knobless doors, one of which he'd just entered by, lined the round black walls; branches of black candles burning with a blue flame stuck out between each door. The floor was black marble, polished to such a sheen that Harry could see his own reflection, as though he stood on top of a vast black lake stretching eternally below him.

In the dream, I just opened a door, and it was the right one...

He lifted a foot to step forward, then stopped, a voice from a story rising to the surface of his mind. "Aren't we going to mark this pool?"

Thank you, C.S. Lewis...

Harry pointed a finger at the door he'd come in through and drew an X in the air. A fiery mark appeared on the door in response, its orange light rippling strangely in the blue of the room. "That should do it," he said aloud. "Now to try the others..."

He strode across the room, intending to try the door directly across from him, but got only a few steps before a rumbling noise made him stop.

The wall was spinning.

Harry dropped his gaze immediately to his feet, half-closing his eyes. If he watched the flames go by, they'd burn into his vision and he'd be blind for precious moments he couldn't afford. Not if there were Death Eaters coming after him, to secure whatever it was Voldemort wanted from this place.

The wall grated to a stop, and Harry looked up. His cross still burned on the door he'd entered the room by, but now it was to his right rather than behind him. He reoriented himself, hurried across to the door he'd meant to try, put his left hand on the place where a knob would have been, and pushed. The door swung open easily, and he brought his wand to bear—

Against an empty room. There was nothing here, Harry saw as his eyes adjusted to the brighter light within, but clocks and cabinets. Ticking clocks, cabinets filled with shining objects—

Wait—I think this is it!

He was inside the room and three paces back before he caught himself with a mental hand on the

scruff of his neck. *Steady on, Harry. Should you really be trying to get whatever this is that Voldemort wants so badly? You know he wants you—why give him extra incentive?*

His Wolf-side bared teeth in a grin. *Because if I get there first, he doesn't get it. Or rather, he only gets it over my dead body.*

Which is also something he wants...

Harry shrugged and kept moving. *I know he can't get into my mind now that I have my own pendants again. And I haven't seen or smelled anyone else around here yet. If I get to this thing fast enough, as long as I don't make a mess getting it, they'll have no way of knowing I took it and it isn't just out for cleaning or some such.*

A cabinet filled with hourglasses, a bell jar with a sparkling wind inside—he paused to watch the hummingbird within the jar hatch at the bottom, rise to the top on the current of the wind, then sink on the other side as the shell closed around it again—and he was through the second door, into a room once more dark. He shut his eyes, counted a slow ten, and opened them.

It's huge.

The thought came unbidden to Harry's mind as he stared around at the vast, shelf-filled stone room. He had never felt so small or so insignificant, and wished with all his heart that he weren't alone.

In one way, at least, I'm not. His hand went to the pendants, and they seemed to grow a bit hotter as he touched them, a subtle reassurance that his Pride was thinking of him.

Or I'm imagining things. Whichever.

Harry brought his wand to half-ready, sharpened his eyes and ears and nose, and stepped out into the aisle between the sets of shelves, glancing around to get his bearings.

If this is number fifty-three, I need to go up to get to ninety-seven. And up is to the right. Off we go...

xXxXx

Maybe we should have gone straight from Dumbledore's office, Danger said as she spun through the Floo connection. **He's hooked up to the Floo, isn't he?**

Yes—but it's being monitored, remember? The only way we could be sure we'd get out of the school without being seen was to go through Umbridge's office. Be fair, love, it didn't add more than two minutes to our travel time. Not even with the side trip to tell Alice what's going on.

Danger sighed. **You're right. As usual. I just wish...**

Wish what?

I wish I knew what we were going to find.

As for that...

Remus broke off, and a moment later Danger felt her own spinning begin to abate. She lunged forward with one foot, threw out her hands to either side, and skidded out of a fireplace into the Ministry Atrium, looking for all the world like a soot-covered statue.

“Hachooo !”

“Bless you,” said Sirius, making a slightly more graceful exit from the fireplace opposite hers, then turning quickly to the one beside him to catch Aletha.

“Thanks.” Danger pulled out a handkerchief, wiped her face with one side, then blew her nose on the other. “What were you saying, love?” she asked Remus, who had arrived a second or two before she had.

“That I think I know what we’ll find here.” Remus set off towards the guard’s desk, deserted now after working hours.

“Do tell,” said Aletha, shaking soot out of her hair as she followed.

“In order of probability, least to greatest: Death Eaters, Ministry officials, and Harry. On his way out.” Remus hit the button to summon the lift.

“Why’re Death Eaters at the bottom of the list?” asked Sirius.

“Wishful thinking.”

Sirius brushed a streak of ash off his robes. “I had to ask.”

xXxXx

Ninety-six, ninety-seven. Here we are.

Harry turned down the aisle and walked slowly along, peering at the orbs that lined the shelves. Some of them glowed from within while others were dull, reflecting the blue light of the candles all around. All had yellowed labels underneath them, with names or initials and dates written on them.

There’s a pattern. The date is first, then a name or initials, then “to”, then another name or initials. And under that... it’s not constant, but it’s usually a name or a couple of names. Sometimes it’s a place, or another date, and sometimes just a question mark...

A tiny sound from behind him froze him in place. A brushing, whisking sound, like the hem of a

robe sliding past a wooden door...

There isn't supposed to be anyone else here...

Harry continued walking. His eyes were still tracing absently along the labels, but all his attention was on what his nose and ears could tell him. Human scents, human movements, in the room with him, and getting closer...

Suddenly he stopped and backed up two paces.

What did that label just say?

He hadn't been making it up. It was his own name, inscribed dully on a slip of parchment stuck to the edge of a shelf. The date at the top of the label was that of the year before he'd been born, and the writing underneath corresponded to the form he'd already seen:

S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D.

Dark Lord

and (?) Harry Potter

Harry stretched out his hand and laid it gently on the orb above the label. It glowed as brightly, and felt as warm, as if he had filled it with fire, but the light inside was distinctly silver.

Silver like a Patronus. Or a memory.

Something to do with Voldemort and me, the year before I was born. Only they weren't sure it was me. And it came from someone whose last name starts with T, and went to someone with three middle names...

His mind, clearer than usual thanks to the healing tears with which Fawkes had banished Umbridge's spell, slid the pieces together for him, and Harry knew what he had in his hand.

I can't leave it here. Voldemort obviously knows where it is. If he gets hold of it...

Fast as thought, the orb was down from its shelf and tucked inside his robes, dust and all. Harry pinched his nose against the urge to sneeze and listened with all his might. As long as the Death Eaters didn't yet have him boxed in, he could sneak out of here, get back to the Ministry proper, and from there into Muggle London—they wouldn't have a prayer of finding him there, especially not if he hid as Wolf, and he could get to Diagon Alley, or even to Grimmauld Place...

Yes. Perfect. The slow and shuffling footsteps, which would have been inaudible to anyone without Harry's advantage, were coming only from one side of him as yet. There were a few trying to work their way around to the other side, but if he moved fast—

Action suited to thought, and Harry darted lightfoot out one end of the aisle. Past two rows of

shelves, three, four, five, and duck back in—

Don't think they saw me... wish I had the Cloak, but speed and black robes will have to do for now... wish I could blacken my face, they're most likely to see that...

A whimsical thought struck him, and he reached inside his robes and scraped some of the dust off the orb. Holding the pile of gray in the palm of his left hand, he pointed his wand at it.

*"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
Turn into ashes, I say you must!"*

The pile of dust turned black.

Huh. I didn't actually think that would work...

Not arguing with good luck. Harry put his wand between his teeth and hastily smeared the ashes on his face. It probably looked horrific, but it would keep his skin from showing up quite so clearly in the strange blue light of the Department of Mysteries.

And then, from five rows away, voices began to speak.

"I don't understand. Where is he?"

"The Dark Lord said he would be here."

"The Dark Lord is never wrong."

"The Dark Lord said he *might* be here," a voice corrected. "If the boy could somehow escape his captivity."

Harry bit his tongue. He knew that voice, though he'd only heard it a few times and it now held a permanent hoarse rasp to it. *Glad Draco isn't here... we'd have to hold him back, and the noise would have blown our position...*

Loud footsteps slapped the ground, and Harry froze in place. The man running past the end of the aisle never glanced his way at all. "Yes," a second familiar voice panted out. "Escaped—yes..."

"You don't look quite yourself, Bartemius," said a woman's rough voice mockingly. "I didn't realize a soft life as a spy was so harrowing..."

"Shut up, Bellatrix," snapped Crouch. "Potter *has* escaped, he stopped me killing Arthur Weasley. I've been trying to find him, but this place is a labyrinth, there's no telling where he is—"

"Is there not?" said Lucius Malfoy. "Look at the shelf, Bartemius."

Harry took a deep breath, held it, and began to move towards the aisle, allowing fifteen seconds for each step.

“It’s gone!” Crouch gasped.

“Which means Potter must have been here. Only he or the Dark Lord himself could have taken the prophecy from the shelf. And he is not long gone. In fact...” Malfoy paused. “I believe he is still here. In this room.”

“Using your newfound skills, Lucius?” sneered one of the other men. “Your little gift from Potter’s foster father?”

“Hold your tongue, Rabastan, if you wish to keep it,” Malfoy shot back. “And let me know when you have abilities the Dark Lord finds as useful as he obviously finds mine. Spread out and search the room. Potter is here, and he has the prophecy.”

Harry bit back a truly vicious curse, instead using the moment to crouch down. *Stealth isn’t going to do it anymore—have to be fast—*

He shifted, and in the instant he felt the final hair drop into place, leapt forward.

“There he goes!”

“Get him!”

“Wait, that’s not Potter—”

“It’s an animal—”

“That *is* Potter!” Malfoy’s voice rose above the clamor. “He is an Animagus! Stun him, trip him, do what you must, but retrieve that prophecy unbroken!”

Wolf dodged two spells, flung himself at the door, and tumbled through it ahead of three more. His paws found purchase on the opposite wall, and he bounded back towards the door, using his weight to slam it shut in the face of three more spells—a breath and he was Harry again, his wand leaping into his hand—

“*Colloportus !*”

The door squelched shut, but Harry knew it wouldn’t hold long. *I have to get out of here, slow them down somehow so I can get away—*

Then he looked at the contents of the room around him.

Hourglasses. Clocks. Time magic. What if—

xXxXx

The first Death Eater through the door stepped on a tiny hourglass and smashed it to pieces. He barely even noticed, bellowing in triumph at the sight of Harry, halfway down the room and

apparently caught unawares. His wand began to come down, his mouth opened for a spell—

Then he backed up, his mouth closing, his wand lifting, his foot coming off the hourglass, which reconstituted itself, every piece coming together perfectly—

Just in time for the Death Eater to smash it again as he lunged forward and yelled gleefully, his wand coming down to aim at Harry—

Perfect.

Harry hurled another hourglass, this one on a chain, over the head of the time-trapped Death Eater, aiming for the man behind him, who was pointing his wand around his repeating friend. The chain wrapped around the man's hand and wand—the hourglass flipped over once—

And the Death Eater was gone.

“Find another exit!” Malfoy shouted from within the prophecy room. “Get to the entrance hall, the circular room, do not let Potter escape!”

Good luck. I'm closer than you are. Harry took off running, wishing he dared carry more of the little hourglasses with him—but what if he dropped one, and trapped *himself* in a repeating loop of time? The Death Eaters could walk up to him and wait for it to wear off, and he would be completely helpless to protect himself, because he'd be living the same moment over and over, never realizing that they were there...

Use what you find. Weapons of opportunity. It had been part of the Pride's war games, part of Combat Club, and he had included it in the DA's lessons as well. *Throw things at them, distract them, hide from them, do whatever you have to. Get away. Get your friends away. Get your objective away. That's all that matters.*

And speaking of an objective...

Harry burst into the circular room, marked the door behind him, and dashed to the center of the room. The spinning started, but he didn't notice. He was too busy pulling the orb from his pocket to look at it.

The date fits, the initials fit, they said it was a prophecy... this has to be the one Professor Trelawney made to Professor Dumbledore, the one that could have meant either Neville or me, the one that's the reason Voldemort came after me in the first place. And he only knows the first part of it, and he wants to know the rest, so he's trying to get this.

But I already know the prophecy. And he doesn't know that, because my blood-bond with Moony seals off my mind. If I'd known when we were sharing that vision that it was the prophecy he was after, I might not have been able to stop myself thinking of it...

But I didn't. So he still doesn't know that I know it.

Harry grinned a Wolf-like grin as the doors slowed to a stop, two of them marked with fiery Xs.

I think it's time for a little Marauding.

xXxXx

Sirius was the first one out of the lift at the Department of Mysteries, Remus and Danger a step behind him. “Go back up to the Atrium, Letha,” he said over his shoulder. “The others will need someone to tell them where to go when they get here.”

“Good try, Sirius, but no.” Aletha’s wand shook back and forth in time with her head. “They know where we are already. And if Harry’s been taken by Death Eaters, it’ll take all four of us to get him free.”

“All three,” Danger corrected. “I have something else I have to do.”

“Something else like what?” asked Remus.

“Something personal.” Danger looked ahead into the darkness. “I learned about it when I went to ask if I could bring Harry home safely. It’s important.”

Remus sighed. “Remind me,” he said to Sirius. “The next time I get married, I need to pick a girl without any otherworldly powers.”

“You had your chance to get rid of them,” Aletha pointed out.

“I did my best to get rid of them. How was I supposed to know they’d give the whole lot back to her?” Remus shook his head. “Enough, now. Let’s move.”

The Pack-adults gathered behind the door at the end of the hall. Four wands were aimed. Sirius pushed the door open—

“It’s Potter!”

“Get him!”

“*Stupefy!* ”

“*Petrificus Totalus!* ”

Danger closed her eyes and clasped Remus’ free hand, opening her magic to him, and a Shield Charm sprang up around the four and held, spells bouncing off it every which way. Sirius and Aletha fired rapidly, Sirius without saying a word, Aletha in furious mutters, and the eight or nine Death Eaters in the room yelled in dismay and dived through various doors, all except the two who lay on the floor unconscious.

“Good enough for starters,” Sirius said, shooting different-colored balls of ink from his wand at

the doors the Death Eaters had left through. “And I see Harry’s been through here already...”

Aletha chuckled, following her husband inside. “Not many people around who’d automatically use fire to mark things.”

“We shouldn’t split up too far,” said Remus, peering around the room at the twelve doors. “Danger, do you have to be alone for whatever you’re doing?”

“It would be best if you weren’t there.”

Aletha looked sharply at her friend, but said nothing.

“I’ll go by myself, then,” Remus said, starting for a yellow-marked door. “I have a slight sensory advantage—hel-lo.” The room had just begun to spin. “That’s right, I remember now...”

“Remember?” Aletha asked.

“He wanted to be an Unspeakable,” Sirius said. “Back in school. He read everything he could get his hands on about the Department of Mysteries.”

“This is a security measure,” said Remus distractedly, watching the wall slow its spin. “To stop us from knowing which door we came in by, or which one we need. Unspeakables are under a certain spell that lets them tell the doors apart.”

“Why not just mark them like we did?” Danger asked as the room stopped turning.

“Ordinary markings don’t last past the departure of the person who made them.” Remus crossed to the yellow-blotched door and tapped a finger against the ink. “Once we’re gone, this will fade.”

“Harry’s fire didn’t,” Aletha pointed out. “Why don’t you two use some of yours to make it permanent?”

“You read my mind, sister dear,” Remus said with a smile. Yellow fire blossomed in his palm, and he smeared it across the door as he might a handful of mud before turning to the red-stained door on his left to do the same. Danger dealt with the blue and the green, then transformed into her wolf form and sniffed.

“What’re you looking for?” Sirius asked.

Danger retransformed. “A familiar smell,” she said shortly. “And I found it. Stay here. Don’t leave this room until I call and tell you to.”

“What?” Remus started forward. “Danger, wait—”

Danger slipped through the door, closed it behind herself, and with a mental flick erased the green fire that had been highlighting this door as something special. A moment later, her husband’s voice was lost in the rumble of the room spinning up again.

Unless one of them thought to count doors, they won't find me in time.

Perfect.

She changed back to wolf and sniffed. Once was all she needed.

I would know my children's scents out of all the world.

And in a very twisted, wrong, unclean way, that man is my child.

Despite the fact that he is my sister's father.

And so, I suppose, my father as well, except that we share absolutely no blood...

A slim, brown-furred head shook violently. *Enough of this. Corner prey first. Think later.*

She loped forward, taking care to make no sound on the tiled floor below her paws.

xXxXx

Lucius Malfoy grinned at Bellatrix Lestrange. He knew the expression looked wolfish, but he had learned, in the month or so he had been free, that he need not care. His greatest fear—that his Lord would disregard him when he learned what Lucius had become—had been unfounded. Indeed, as contradictory as it seemed, his Master looked with favor on the change, or at least on portions of it.

He does not let me touch him, but he allows that to almost no one in any case. And the precautions around the full moon are stringent—so should they be, to keep me from harming anyone, myself included. I doubt any werewolf in these Isles is better cared for than I. Even Fenrir Greyback.

The thought of the half-feral pack leader sent a strange thrill through him. Perhaps, one day, he would defeat Greyback, defeat him and take the other's position, for was not Greyback superfluous now that he, Lucius Malfoy, had arrived? The Dark Lord required his services as a lieutenant, true enough, but why could he not combine that with leading the werewolves his Master would certainly want under his command?

And, of course, with my personal revenge. My Lord does not mind that I have my own special enemies among those who oppose him. I am sure he will delight, in fact, when I succeed in my little quests, for they will bring him his favorite type of entertainment.

It was a shame, really, that they couldn't afford to wait for the Dark Lord's arrival before they killed Arthur Weasley. But the Order of the Phoenix had already arrived. The blood-traitor must die now, before the Order could find them and stop them. Bella's wand was already aimed at the unconscious Muggle-lover's chest, her lips were opening to speak the words—

“Stop, ” said a woman's quiet voice.

Lucius froze where he was. Some deep part of his unconscious mind demanded that he submit, lie down and show his throat—

No! I will not be commanded by brute instinct!

Wrestling free of his compulsion, he leapt across the room and pinioned the woman, and only as she fell without resistance under his hands did he recognize her—

“*You*,” he hissed into her face. “I know you. I know what you did to me. I had plenty of time to recall. It was not the male, not the werewolf, which attacked me. It was the true wolf, the female. The Animagus. *You*.”

“I don’t deny it.” Brown eyes met his without a trace of mockery. “We gave the story the other way to keep me from becoming a medical curiosity. If I’d known I would infect you, though, I never would have bitten you.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Lucius snorted. “I doubt that.”

“So this is Lupin’s woman, then?” Bellatrix asked, coming up behind them. “I’d wondered what kind of fool would sleep with a werewolf. But of course I knew. A Muggle fool.” She laughed aloud, and Lucius spared a smile.

“And you’re Sirius’ cousin,” Granger-Lupin said. “We have a great deal in common, you know.”

“A great deal in common? You and I?” Bella drew back her foot and kicked Granger-Lupin in the side. The woman gasped.

“Easy, Bella,” Lucius cautioned. “If we have her alive, we have Lupin. And possibly your cousin and his Muggle as well. More important, though, we have Potter.”

“Yes, of course...” Bella’s smile widened. “Our little Potter-baby will come out right away when he sees his dear mummy in trouble...”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Granger-Lupin whispered, her face still twisted in pain. “You see, I’ve come here to stop you...”

An explosion at his chest, and Lucius felt himself soaring backwards until he hit the wall on the other side of the room. Half-stunned, he slid down to lie crumpled on the floor. His muscles would not respond to him, but he could still see and hear as Granger-Lupin rose to her feet, fire wreathing her figure. Bellatrix was backing away warily, her wand wavering from one side of the woman to the other.

“As you and I are both warrior women, I charge you, Bellatrix Black Lestrange,” Granger-Lupin intoned, then turned to look at Lucius. “And as you and I both bear the sign of the wolf, I charge you, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy...”

Lucius wanted to grind his teeth—the use of his full name made whatever she was doing here

magically binding on him, as was obviously her intent...

“And as all those here bear the mark of the serpent as do you both, I charge them through you...” Granger-Lupin lifted her hands. “...that you shall not kill nor permanently harm any here who fight or who have fought for us, whether they are part of the Order of the Phoenix or no. Though you mean to speak death, your spell shall not deliver it; though you mean to strike deep, your weapon shall glance off. So I speak, so I intend, and so...” A deep breath. “...so let it be done!”

The fire covering her body exploded outward, and Lucius knew no more.

xXxXx

Sirius knew the exact moment when Danger spoke in Remus' mind. That frozen pose, the half-listening cock of the head, all were signs he'd learned over their years together. “Can we go?” he asked eagerly.

“Yes. Go.” Remus was already running to a door, unmarked, but Danger must have told him which one. “She's made it so they can't kill,” he called back, “but be careful anyway...”

“They can't kill?” Aletha repeated. “I like that. Bringing everyone home from a battle. I wonder if she can do it again next time?”

“Probably not.” Sirius peered around at the doors. “Pick one, let's go. I'm not a crazy werewolf, so I want my backup right here beside me.”

“Don't call your brother names when he's not here to listen. It's a waste of effort.”

Sirius snorted and shoved open the door marked with red fire.

The chamber beyond was vast and cavernous, shaped like a natural amphitheater. Rough-hewn stone benches led down to a dais in the center. There, like the only piece of scenery for some strange and tragic play, stood a crumbling stone arch with a sheer black veil hanging within, as though to block the view of the area beyond. Its appearance seemed somehow familiar, as though he'd heard of it somewhere a long time ago.

“No cover I can see,” Aletha murmured at his back. “I don't think they're in here.”

“We'd better check behind that thing just in case.” Sirius stepped down carefully along the benches, staring at the archway as he went. The veil was fluttering—had someone just passed through the arch, to hide on its other side? And if they had, was it a Death Eater, or was it Sirius' godson?

“Sirius, let's go,” Aletha said more loudly. “There's no one here.”

“I just want to have a look.” Sirius leapt off the last bench and approached the arch slowly, wand at the ready. There was a strange, dull scent in here, it was masking any other odors that he might have caught, but he had a feeling that someone was lurking just behind this arch—

He stopped, listening. Were there voices back there, whispering together? Might it be two people hiding? There didn't seem to be enough cover for two, but perhaps if they were very good friends... and he thought he'd just seen a flutter of black cloth *behind* the arch, as though a piece of the veil had drifted out and around...

“Gaahh!” He jumped a foot as a hand touched his elbow.

“What is wrong with you?” Aletha demanded. “There is *no one here*. What are you doing?”

“Listening.” Sirius pointed at the arch. “Can't you hear the voices?”

Aletha turned, and her face went dreamy. “Yes,” she said quietly. “I just...wasn't listening properly, before...” She began to walk towards the archway, one slow step at a time.

“Wait.” Sirius caught at her arm this time, drawing her back. “Something's not right here. I don't think we should stay.”

Aletha shook her head and blinked a few times. “I agree. Check behind there, make sure there's no one, and we'll move on.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Sirius let go of her arm, watched to see her clear of the dais, then started walking back towards the archway—

“*Impello !*”

There was no time to dodge, but Sirius tried anyway. The spell, obviously intended for the middle of his back, hit him on the left shoulder blade and spun him completely around. He was falling backward—

Straight into the archway.

He grabbed hold of both sides of it and clung, off-balance and held up only by the grip of his hands, trying desperately not to think of how ridiculous he looked.

“Don't try anything, Freeman-Black,” shouted the voice which had cast the spell, the voice of Bartemius Crouch. “One word from me and he's through that veil. Gone forever. He should have been dead already, but you must have some protection I don't know about...”

“You murdering bastard,” Aletha hissed. “I *trusted* you.”

“Yes, I know.” Crouch sauntered down the benches with an ease that put the lie to his age. “That's the job of a spy. To make people trust him. And thanks to this little toy of Dumbledore's...” He tapped the pin in his lapel. “I can find others like it. Which is how I know exactly where Potter is, and the prophecy with him. When I deliver that to the Dark Lord, what do you think my reward will be?”

“You're mad,” Sirius gasped out, trying to keep his hold. The stones were old and slick, and his

fingers were sweating. One slip, and not even Danger's wild magic could keep him safe. Sheer panic had jogged his memory—he had heard of this thing, but only in the stories of Beedle the Bard, as another mythical object like the Sword of Decision or the Deathly Hallows.

It was called the Gateway to Hades.

“Mad I may be, but dead I do not intend to be. Unlike you.” Crouch stepped onto the dais and smirked. “Say goodnight, Sirius Black.”

Aletha's wand snapped into line with Crouch's back just as Crouch's found its bead on Sirius' chest. Together, they shouted the same words.

“Avada Kedavra!”

“NO!” screamed a third voice.

Everything went green, and Sirius felt himself fall—

And then there was nothing.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 24: Reciprocity (Year 5)

Somewhere nearby, a baby was crying.

Harry groaned aloud, rolling onto his side and curling up. *Merlin's wand, I hurt everywhere, it feels like I was practicing Wronski Feints and didn't pull up in time... what happened? Last thing I remember was looking at that stone archway, and being just about to touch that veil hanging in it...*

From what he could see, he was still in the archway room, but there hadn't been a baby here before, much less a screaming baby. Gritting his teeth, Harry dragged himself to his knees, then to his feet, shivering slightly as his pendants touched his chest. Where there was a baby, there had to be an adult to take care of it. He'd find them, he'd find out what was going on, and then maybe he'd get out of here...

He stepped around the corner of the archway and backed up involuntarily.

Streamers of silver light rushed past him into the archway, a gale-force wind made visible, dragging at him even where he stood out of its direct path. In the exact center of that gale lay a tiny, brown, naked baby, shrieking with indignation as the wind yanked at him. He'd fetched up against a slight projection in the stone dais, which was the only reason he hadn't yet been pulled through the archway, but Harry could see the small body starting to rise from the sheer force of the wind—any second now, the power of the wind would overcome the obstacle in its way, and the baby would be gone—

No! Harry leapt forward before he could think, throwing himself between the baby and the arch, sheltering the child with his own body.

Then the wind caught hold of him, and he realized what a bad move he'd just made.

How can I—

The wind tore even the thought from him, as it did all thoughts except holding on. Harry kicked out of his shoes and dug his toes into the rock, struggling to breathe against the rush of the wind, and carefully detached one arm to scoop up the baby, now wide-eyed and silent.

“Got you,” he breathed, cradling the infant to his chest. “Now we just have to—get out—”

“Animagus!” cried a woman's voice, almost inaudible over the furious scream of the cheated wind. “Use Wolf, Harry—use Wolf!”

Wolf. Good idea. But—

“Your robes,” a man called, a little louder than the woman, as though he were moving closer. “Use them like a cradle!”

Right. Harry undid the front clasp of his outer Hogwarts robes, then slid his top arm out of them, bracing harder with his toes to make up for the lost grip of his fingers. The next part would be the hardest—getting the robes out from under him without being dragged away in the process—

“Roll on your back,” the woman counseled, her voice now stronger as well. “Get your other arm out. Then pull the robes forward, slow and steady. Don’t rush.”

It seemed to take an hour, including one heart-stopping moment when Harry nearly lost his grip, but finally a crumpled pile of fabric lay before him. Harry lifted the baby again and laid him on top of the robes, then pulled as much cloth as possible to the top from both sides. *I’ll only get one shot at this...which way do I go?*

“Go to the side,” said the man’s voice, which was coming from behind him. “Small steps, keep your paws on the ground.” It sounded almost like Padfoot, but Harry didn’t have time to think about the ways he knew it wasn’t. The wind was getting stronger, if he didn’t start moving now he never would—

Planting hands and feet on the ground, he transformed. The effort pulled him up onto his paws, and the baby shrieked again as the wind caught at him—

No you don’t! Wolf snapped his jaws shut on the robes swathing the human cub, then began to shuffle forward in a strange parody of his usual movements. It wasn’t enough, he could feel the wind still dragging at him, he’d lose his balance in a moment—

Have to get low. He dropped to his belly, as though he were abasing himself before a wronged alpha. *Low. Low like worm. Or snake.*

Paws worked against the stone, and in a moment they were moving. The cub was wailing inside his improvised cradle, but Wolf didn’t have time to listen. He was focused on two things and two things only. *Stay low. Keep moving.* The world narrowed to those two things, it had never been anything else, he would be crawling out of this impossible wind forever—

And then his nose poked out of the edge of the wind, and his ears followed. A few seconds of frantic struggle later, Wolf lay panting beside the archway, the cub tucked between his paws, whimpering but settling down quickly. He would have to find the little one’s mother before much longer, but for now he was grateful they had survived the tempest.

We wouldn’t have, if it wasn’t for whoever told me what to do. Harry slipped back to the top of the mind without bothering to retransform. *I wish I knew who they were. I’d like to thank them.*

“No need to wish,” said the woman’s voice, coming from beside and all around him. “We’ll come to you.”

“You stay put,” the man added. “After what you just did, I don’t want to take any chances!”

Harry nodded, then concentrated on his human form. Whoever had helped him, he wanted to meet

them with his best face on. Besides, there was no point in giving too much away, even if they could read his mind.

He was about to pick up the baby when a noise made him look up—no, it wasn't a noise, it was the absence of one. The wind was gone.

That's odd. Where did it go?

Lifting the baby carefully in the crook of an arm, his hand under a fuzzy head—he remembered vaguely, from long ago, Letha telling him that he'd have to support Meghan's head because her neck wasn't strong enough yet to do it herself—Harry got to his feet and backed away from the arch, waiting for his benefactors to appear.

The black veil hanging in the arch fluttered once. Twice. Then it drew itself aside, and Harry yelped and hid his face with his free hand as a bright light from beyond it hit him square in the eyes.

“Sorry!” said the man's voice, sounding amused but also genuinely apologetic. “Sorry, hold on—here, love, you go first—”

“What a good idea,” said the woman acerbically. “Harry, don't look yet, we'll be there as soon as we can.”

Harry lowered his head, shielding his eyes, but his heart had started beating faster. A man and a woman who knew his name, who knew all about him, but whose voices he didn't recognize...

Footsteps in front of him, two sets of them, and then a hand on his shoulder. “You can look now,” the woman said gently. “It's all right.”

Harry looked up. The woman standing in front of him had dark red hair spilling down her back; her green eyes, fixed on his face, were filled with a joy so deep it was almost sorrow. A tall, thin man stood beside her, his black hair untidy in a way Harry knew well and wire-rimmed glasses shading hazel eyes which held the same emotion as the woman's. It was his hand on Harry's shoulder, and Harry knew now why he had thought the voice sounded like Padfoot.

“Mum?” he whispered. “Dad?”

xXxXx

Remus shoved through the final door, ignoring the freezing cold against his chest, his wand already leveled. “*Stupefy!*” he shouted.

“*Protego!*” Bellatrix Lestrange screamed, leaping back from the unconscious bodies of Danger and Arthur Weasley. “Come for your bitch, have you, werewolf?”

Remus dodged the reflected spell easily. “You never did understand, Bella,” he said, moving forward to stand over his wife and his friend. “Perhaps it hurts Lucius—” He nodded to the

slumped figure in one corner. “—but calling me what I am has never hurt me.”

“Because you’ve accepted your perversion!”

“Because I’ve accepted what’s happened to me, yes.” Remus kept his wand trained on Bella, waiting for the opening he knew would come. “It helps to have my family and my friends who accept it as well. And sufficient precautions taken on the full moon to be sure I don’t hurt anyone.”

“Hah!” Bellatrix laughed explosively. “Why waste the time? You’ll get out eventually. Bite someone. Oh, wait, I forgot.” Her death’s-head grin spread across her face. “You already did.” Anger flashed down to replace the smile. “But of course Dumbledore’s good little wolfy got away with a slap on the wrist.”

Remus chuckled. The sound seemed to take Bella by surprise.

“I am many things to Albus Dumbledore,” Remus said when he’d caught his breath. “A student, a supporter, and, I hope, a friend. But one thing I am not and have never been is his ‘good little wolfy.’” He glanced down at Danger and let a smile appear on his face. “You see…”

“Arrgh!” Bellatrix clutched her free hand in her hair, then spun and sent a spell at him. “*Incarcerous !*”

“*Oppilorbis !*” Remus countered, his block materializing in front of him and absorbing the spell. “So you mean you don’t want to hear details of my private life, Bella? What a shame… and I was in a sharing mood, too… *Stupefy!*”

“*Petrificus !*” Bellatrix shouted, nullifying his spell with another spell. “Keep talking, werewolf, every second brings the Dark Lord closer! You won’t play silly word games with him!”

“You’re quite right.” Remus lowered his wand slightly. “I have no intention of playing silly games with Voldemort.”

Bellatrix blanched. “You—you dare speak his name…”

“All the games I play with him will be entirely serious,” Remus finished. “*Expelliarmus !*”

“*Oppiltholus !*” Bella cried, her block appearing in a dome shape instead of Remus’ disc. “You dare to mock my Master! See how much you laugh at this! *Aguamenti Maxima!*”

xXxXx

“Hullo, son,” said James Potter, an odd smile touching his face.

“Oh, *Harry!*” Lily closed the distance between them with two steps and threw her arms around him. Harry hugged her back, as well as he could with only one arm, and then James was hugging them both, and everyone was crying, and then the baby in Harry’s other arm started crying too,

which broke up the hug.

“Hush, now, Marcus,” Lily ordered, tapping a finger gently on the baby’s nose. “Behave yourself.”

“Marcus?” Harry looked again at the baby, who looked back at him solemnly out of wide gray eyes. The same silver-gray he saw every time he looked at Meghan, or at Padfoot—

“Padfoot!” Everything came rushing back—he’d stumbled into the archway room and become mesmerized by the arch and the veil, listening to the whispers, watching the ripples—the sound of Padfoot’s name had broken him from his trance, and he’d looked around the side of the archway just in time to see Crouch with his wand leveled at Padfoot, Letha with her own trained at Crouch’s back, and two mouths moving in unison—he had his own wand in his hand, but he hadn’t shouted a spell, just a desperate “NO!” as he realized what was about to happen—

“Harry!” His father’s hands were on his shoulders, shaking him gently, bringing him into focus. “Harry, calm down. It’s all right. Sirius is all right.”

“That’s easy for you to say! You’re *dead!* ”

“For which reason, we know the difference among our friends,” Lily said firmly. “Believe me, Harry, we would know the instant Sirius Black crossed over to join us. Or Aletha, or Remus, or your Danger.” She smiled. “Who is, incidentally, part of the reason your godfather is all right.”

“How can he be all right?” Harry demanded. “Crouch used the Killing Curse! Unless...” He stopped, letting his mind and his ears catch up with his emotions. “What did Danger do?”

“She stopped any of the Death Eaters’ curses from killing or maiming anyone who’s fighting with you,” said James, letting Harry go. “Thus, Crouch’s curse couldn’t kill Sirius. It would still have knocked him through the arch, though, and he’d have been gone then in any case.”

“It would have knocked him through the arch if he hadn’t been shielded, that is,” Lily added, holding out her arms. “Here, Harry, give me Marcus. I think he’s hungry, and he could certainly use something to wear.”

“What? Oh. Right.” Absently, Harry handed his mother the baby. “But who shielded him? If Letha was trying to get Crouch...”

“Silly boy.” Lily chuckled, pulling a nappy from the pocket of her robes and laying Marcus down on the bench behind Harry. “You did. Don’t you remember shouting out?”

“But I didn’t say a spell!”

“Sometimes you don’t have to,” James said, turning to regard the archway.

Harry looked down at his hands. “Do you mean I did wandless magic?”

“Did you have your wand out?” James asked, turning back with a grin.

“Well. Yeah.”

“Then no, obviously it wasn’t wandless magic. But it was magic done outside the usual boundaries the wizarding world sets. As is this.” James waved a hand at the four of them. “Which I hope you already knew.”

“No, not at all,” Harry retorted. “Rescuing my baby brother who isn’t born yet from a giant magical vacuum cleaner, having my dead parents tell me how to do it... all sounds perfectly normal to *me* .”

“Ouch.” James winced. “I’ll have to have a word with Sirius when I do see him. He’s been letting Letha teach you to be sarcastic.”

“Be realistic, James,” said Lily, bouncing Marcus in her arms. “Since when did Sirius ‘let’ Aletha do anything?”

“You have a point.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile. “So where is Padfoot?” he asked.

“He’s right there.” James pointed to the foot of the archway. “We just can’t see him.”

xXxXx

Somewhere nearby, a woman was crying.

Sirius groaned aloud, trying to push himself upright. *That’s Letha, she’s hurt, I have to get to her...*

Wait. Am I dead? I’m supposed to be dead.

I don’t feel dead. I feel... bruised. And cold. And worried.

But I’m supposed to be dead...

OK. I’ll look at myself. If I’m white and transparent, I’m dead. If not... well, deal with not if not happens. One, two, three—

Sirius opened one eye. He was not white and transparent.

Then he looked up.

The arch of the Gateway to Hades stretched over him.

I think that I will now move forward. Very, very carefully.

And then I will faint.

That was probably the closest call in the history of the world.

xXxXx

Harry thought over possibilities and came up with one he didn't much like. "Does that mean... if I can't see live people... am I dead?"

"No!" James and Lily said at the same time, vehemently, then looked at each other in surprise. James made a little circular motion with his hand, a "go on" gesture, and Lily continued. "You're not dead, Harry. Look at yourself. Does this remind you of anything?"

"Um..." Harry looked down at his body. It looked normal to him, except—

"My cord!"

"Precisely." Lily pointed to the slim silver line trailing away from Harry's left wrist. "What does that tell you?"

"I'm... out walking?" Harry shook his head. "That doesn't make sense. I didn't say the words, I didn't try to leave my body—"

"What you did," James said, "was get hit with the back-blast from a reflected Killing Curse. Because you'd been out walking recently, the shock was enough to throw you out of your body again, but because you've been fighting, Danger's magic protected you from the full force of it."

"Which means it couldn't kill you," Lily finished. "And it couldn't kill the person it hit, either."

Harry frowned. "I thought you said it didn't hit Padfoot."

"It didn't." Lily had her head bent over Marcus, who had his toes in his mouth. "Your shield reflected it away from him."

"Crouch, then? No, you said it couldn't kill the person it hit..." Harry felt his stomach sink. "It hit Letha, didn't it?"

Both his parents nodded. "It is not your fault, Harry," James said, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder again. "I want you to understand that. What happened is not your fault at all."

"But if it didn't kill her, then what happened that's so bad?" Harry asked. "I don't understand."

"Danger's magic could only protect the people who were fighting, Harry," said Lily. "There was someone in that room who couldn't fight. That is who the Killing Curse took effect on."

"But there were only four people there. Padfoot, Letha, Crouch, and me."

"Five," Lily corrected without lifting her head. "There were five people there."

Harry looked at her, then down to where she was looking.

Marcus gurgled cheerfully and switched feet.

xXxXx

Sirius hoisted himself forward until he was well clear of the arch, then crawled past Crouch's crumpled form towards Aletha. She knelt near the first row of benches, her face hidden in her hands, a dark pool of liquid spreading around her robes—

Oh, Merlin's wand, no—

“Letha!” Sirius went to his knees beside her. “Letha, look at me, talk to me, love. Where is it? Where are you hurt?”

“S-Sirius?” Aletha raised her head and stared at him, disbelief naked in her eyes. “Sirius—no, I saw you fall, and the pendants—”

“I fell, all right. Straight down. I'm still here.” Sirius caught one of her hands and winced at the chill of her skin. “Letha, you're bleeding, and your hands are freezing. What happened to you?”

“To me?” Aletha began to laugh, great tearing laughs that sounded more like sobs than her crying had. “Nothing. Nothing's happened to *me*. Danger's magic—oh, yes, it protected *me* from the Killing Curse...”

“How could you get hit with the Killing Curse? You threw one at Crouch, Crouch threw one at me —”

“There was someone else here.” Aletha's hand shaped circles in the air above her head. “A third spell, a shield—I don't know. It came from somewhere. It couldn't kill *me*, but I wasn't alone...”

Her free hand slid across her belly, forlornly, as though she would cradle something no longer there.

xXxXx

“But...” The room had gone very cold, and Harry's lips didn't seem to want to work. “He's just a baby,” he forced out after a moment. “He isn't even *born* yet.”

“Which is probably why a reflected curse still killed him,” James said quietly.

“*He's not dead!*” Harry shouted, rounding on his father. “He *can't* be!”

James met Harry's eyes. “I wish we had some way to change it. But what's done is done, Harry. Marcus is dead.”

Harry's throat tightened, and he squeezed his eyes shut. A moment later, his father's arms were

around him, holding him, comforting him.

“It’s not *fair*,” he choked out into James’ shoulder.

“I know.” The arms tightened briefly, then released.

“He never even had a chance to live.”

Squeeze, relax. “I know.”

“I mean, what was the point?” Harry demanded. “What was the point in my saving him? What was the point in him *living*, if he was just going to die anyway?”

James shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Ha!” Harry dredged up a grin and plastered it on. It felt awful and fake, but he held it anyway. “Made you change!”

“Heh. So you did.” James smiled back. “I used to play that game with your godfather, you know.”

“I know.”

xXxXx

The message had gone out, and the DA was starting to arrive in the Room of Requirement. Ginny sat by herself in a corner of the room, her legs curled under her, her hand around her pendants.

“Something wrong, Gin?” Ron asked, bending down to meet her eyes.

Ginny shook her head. “Something was,” she said. “When the pendants were so cold, a minute or two ago. But then they warmed up again, and now something’s right. Whatever’s happening to Harry, it’s more happy than sad.”

“That’s great. D’you know what it is?”

“No. Just that it’s good.”

Ron shrugged. “Better than nothing, I suppose.”

“What is?” Hermione asked, joining them.

“I know something good is happening to Harry,” Ginny said, “but I don’t know what.”

“I hope he’s being rescued,” Hermione said, shivering briefly. “What if they’re too late? What if all that cold was for him?”

“Then his carving would have lit up instead of that all-over glow we got, and he wouldn’t be having good things happen to him now, would he?” Ron said reasonably. “Harry always comes out

all right, Hermione. He could fall in the lake and come out dry.”

“Of course he could. He’d just heat his clothes until they dried out.”

Ron grimaced. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Of course not.” Hermione grinned. “I just love—”

“Won-Won!” squealed a girlish voice from behind them.

“Seeing you with Lavender,” Hermione finished, her grin converting instantly to a rictus.

Ginny caught Hermione’s eye and beckoned her closer. “There’s enough room in my ‘something wonderful’ for two,” Ginny said, holding up her pendant chain. “Join me?”

“Please.” Hermione cast a scathing look at Ron, who was backing away from Lavender under a barrage of questions about Harry, none of which Lavender was giving him time to answer. “Before they start snogging.”

Ginny handed Hermione a loop of chain. “Enjoy.”

And you, brother of mine, need to figure this out pretty fast before this beautiful girl gets tired of waiting...

xXxXx

“Let’s go see your mum, how about?” James suggested.

Harry let himself be led over to where Lily still sat, Marcus in her arms. She stood up, handed the baby to James, and embraced Harry herself.

“Something funny about this,” Harry mumbled into her hair.

“Oh?”

“First time I’ve hugged you... at least, to remember it... and I’m taller than you are.”

“Such a fine big boy oo is!” Lily teased, reaching up and rumpling Harry’s hair. Her smile turned wistful, then shrank away altogether. “You were such a sweet baby. And such a wonderful little boy. I only wish...”

“I know.” Harry looked from his mother to his father. “I don’t want to sound horrible,” he said hesitantly, “but if I say what I’m thinking, I will.”

“Say it anyway,” said James, swaying back and forth on his feet, Marcus cradled to his chest.

“I’ve... never missed you. Not because I didn’t want you for parents, but just because...” Harry’s

tongue tripped over its own words, and he shook his head helplessly.

“Because you had four of the best foster parents any child could ask for?” Lily finished for him. “Harry, we’re not hurt in the least. We’re glad.”

“You are?”

Both Potters nodded. “We’d rather you be happy,” said James. “And you are. You always have been.”

Lily winked. “We’ve been watching.”

“I always knew who you were,” Harry said, piecing the feelings together as he spoke the words. “But I’ve always known who my parents are, too. And I think because I don’t remember you, but I *did* have parents who loved me, that now I can meet you like this, and... it doesn’t hurt.” He smiled, watching the smile echoed on his father’s face, seeing it dance in his mother’s eyes. “I’m glad to have met you. I’ll never forget it. And I do love you.”

“We’ve never doubted that,” Lily murmured.

“But it isn’t going to haunt me that we can’t be together after this,” Harry went on. “I won’t do anything stupid. Because... as much as I love you, I have a lot of other people to love too. And I know they love me back. Not that you don’t, but...”

“But they’re in your world,” James said. “And we’re not. We’re always watching over you, but we can’t be there for you the way your Pack can.”

“Yes.” Harry paced back and forth once. “Am I making any sense?”

“Quite a lot,” Lily said, reaching out her hand to clasp Harry’s. The sleeve of her robe slipped up, revealing a green stone bracelet on her wrist, elegantly carved in the form of a snake. “I think we’d be upset if anything else were the case.”

“We were actually hoping you’d say something like it,” James continued, changing grips on Marcus to take the hand of Harry’s Lily wasn’t already holding. “Because... Harry, have you ever heard of the Law of Reciprocity?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Ask Moony about it. It’s a magical law, but what it basically amounts to is ‘tit for tat.’ Fair trading. If you get mine, I get yours.”

“What your father is trying to say,” Lily interjected with a smile, “is that since Sirius and Aletha have taken such good care of you—loved you as if you were their own blood son—that we can now do the same for their son. For Marcus.”

“Until we’re no longer needed,” James added, a strange look on his face, as though he were

listening to something Harry couldn't hear.

"But we wouldn't have been here in time to take him if it hadn't been for you, Harry," Lily finished. "So that is the point in you saving him. You saved him for us."

xXxXx

Remus slumped against the door, coughing. His chest hurt in the way that meant there was still water in his lungs somewhere, but he knew he'd get it out eventually. Arthur, Danger, and Malfoy were all crumpled on the floor nearby, their breathing slow but regular.

I shouldn't have gone back for Malfoy. That was what nearly did me in. Bella left him when she'd triggered off that spell—why couldn't I?

Danger stirred, moaning slightly, and Remus reached out and took her hand.

But that's what makes us different from them. They'll leave anyone behind, and we... won't.

My enemy or not, my son's father or not, I couldn't leave him in there to drown. He snorted wearily. Besides, now he owes me his life. I wonder if I could collect by forcing him to leave the Death Eaters?

An oddity caught Remus' eye. Danger and Arthur lay quiescent, except for Danger's one moment of mobility. Malfoy, though... why were his eyes moving, under their lids?

xXxXx

Harry squeezed his mother's hand, then let go of it and stepped closer to his father, looking at Marcus. The baby had his eyes shut and one fist against his mouth, as though he wanted to suck his thumb but couldn't figure out where it was.

"We'll miss you," Harry said, stroking the side of Marcus' face. Marcus opened one grey eye, regarded Harry for a second, then closed it again and sighed deeply.

"That's baby for, 'get back to me later, I have napping to do,'" said James, chuckling. "And you have work of your own, Harry. A certain Dark Arse is on his way—ow!"

"Not in front of the boys," Lily said as James rubbed the back of his head with his free hand. "As your father was saying," she continued to Harry, "Voldemort is on his way here. Think about what he knows, and what he expects. You may be able to catch him out."

"And give our best to everyone," James said. "We're keeping an eye out for them."

Harry nodded, his throat tightening once more. "Will..." He coughed. "Will I see you again?"

"I think at least once or twice before everything's over," said Lily, pulling him into an embrace. "We're hard to get rid of, you know."

“Voldemort himself had to try three times,” James added, putting an arm around the outside of the hug. “I don’t think you’ll have any better luck than that.”

“I don’t want better luck than that.” Harry closed his eyes and hugged his parents, letting himself believe for one instant that this was the way it had always been.

Not that the way it has been is so much worse, it’s just...

Well, Padfoot and Moony and Letha always said I would have loved them. Now I know they were right.

After some fraction of forever, the Potters let go of each other. “I have to go,” Harry said, starting to walk towards the side of the archway that hid his body. “I love you.”

“We know.” *Go get ‘em, tiger*, James signed with his free hand. “We’ve always known.”

“We love you too,” said Lily. A grin sparkled into being on her face. “Go kick his arse for me, Harry.”

James Potter turned on his wife. “Oh, so you’re allowed to say it? How come you’re allowed to say it and I’m not allowed to say it?”

Lily planted her hands on her hips. “I’m allowed to say it because I know when to say it. You, on the other hand, will throw it into every conversation if I let you.”

Harry fought back a laugh and started fitting himself back inside his body. He had a Dark Lord to fight, a prophecy to guard, and a message to deliver.

xXxXx

Draco leaned his back against one of the walls of the Room of Requirement, which obligingly molded itself to the contours of his spine. Ginny and Hermione were sitting side by side up front, identical expressions of worry-flavored bliss on their faces. Ron was off in a private corner with Lavender; no one with any sense had any question what *they* were doing. Neville and Meghan were whispering together in low tones with Meghan’s cadre of younger students in the DA, most of whom had arrived before their older peers. And Luna was—

“Boo,” said a voice behind him.

Draco turned to smile at her. “I was just thinking about you.”

“I know.” Luna sat down on his lap. “I can feel it.”

“You can?”

Luna nodded. “I can feel all your thoughts,” she said. “I just don’t know what most of them mean. I know me, because it’s the way your mind feels whenever we kiss. But I don’t know almost any

others.”

“Almost?”

Luna giggled and clapped her hands over her mouth, shaking her head in wide arcs. Back and forth, back and forth, back and—

She stopped. The hands came down.

“What is it?” Draco asked.

“I don’t know.” Luna frowned. “Nothing, I think it’s nothing. Just a bad thought, and now it’s gone. False alarm.”

“Oh, good.” Draco ran a hand through her hair, reveling in its feel over his skin. “Where did you see this bad thought?”

“Hermione.”

“Huh.” Draco stroked Luna’s hair once more, then lifted her out of his lap and stood up. “Let’s go see her, then.”

“Let’s.”

Hermione opened her eyes as they approached. “Is everyone here yet?”

“Almost,” Draco said, dropping cross-legged to the carpet beside her. “We’re just waiting for a few of the older Ravenclaws.”

“Ginny was right.” Hermione lifted the younger girl’s chain off her head. “Something wonderful happened to Harry. It was tied up with something very sad, but...” She shrugged. “There aren’t words for it.”

Draco held out a hand. “Show me, then.”

“All right.” Hermione took his hand in her own and opened her mind, letting a torrent of emotions crash through—joy, disbelief, wonder, shock, sorrow, anger, determination, and underlying it all, love. Not quite the love of the Pack, not as interwoven or as age-strengthened, but it varied by such a tiny amount that only someone as attuned to the Pack’s love as Draco and Hermione could have felt the distinction at all.

“Yeah,” Draco breathed. “Yeah, that’s good, all right.” *But good with bad right in the middle of it...*

Beside him, Luna made a small, wondering sound. “Did you just have a bad thought, Draco?” she asked.

“Sort of. Why?”

“It felt the same as Hermione’s looked. I was just wondering.”

xXxXx

Silently, he withdrew, well pleased with what he’d been able to accomplish. The worry the pair were feeling over their absent ‘brother,’ combined with the momentary link between his own magic and another’s, had allowed him just that little crucial way in. Not enough to influence them directly, but enough to plant the tiniest of hooks into them.

From now on, wherever they went, he would know.

And one day, when they were least expecting it, there he would be.

Just as I promised, my son. I will take you back.

And once you are mine, you will never be another’s. Ever again.

xXxXx

“We probably had just about the same bad thought, Luna,” Hermione said. “Wondering what Harry felt that made him sad and angry, even in the middle of being so happy.”

“Someone’s dead,” Ginny said distantly.

“What?” The question came from all directions, including the door, where the absent Ravenclaw members of the DA had just arrived.

Ginny opened her eyes and got to her feet, moving with no trace of the stiffness Draco was sure she was feeling after so long in the same position. “You all know by now that Umbridge kidnapped Harry,” she said without preamble. “You might not know, but I’m sure most of you guessed, that she took him to the Ministry. What you don’t know is that people went after him, to try to rescue him. His parents, my parents, Professor McGonagall, Professor Longbottom, and a lot of other people. And what I didn’t know until just a moment ago is that someone has died there.”

A ripple of surprise and worry fluttered around the room.

“Professor Dumbledore spoke to me, on behalf of all of us,” Ginny said, turning her head slowly to encompass the entire room. “He asked us to stay here. To stay safe, out of the fighting. But he also told me that after tonight, he would never ask us that again.”

The area of floor on which Ginny was standing had begun to elevate, Draco noticed. She was a few inches above the DA now and still rising.

“With Umbridge gone from Hogwarts, we can come out of the shadows.” Ginny’s eyes fixed on

the far wall, as though she could see beyond the stone and mortar into the future. “We can become the core of the new Defense program at Hogwarts, because we are going to need one. After tonight, at least to Professor Dumbledore, we aren’t just students anymore. We are fighters.”

“He told you that?” blurted Zacharias Smith. “Is he crazy? We can’t fight You-Know-Who!”

“That’s what he’s counting on,” said Ron from the back of the room, drawing all eyes to himself. “That attitude. ‘I’m just a kid, I can’t do anything.’ But look at us. Look what we did. We got this thing together, we made it work, and we’re good. We’re not Aurors, no one’s going to expect us to be, but we can at least put up a fight if we have to.”

“That’s what the DA is all about,” Hermione picked up the thread, stepping up onto Ginny’s dais. “About training all of us to fight as best we can. Not to take the place of the adults, but to free them up to do what only they can do, because they won’t have to worry about us being helpless without them.”

“And sometimes we can do things they can’t,” Neville added. “Things they wouldn’t think of, things they don’t know about, or even things we can get away with because nobody pays attention to kids.”

“It’s what we have that they don’t,” said Luna, her gaze roaming the crowd. “We work together without someone telling us to. Even against someone telling us *not* to. And with all our minds and all our magic together, we’re strong. We can help win the war.”

“And this is a war,” Ginny said, drawing all eyes back to her. “The Second War against Voldemort. The Ministry doesn’t want to believe it, the *Prophet* doesn’t want to talk about it, but that’s what it is.” She paused, one hand on her pendants. “And I think by tomorrow everyone will know about it. Whether they want to or not.”

“So... what can we do?” asked Hannah Abbott into the silence.

“We can plan,” Draco said, squeezing Hermione’s hand and letting go. “Wars are usually about getting hold of important places. If you can get enough of the enemy’s without letting him get too many of yours, then you win. And we’re standing in one of the most important right now.”

“Of course it is,” said Ernie Macmillan. “Everyone in the wizarding world went to Hogwarts. People make friends, get promotions, decide who to marry, based on what House they were in. It would be awful if the castle got taken over.”

Murmurs of agreement filled the room.

“And that’s not even mentioning all the students!” Amanda Smythe said strongly. “Seven years’ worth of the wizarding population of Britain is right here. And almost everyone who’ll be fighting has children here, or nephews or nieces or brothers or sisters or *something*. What if they knew that if they kept fighting, we would die?”

Silence, except for nervous swallows and shuffling feet.

“That’s why we have to fight,” said Ginny, jumping down from her dais. “That’s why we will fight. And that’s why we will win.” She grinned. “Of course, we’ll also win because we have a castle. And we know how to use it.”

Laughter swept through the DA. Draco chuckled, but also called up his internal image of the castle. There were doors and secret passages all through the place, but as long as the defenders knew about them all and kept them covered...

She’s right. With a good defense plan and strong leaders, we could hold out at Hogwarts forever.

He caught Amanda’s eye and gave her a thumbs-up. *Good for you, bringing up hostages. They’ve proved they’ll do it if they get the chance. Let’s not give them any more.*

Amanda smiled back at him, and Draco felt his heart squeeze a little. *Beautiful, smart, and funny... this isn’t fair, really it isn’t...*

“What are you thinking about now?” Luna asked in his ear.

“Uh.” Draco wrenched his eyes away from Amanda. “Nothing.”

“So that’s what nothing feels like,” Luna said ruminatively. “I’ll have to remember that.”

Mentally, Draco hammered the heel of his hand against his forehead.

Why does my heart have to be an idiot?

xXxXx

Albus Dumbledore opened the door still marked with a dim smear of red fire and stepped inside. The members of the Order of the Phoenix had spread out through the Department of Mysteries, finding and battling the Death Eaters, fortified by Remus’ word that there was a general spell in place that would not let them be killed here tonight.

But it seems there has been a death in any case.

Aletha knelt on the stone floor, blood trickling away from her, her arms around Harry and sobs shaking her frame. Harry was speaking to her in a low tone, too low for Dumbledore to hear, but the fact that his young Gryffindor was giving rather than receiving comfort raised Dumbledore’s hopes of a good ending to this night.

Or as good as can be arranged.

Sirius stepped out from behind the door and lowered his wand. “Albus,” he said, nodding.

“Sirius.” Dumbledore nodded to Aletha and Harry. “It is Marcus, then?”

“Yes.” Sirius’ voice nearly cracked on the word, but he kept it steady. “Yes. Marcus.” A deep breath, let out slowly. “But if Harry’s to be believed, he’s in the best possible hands. He says... he says he saw James and Lily. That they came to him, spoke to him. That they took Marcus with them, and they’ll take care of him. Because we took care of Harry...” He trailed off, his eyes fixed on Dumbledore.

“Do you see a reason to doubt Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

“No, of course not... it’s just... it seems so...”

“Unbelievable?” Dumbledore started down the steps, hearing Sirius fall in beside him. “All things are unbelievable until they are believed. Think of Lily Potter’s love for her son, and all that it has done for him. No, Sirius, I do not find this hard to believe.”

They reached the floor. Sirius went immediately to Aletha, taking her in his arms, and she released Harry, running a hand through his hair before she turned to Sirius and laid her head on his shoulder. Harry got to his feet, straightened up slowly, then crossed to Dumbledore. “Sir,” he acknowledged with a brief nod of his head.

“I am glad to see you well, Harry.” Dumbledore knew the boy would hear in his voice the things he dared not say in words.

“I’m glad to be well, sir. Thank you for sending Fawkes. But I need to talk to you.” Harry put a hand inside his robes and drew out—

“This changes things,” Dumbledore said dryly, regarding the one thing Voldemort wanted almost more than he wanted Harry Potter himself.

“Not necessarily, sir.” Harry lifted his head and met Dumbledore’s eyes. “Nothing good has happened to us so far tonight. I’d like to change that.”

“And you have an idea.”

“Yes, sir, I do.” Harry’s grin was pure wolf. “If you’ll help me set up for it, I think I can sucker Voldemort.”

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Facing Danger

Chapter 25: Debts and Payments (Year 5)

The Atrium of the Ministry of Magic echoed to the tinkling of falling water from the golden fountain at its center and the tuneless humming of the person sitting beside the fountain's basin, rolling a glass ball back and forth on the floor. He wore a rumpled Hogwarts uniform and round-framed glasses, and his black hair was in disarray, as though he had been through a windstorm. He showed no awareness of being watched, or of anything besides the orb beneath his hand.

This is a trap, whispered the watcher's internal voice of caution. Both the boy and the prophecy, alone and unwatched? Bait, they are bait, they can be nothing else—I should leave at once, Dumbledore is already here—

“Well!” said a female voice from the other side of the Atrium, sharp under its veneer of sweetness. “So this is where you got to!”

Harry Potter stiffened for an instant, then snatched up his ball and scrambled to his feet. A wordless moan escaped him as he backed slowly away from the woman at the door, shoving his free hand repeatedly in front of him.

“Oh, hush,” Dolores Umbridge said impatiently, coming forward just enough that both Potter and the watcher from the shadows could see her. “You’ve been very naughty, and you know it. Running away from the nice safe room where I left you, breaking into all sorts of places, stealing Ministry property...”

Potter whimpered, hugging the orb to his chest with one hand while the other continued its warding-off motions.

“Now, now, there’s no need for all that.” Umbridge advanced on Potter, a smile breaking free on her face. “Just give me back what you’ve taken, and everything will be all right again. I’ll bring your family here, and your friends, to see you. Wouldn’t you like that?”

Potter continued backing around the fountain, his eyes showing fear and incomprehension in equal measure.

He seems not to understand her. And he has not spoken a word since she arrived.

I wonder...

Cautiously, the watcher reached out along the mental bond he normally kept blocked. He had last done so only a short time before, and he had found, as promised, cacophony and confusion.

Could it have taken effect so quickly?

It seemed it could. The mind he now touched seethed in wordless terror, with no coherent thoughts of any kind present. Even in the mind of the most frightened Muggle he had ever used his

Legilimency on, a few fragmented thought-forms or memory images had existed. There was nothing here except an overwhelming fear of Dolores Umbridge.

But no, wait... memories, there are memories, though not many... a bewildered boy awakening in a place of blank white, wandering through a series of rooms, every one stranger than the next, until finally...

The entrance hall, the Chamber of Time, and the Chamber of Prophecy. A sequence much on my mind lately. And I felt him in my thoughts, and followed him to his own mind—

Where he had encountered the spell-induced chaos for which he had bargained through his triple agent, the chaos which seemed to have had its desired effect.

Could my line of thought have survived his mind's destruction, and taken him to my goal? I had intended to have my Death Eaters use him for fetching the prophecy, but to have him bring it to me on his own...

The watcher withdrew his mental contact and smiled.

I will use it to taunt Dumbledore, before I kill him—that his champion was so weak that Umbridge's spell destroyed his mind, and I am so strong that a thought of mine survived that spell and guided Harry Potter to his doom...

Reaching into his robes for his wand, he stepped from the shadows into the light. It was time to claim what was his.

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“If you do not stop, Mr. Potter, I will have to use magic on you,” Dolores warned, though secretly she was delighted that nothing she was saying could garner a response from Harry Potter. She had known that the spell she had developed might well drive him mad, by forcing him to constantly doubt his senses until he retreated within himself, but she had never hoped it would have that effect so quickly.

And even his escape from custody can be explained by his present mental state. He is a child again, and children do wild magic when they feel threatened. He felt threatened by being locked in, and therefore his magic melted the lock on the door of his room to release him. He must have struck me down from behind when I was speaking to Bartemius as well, but I have no doubt his subconscious desire for punishment was behind my quick revival...

She would have to remind the Healers at St. Mungo's to keep up the anti-magic spells on Potter's room, or perhaps to keep him under calming potions at all times. The potions might be a better idea, now that she thought about it, since they would have the knock-on effect of concealing any possible return of his sanity that might result from the lifting of her spell.

“Really, Mr. Potter,” she said aloud, reaching for her wand and delighting in the fresh spasm of

terror in the boy's eyes as they followed her hand. "Do be reasonable. You can't possibly escape me, not here..."

Movement to one side caught her attention. Someone was here, stepping from the shadows, here was her first chance to share her triumph—

Dolores froze as the paper-white skin, the noseless face, the slitted red eyes, registered in her mind. It could not be. This was a hoax, someone trying to frighten her, possibly one of the boy's friends. She would not allow it to succeed.

"You are on Ministry premises after hours without permission," she said, pleased to hear her voice firm if a bit squeaky. "Identify yourself and state your purpose here."

"I am Lord Voldemort," said a soft, cold voice, "and I have come here for Harry Potter."

Dolores felt a shiver pass through her, but managed a good sniff once it was past. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Ridiculous. He's been dead for fourteen years, as anyone with any intelligence knows. And Harry Potter—out of the question. As you can see, he's quite ill and needs the immediate attention of a Healer." She nodded towards the boy, who had retreated around the edge of the fountain and was peering at both of them warily from around the robes of the witch.

"'Ill,' is he?" mocked the voice, as the tall figure advanced on her too smoothly to be walking. "And when did he first fall prey to this illness? When you pointed your wand at him and spoke the incantation to scramble his senses?"

"When I—how dare you!" Dolores backed away a few steps, hoping the fear in her voice sounded like indignation. "Harry Potter was a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the school for which I am High Inquisitor, and therefore he was under my protection and guidance! How dare you insinuate that I might have harmed a student for whom I was, for whom I still am, responsible?"

The laugh chilled her spine and sent her backwards three more steps. "I dare to insinuate only what is true. You see, I gave you the idea for what you have done. Is it so surprising I should know what it is under those circumstances?"

"You—you—"

"I owe you a debt of gratitude for delivering my young enemy, and the prophecy which will tell me how to deal with him, into my hands," the voice went on, its owner now gazing up at the Fountain of Magical Brethren with a thoughtful expression. "And I find your creativity and energy refreshing. Would you be willing to join me, to take my Mark? I will give you the power to control any or all of those around you, to tell them precisely what they may and may not do. You could be Minister of Magic for Life, or take any other post you wished." Red eyes fixed on hers, caught and held her as surely as any spell. "What do you say? Will you join me?"

Half of Dolores yearned eagerly towards what she was hearing, while her other half fled shrieking

from the horror of that half-human face. Neither half could find dominance, and so she stood trembling, unable to speak, unable to move, able only to stare into the eyes of the Dark wizard she had denied was alive and discover there the one unthinkable truth—that she, and the Ministry through her, had been wrong.

It cannot be, her mind repeated over and over. It cannot be.

“I see.” Was there a trace of regret in that cold, quiet voice? “You wish that you could still believe I did not exist, that you could somehow forget you have seen me.” A thin-lipped, predatory smile, and now his voice and face held nothing but the implacable certainty of a glacier moving steadily forward. “I share that wish, as it happens. Let me help you make it come true.”

His wand flicked up and pointed directly at her chest. “*Avada Kedavra!*”

Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, Hogwarts High Inquisitor, died before she could believe that it was happening.

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Lord Voldemort lowered his wand and watched as Harry Potter tiptoed around the back curve of the tasteless golden fountain. The boy was staring open-mouthed at the motionless figure of Dolores Umbridge lying on the floor.

Somewhere in his broken mind, he retains the association of her with pain and fear. I wonder if the same holds true for me?

“Harry,” he said quietly, and the boy looked up at the sound. Wide green eyes blinked once, twice, three times, and then Umbridge’s body drew his attention away from Voldemort once more.

It would seem not. Perhaps I can convince him to give me the prophecy without my having to harm him—he might be useful, if he is trainable. Even if he is not, he will be amusing to have around. I can dangle him as bait for his so-loving family, allow them to “break my defenses” and reach him, and watch them discover that their prize is already lost to them before I step in and take them captive as well...

Potter was circling Umbridge warily, nudging her with his toe, looking more and more puzzled as she failed to react. After a few nudges that verged towards being outright kicks, he gave up on Umbridge and looked back over at Voldemort, his face open and curious.

“Yes, I did this,” Voldemort acknowledged. “Do you know what you should say to me?”

Potter wrinkled his forehead, frowning, as if he were wondering what the strange sounds coming from Voldemort’s mouth could be.

“I will accept a material token of gratitude in lieu of any other,” Voldemort went on, allowing himself a chuckle at the gloriously ridiculous nature of this scene. It would be a gem among the tales his followers told their children, the crown jewel of the collection, and there would be many

of them. “What about that ball you carry?” He pointed to the object, held loosely in Potter’s left hand.

Potter clutched the ball possessively to his chest.

“Come now,” Voldemort coaxed, moving a step closer.

Clapping his other hand around the prophecy as well, Potter growled and backed away.

“Very well, give it to her, then.” Voldemort motioned with his wand to Umbridge, lying in her undignified sprawl on the Atrium’s dark wood floor. “Consider it an offering to the dead, if you like.”

Potter frowned again, looking from Umbridge to the orb and back again.

“I will stand back here.” Voldemort took three large steps away from Umbridge’s body and Potter. “You see, I cannot possibly reach you from here. I will not harm you.” *Not yet.*

Keeping one eye on Voldemort at all times, Potter edged forward until he stood beside Umbridge. Slowly, he knelt and placed the prophecy on her chest. It began to roll as soon as he took his hand away, and he tugged her robes into a fold on the side it had rolled to, then repeated the action on the other side when the orb began to roll that way instead. Finally, the prophecy lay in a nest of cloth, and Potter stood up with an expression of satisfaction. Humming to himself, he hop-skipped to the fountain, where he sat down on the edge of the basin and began to splash in the water with both hands.

Voldemort waited a few moments, until the boy was fully occupied with his childish pastime, before he allowed himself to come forward and claim the first of his prizes. In his hand at long last rested the prophecy, the full prophecy, which would tell him if the boy were fated to kill him, in which case Potter must die immediately, or whether their lives were in some way linked, in which case Potter would live a very long time indeed.

I wonder if I can split his soul artificially, to make a Horcrux for him? Perhaps a Killing Curse deliberately understrength would do the trick...

But there will be time to think of that when I know if it will be needed or not.

Let me find out.

He laid his wand against the globe and split it precisely open with a small, neat spell.

Then he screamed.

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The sound of smashing glass as the halves of the globe fell to the floor snapped the spell shielding Harry’s mind, and he snatched his pendants from his pocket with his left hand while his right

came out of the fountain basin in a rush of water clutching his wand. *It worked. It worked. Whatever I'm doing, it worked...*

Voldemort doubled up, shrieking in agony, as fierce red flames clung to his wand hand, charring and withering the flesh on the bone. Harry paused only to throw the pendants over his head before he was on his feet, wand trained on Voldemort. *Too bad I didn't tell the fire to burn his wand too—not a problem, I'll just get rid of it the old-fashioned way—*

“Expelliarmus !”

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Through the pain, he saw the boy leap up, saw the flash of gold around his neck and the gleam of polished wood in his right hand, and knew he had been played for a fool.

You will not win this time, old man. No one can make Lord Voldemort look foolish with impunity. You have won a battle, but I shall win the war here and now.

He shoved his wand forward roughly, with none of his usual grace. It would do the job just as well.

“Avada Kedavra! ”

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Harry had just time to wonder why he was so sure of what to do if he didn't know what he was doing before the spells collided. A shock ran through him, his wand quivered madly in his hand—he brought his other up to support it, just as a golden ray of light shot outwards from the place in the air where the green and the red spells had collided, connecting his wand to Voldemort's—Voldemort's red eyes widened, and he tried to yank his wand away, clasping his still-flaming right hand with his left—

No you don't. Harry clung tighter to his wand, following Voldemort's movements with his own, keeping the beam constant between their two wands. *If you want this thing broken, then I want it to stay right where it—*

Voldemort gave a convulsive yank to his wand, and the outer edges of the light shattered, but a thinner beam remained. The shattered light hovered for a moment, then shot outward, forming a loose cage of gold around Harry and Voldemort. The Dark Lord hissed like an angry snake—exactly like an angry snake, Harry realized, recognizing the Parseltongue oath as one Sangre had only used once in his hearing and Siss never—and slapped again at the flames on his wand hand.

I did that, Harry recognized dimly, through the throb of power in his head. *I put the fire inside the prophecy ball, after I melted a piece of it to let the prophecy out. And I told it to burn Voldemort's hand just the way Dumbledore's was burned the summer before last...*

And as though thinking of Dumbledore had brought the man near, the crooning, heart-filling song of a phoenix filled the air around Harry. It took him only a second to trace it to the delicate lines

of light webbing him in. *Hold on*, the song whispered to him, *don't let go, keep fighting, help is near...*

With a shudder, the thread of light between the two wands developed a definite midpoint, a bulge at its center, and Voldemort hissed again, this time in triumph. Before Harry had quite grasped what was going on, the golden bead was moving down the thread towards him. His wand began to shake harder, until he thought it might well come apart in his hand—

So make it stop. Push back.

Harry set his jaw, planted his feet, and pushed with all his will at the bead sliding down that magical thread, just as he might have pushed at his opponent's arms during a hand-to-hand combat practice. The phoenix song throbbed around him, his pendants lay warm against his chest, and the bead shuddered to a halt, but Harry was out of strength—he could only fight Voldemort to a standstill, he couldn't do anything else on his own—

Don't be on your own, then. Get help.

Harry reached out through the pendant link, searching for the scent of roses, the feel of soft red fur beneath his hand, and beyond that all the other senses that were the combined magic of the Pride —

He touched Ginny's magic, and felt the shape of it, and began to laugh. As he traced her link to Ron, and Ron's to Hermione, and Hermione's to Draco, he laughed harder. By the time he had followed the links from Luna to Neville to Meghan, he was hooting aloud, barely able to keep standing upright.

They're hardly even thinking about me. Little flashes, little worries, but then they're back to whatever they're doing. He tapped Ginny's sight, and was rewarded with a momentary flash of a scale model of Hogwarts, with tiny figures moving about it, like the clay house she'd modeled when they were planning Graham's rescue—

Planning. They're with the DA, planning. Talking about how to fight the war. Because they're not worried about my winning this battle. They know I can, they know I will—

So how can I not?

The laughter had brought him new strength. It was easy now to hold the light-bead still, and not quite easy but entirely within his ability to slowly push it the other way, towards Voldemort's wand, clasped tightly in his charred and blackened hand—

He's fighting back, Harry registered dimly, *he's trying to push it towards me again*, but it was only an instant later that the bead touched Voldemort's wand, and touched it again, and then sank into it without a trace. Voldemort stared wide-eyed at his own wand, then lifted his head to glare at Harry, but before either of them could speak, something began to emerge from the tip of Voldemort's wand, something round and gray and made entirely of smoke—a person, Harry

realized when he saw an arm join the head and chest, it was the likeness of a person, a woman—

Of Dolores Umbridge.

“What is the meaning of this?” demanded the smoky Umbridge, hands on her hips. “Harry Potter, I demand an explanation—”

Shrieks of pain interrupted her, coming unmistakably from Voldemort’s wand—they went on and on, barely stopping between bouts, until Harry wanted nothing more than to cover his ears, and then a second figure began to emerge from the wand, female again, about the same age as Professor McGonagall—

“He killed me,” the woman said gravely, regarding Voldemort. “He said I didn’t deserve to call myself a witch, that my blood made me a disgrace to the word, and he killed me.”

A young man pushed himself free of the wand. *“I told him he was crazy, that I wouldn’t join his army, and he cursed me, I thought it was the Imperius until I saw the color—”*

A young woman. *“I was just passing through, I saw men in masks waving sticks around and making people fly, and then the green light hit me—”*

A boy younger than Meghan. *“He told me I didn’t deserve to have the letter—I said I’d give it back to him, but he just laughed and pushed me down on the floor—”*

Harry lost track of the figures that shoved themselves through the tip of Voldemort’s wand, of the stories they told, of the screams and the frightened whimpers that punctuated the arrivals of the ghostly people, until the moment that one of them raised its head and looked at him, and he knew its face.

“Cedric,” he whispered, and almost took a step forward, almost held out his hand to the other boy.

“Don’t, Harry, don’t break the connection—” Cedric dropped to the ground and stood up. “Keep holding on,” he said in his echoing voice. “You’re almost there. Thank you for what you did for me.”

“It wasn’t enough,” Harry said, feeling the tightness start in his throat. “You still died.”

“That was my own fault. I should have known better than to run like that. Harry—” Cedric looked decidedly uncomfortable. “Don’t be too hard on Cho, all right?”

“Hard on—”

But the new figure emerging from the wand caught all of Harry’s attention, and whatever Cedric had been saying about Cho was lost. A woman with long hair, a young and familiar woman, who smiled with love in her eyes as she looked up at him—

“Mum?” Harry breathed.

“Hello again, Harry,” Lily Potter said.

“Again?” Harry blinked. “What—”

“You’ll understand soon.” Lily came forward, the other ghosts making way for her, to stand beside Harry. “We’ve seen each other already once tonight. But you gave up those memories, to trick Voldemort into thinking you had lost your mind, because the only things in your head since he’d touched you were the ones you created for him to see...”

An image fluttered through Harry’s head. Standing in front of Dumbledore, waiting with a sinking heart for the precious memories to be pulled from his mind, the memories he’d never wanted to lose—the only moments he would ever remember sharing with his parents—

“You’ll get them back,” said the latest figure to emerge from Voldemort’s wand, grinning openly. *“A bit second-hand, but better than none at all, right?”*

Harry nodded dumbly, staring at his father. *Why is he holding—*

Another memory. He was lying in the center of a blast of wind, using his body to shelter a naked baby, who stared at him with wide gray eyes in the middle of a brown face—

“You used Marcus to help you,” James Potter went on, bouncing the baby in his arms slightly. *“Well, Dumbledore did it, but he couldn’t have if your soul hadn’t touched Marcus’. He was able to disguise your mind with that kind of fearless innocence, because your soul had been in contact with a soul that held that.”*

“So I suppose you could really say that Marcus won this battle for you,” Lily finished.

“I think we should say we all played a part,” Cedric put in. *“Working together.”*

Lily laughed. *“And I think you are an irrepressible Hufflepuff,”* she said. *“Harry, we can’t stay much longer, but we don’t need to—do you see?”*

Harry tore his eyes away from his parents, from the crowd of smoke-colored ghosts, from a half-frightened, half-furious Voldemort, and saw.

“Dumbledore managed to roust out almost the entire Ministry,” James said. *“Not to mention Rita Skeeter, and a few slightly more reputable types. What say, people, shall we give them a show?”*

The shades growled agreement, hungrily.

“We love you, Harry,” Lily said softly. *“Break the connection on three. One, two, five—”*

Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing and snapped his wand sharply to the side. The connection vanished, the light-web disappeared, but the figures of Voldemort’s victims remained, crowding in around him, so thick that he almost disappeared in their midst—

A wave of exhaustion rolled over Harry, and he dropped to one knee, half-hearing a small Apparition pop beside him. Then an arm was around him, holding him close. "Almost done," Moony told him under his breath. "Only a little longer. Can you stand back up?"

"Think so—help me?" Harry steadied himself on Moony's outstretched wand arm, and together they rose to their feet, just in time to see the rapidly eroding smoke-figure of Dolores Umbridge waft towards the stunned and silent Ministry observers, avoiding Albus Dumbledore, who stood between them and Voldemort with no expression at all on his face.

"Cornelius!" Umbridge's voice shrilled. *"Cornelius, do something!"*

Cornelius Fudge seemed unable to pry his eyes away from Voldemort. Behind him, Percy Weasley and Kingsley Shacklebolt were wearing identical small, smug expressions. Harry almost laughed, but fought it back—he was tired enough that if he started, he might not be able to stop. Instead, he leaned into Moony's shoulder, half-turning so that he could rest his head—

"Down!" he bellowed, and threw his weight against Moony, knocking his Pack-father to the floor as a spell zoomed past overhead.

"Master!" shrieked Bellatrix Lestrange. *"Master, I'm coming!"*

Harry got his head up just in time to see a black-on-black blur appear beside Voldemort and disappear again with him in tow. Dumbledore's spell whisked through the area an instant too late —

Or maybe not. Harry smiled, remembering a long-ago Memory Charm fired at a Disapparating foe. *Dumbledore usually hits what he aims at. Maybe he was trying to get them late. Wonder why?*

"Are you satisfied, Cornelius?" Dumbledore asked as Kingsley offered the Minister a hand up. "Lord Voldemort has returned, as I tried to tell you months ago. Not only that, but he is regaining strength at an alarming rate. He orchestrated the breakout which removed his best men from Azkaban; he is building his army with both willing and unwilling, both living and dead..."

Fudge seemed not even to hear Dumbledore. Instead, he was staring at Umbridge's body on the ground. "He's killed Dolores," he said in a conversational tone. "She's dead."

"She is." Dumbledore held out a hand. "I am sorry, Cornelius."

Fudge ignored the gesture. "It's awful, I know, but I'm rather glad of it," he said vaguely. "She was always willing to go to more extreme lengths than I was. There were times I was afraid of her... did you know she killed two people to make sure I'd be Minister again?"

Footsteps sounded behind them, and Harry half-turned to see members of the Order beginning to crowd into the Atrium. Professor McGonagall was in the lead, Moody behind her, Charlie and Tonks behind him, but Harry's eyes were starting to unfocus and he couldn't recognize whoever was behind the newlyweds.

“Vilius was the first, of course,” Fudge continued, still in the same calm tone. “I couldn’t be Minister while he was still Minister. But the other was a Healer, the one who was investigating the death... Dolores didn’t tell me until after I’d been confirmed in office, she said everyone would blame it on Lucius Malfoy, no one would ever have to know...”

Tonks went absolutely white, all the color bleaching from her face and hair.

“But now she’s dead, so I can tell the truth,” Fudge concluded. “Will it make trouble for me, do you think, Dumbledore? I couldn’t very well give up the office, not after being there less than a week, people would have talked, and it wouldn’t have brought them back...” He sighed. “But I do suppose I still should have told someone.”

“You *bastard!*” Tonks shrieked, her voice cracking on the last word. Charlie grabbed her and pulled her wand from her hand, holding her back with his other arm around her waist. “She was my *mother!* Not just some Healer—my *mother!* Andromeda Black Tonks!”

“Yes,” Fudge said, nodding to himself. “Andromeda. I had thought it was some silly pureblood name, but I couldn’t recall it.”

“*It’s not silly!*” Tonks screamed. “*Don’t call it—*” She choked, shaking all over, her hair turning phone-box red, as Charlie pulled her into his arms and the rest of the Order closed around them, most shooting looks at Fudge that should have felled him on the spot.

“Do you understand now, Cornelius?” Dumbledore said quietly. “Your hunger for power, your distrust of your true allies, has lost you everything. And lost many people their lives as well—you saw just now how many have died by the hand of Lord Voldemort alone since his resurrection. How many do you think his followers have killed? And what of those they ‘merely’ torture, or toy with? How many lives have already been destroyed, and how many more will be because of the head start you have given the Death Eaters by refusing to believe that their leader had returned?”

Fudge was shaking his head, back and forth, back and forth, still staring at Umbridge’s body, his face starting to twist in lines of true fear.

Dumbledore sighed. “Percy,” he said. “Can you... assist the Minister to his office? I fear he is unwell. I will meet you there to explain things better.”

“Yes, sir.” Percy moved forward to tap Fudge on the arm, and Dumbledore crossed behind him to speak to Kingsley. A flash went off, and Harry turned his head to see Rita Skeeter’s photographer snapping furiously, Rita herself beside him, muttering to her acid-green Quick-Quotes Quill.

“I think this is one story we won’t object to her covering,” Moony murmured. “Let’s go, Harry, we’re finished here.”

“Okay.” Harry leaned into his Pack-father. “Where are we going?”

“Wherever Dumbledore has that emergency Portkey of yours set—and I’d prefer if you could

remember about it next time, please, and save us all some trouble. Though I suppose it worked out for the best, what with getting Voldemort out in the open.”

“Still not worth it.” Harry fumbled inside his robes, pulled his pendants free, and located the little carving of the phoenix by touch alone, his eyes no longer wanting to stay open. “Not with Marcus...”

“We’ll discuss that some other time.” Moony’s hand joined his on the phoenix. “Go ahead, Harry-kins.”

Harry half-smiled at the old, old pet name. “Denward bound,” he said as clearly as he could manage.

The jerk-behind-the-navel feeling of a Portkey jolted him, then he was flying through the air through a whirl of strange sounds, but Moony’s arms were still around him, holding him safe. The worst that could happen to him now would be to collapse when they arrived at their destination.

One of these days I’d like to have an adventure where I don’t fall on my nose the instant it’s over... d’you suppose that’s possible?

Anything is possible, little Wolf, murmured Moony, his voice vibrating through his hand where it gripped Harry’s around the Portkey. **Anything is possible.**

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“...immediately. Get me everything. Stories, rumors, anything at all, even if it seems impossible, if it concerns the subject I want, get it for me.”

“Yes, my Lord.” The man bowed and disappeared through the door.

Lord Voldemort leaned back in his chair, glaring across the room at an inoffensive piece of statuary.

Potter’s wand and mine are brothers. That is the only thing which could explain such a reaction. And he was able to find the strength to turn my wand against me, which can only mean that the magical core of the wand ‘likes’ him more strongly than it does me...

Could the feathers have come from Dumbledore’s phoenix? Phoenixes are ‘light’ birds, but I doubt the feather of a phoenix which had never met either me or Potter would be quite so adamant about choosing him over me, no matter what spells our wands have performed. Dumbledore’s phoenix, though, knows us both. It took a strong dislike to me in my school days, and I have no doubt it has an equally strong liking for Potter.

Potter. He infuriates me. Voldemort’s lip curled in a sneer. Such a perfect little ‘light’ wizard, with never a ‘dark’ thought in his head. Dumbledore’s darling, Lupin’s obedient pup, a model student and son, and now he will likely be the darling of the press, just as he was before.

And if he has the ability to handle fire that the orb seems to indicate he has... Voldemort hissed under his breath at the sight of his ruined right hand. Then I must reopen another of the questions I thought resolved long ago. I was so certain that Snape was giving me information Dumbledore had deliberately fed to him, a blind to conceal the truth... but is it perhaps a double blind, telling the truth in such a way that everyone will think it is a lie?

Whatever it was, he would be keeping his researchers busy for quite some time.

It was well that most of the men he had lost at the Department of Mysteries were fighters.

It was even better that one of those he had specially sworn at the beginning of the summer had not been present at all, while another had wriggled free of his bonds and made his way safely out of the Ministry before the Aurors arrived to take them all into custody. He had not stopped for such petty things as freeing his comrades.

Lord Voldemort approved. If he had had time, of course, it would have been another story. But he did not know when the Aurors would arrive, other than 'soon,' and he chose to return me one fighter for certain than risk bringing me none at all by trying for more.

While the Ministry searched for Death Eaters in panic-stricken circles, he would work silently, behind the scenes, on the targets he had chosen first but been denied access to for lack of opportunities.

That would soon change, now that the younger Crouch had joined the father he'd been impersonating in death. It would be a simple matter to place a new spy in the Order, one Dumbledore knew nothing about. And once that was done...

Once that is done, the world is mine. I need merely ask for it, and it will fall into my hands.

He looked at his right hand and scowled. *Or perhaps I should say into my hand.*

Potter will pay for that. Just as he will pay for everything else.

xXxXx

Aletha lay asleep on the bed in the guest suite, Meghan cuddled close to her mother's chest. Sirius looked at them both from the desk and smiled sadly, blinking hard to control his tears.

He's in the best possible hands, he didn't feel any pain, and it's not as if I really knew him...

The familiar phrases held only drops of comfort, not enough to ease the raging pain inside of him, and Sirius tapped the DictaQuill in his hand twice with his wand and set it on the parchment.

"Chapter One," he said quietly, so as not to wake his girls. "In Which Marcus Leaves Home and Discovers a Curious Contrivance."

Valentina Jett is about to branch out into children's books. With a brave and witty young hero

named Marcus, who never gives up and always saves the day with his clever answers...

He kept speaking, telling the story as it had come to him while he held Aletha and tried to stave off his own tears. By the time Marcus had met the strangers on the other side of the Curious Contrivance and was busy explaining to them the rules by which his world worked, Sirius was so deep in the tale he barely noticed the door opening.

But when Chapter One of *Through the Gate* was finished, Sirius set it aside and unrolled a fresh scroll of parchment. “Once upon a time,” he said, watching the quill scribble the words in his handwriting, “in a kingdom called England, there lived a young boy named Dafydd Beauvoi, the younger son of a Norman noble and his wife, a Welshwoman though she carried also the blood of Denmark. Dafydd was a beautiful boy, with his father’s fine bones and his mother’s fair coloring, but he was lonely, for his father’s great concern was Owain his heir, and his mother’s great love was Angharad her daughter, and neither had much time to spare for little Dafydd.

“And so one day he went exploring, and in a stream he found a girl of his own age, seven years, whose red hair spilled over the shoulders of a kirtle as green as her eyes. And as they bragged as children will—Dafydd was the son of a lord, the girl the granddaughter of a baron—Dafydd let it slip that he could make the arrows of his bow fly anywhere that he wished, merely by willing it so. The girl coaxed him into coming to her home, where her black-haired father laid a carven stick in Dafydd’s hand and bade him wave it in the air, and as the boy did so, sparks flew from it, for the stick was a wand, and young Dafydd a wizard.

“Thus began the great magical House of Beauvoi, famed in song and story...”

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Neville had excused himself to spend the night with his parents in the Defense Professor’s suite, seeing for himself that they were both all right. Luna had slipped off on business of her own; Meghan, of course, was with Padfoot and Letha; and Mrs. Weasley had taken Ron and Ginny back to Headquarters with her, to wait for news of their dad from St. Mungo’s. So the Pride who would den tonight was only three Warriors strong.

“Just like old times,” Harry whispered as Hermione lay down beside him. “Really, really old times.”

“I remember the first night we did this,” Draco said from his other side. “I was scared I’d fall out, so you gave me the place by the wall.”

Hermione giggled. “And then you were scared we’d squash you, so we promised to stay on the other bed... how long did that last?”

“About an hour,” Harry said, interrupting himself in the middle of the last word with a huge yawn. “’Scuse me. Then you scooted over and got right beside us, and they found us in the morning all cuddled up like we’d always done it...”

“And now we always have,” Draco finished. “If you define always right.”

“Go t’sleep...” Harry yawned again. “Talk ‘bout def’nitions in th’morning.”

“I’ll hold you to that, now,” Hermione said with laughter in her voice.

Harry smiled, inhaled a long breath full of his brother and sister’s scents, and let go.

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She closed the door gently. Draco would be sure to read the story, as he read everything his Pack-father wrote. She was less sure he would understand what was meant by it, but that could be explained. What mattered was that he know the truth, know why she was doing what she did.

She turned around and stopped dead at the sight of what was waiting for her in the corridor.

“Hello, Amanda,” said Luna Lovegood, her eyes half-lidded but penetrating. “We need to talk.”

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Facing Danger

Chapter 26: Plans and Promises (Year 5)

Amanda Smythe sat down in an empty desk, her eyes downcast. One foot joined her on the chair, and she wrapped her arms around her knee, rocking gently back and forth.

“What did you do to Mr. Padfoot?” Luna asked, shutting the door behind herself. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“You probably never will again.” Amanda’s voice, though quiet, filled the room, as if she were the size of Hagrid or Madame Maxime. “What do you see when you look at me, Luna? What do you see?”

“You are different,” Luna said, perching herself on the corner of a desk a few rows away from Amanda. “You and your brother. You have a brightness around you that I haven’t seen before.”

“And you probably won’t ever see that again either.”

“You still haven’t answered my first question.” Luna leaned forward, letting her eyes rest on Amanda. “What did you do to my mate’s Pack-father?”

Amanda’s head snapped up. “Don’t call him that!”

“Who?”

“Draco! Don’t call him yours!” Green eyes locked onto blue-gray, hot fury slashed into cool calm. “You made a stupid pact when you were babies, who’s to say he still wants to be held by it now? Who’s to say he still wants to play that game? Why can’t he make his own decisions?”

“He can.” Luna swung her leg idly back and forth. “But he is honorable and he respects me. If he truly wanted to move away from me, he’d tell me so himself. And you still haven’t answered my question. Why are you trying so hard not to?”

“Because it’s none of your business what I did!” Amanda slammed her foot down onto the floor and stood up. “Why are you questioning me, anyway? What right do you have?”

“I saw you doing magic in the halls,” Luna said, still sitting, still swinging her leg. “Doing magic on a guest of the school, someone who used to be a teacher, who’s still the father of students. I don’t want to get you in trouble, but I will if I have to.”

“Try it.” Amanda sneered. “Just try it. No one can prove I did anything, it’s your word against mine, and I’m innocent until proven guilty.”

“Unless I show my memory in a Pensieve. Or through my pendants.”

A red head tossed scornfully as its owner turned away. “You could have tampered with it. It

doesn't count."

"Amanda, what are you afraid of?" Luna asked softly. "You didn't hurt him. I know. You gave him an idea, or a dream. Nothing bad. Why are you so afraid to tell me?"

Amanda whirled on Luna. "*I'm not afraid!*"

Luna unfocused her eyes, then let them converge on Amanda again. "Yes," she said. "You are."

Amanda's hands fisted, and she whirled and slammed one into the wall. "Fine," she said shortly over her shoulder. "Let me tell you a story, then. Once upon a time there was a girl with a curse on her family, a curse her grandfather put on her father when he broke with the family line. A curse that meant either she or her brother was going to die young. Young like us. Young like not even getting a chance. And one day, she was trapped. Trapped with her brother, and with the boy she loved. She had enough magic to save two of them. Only two.

"If she saved the other two, her love would probably break his heart over her, and her brother would never forgive her. At least, that's what she told herself." Amanda's voice could have etched glass. "And why should she save herself and her brother, when one of them was still doomed to die anyway?"

"So she saved herself and her love," Luna filled in. "What happened then?"

"They married. They had a family. They were happy, sometimes." Amanda flattened her hand against the wall. "But every so often, he would just look at her. Just look her up and down, like he was trying to measure her. And she knew what he was thinking. 'Do you ever wish you'd gone another way, made a different choice? Do you ever think about your brother, about the frightened look on his face, about the way he screamed your name just before he died?'"

Luna shook some hair forward and began disentangling a knot in it. "Did she?"

"Did she what?"

"Did she ever wish that, or think that?"

"How should I know? It's a story. I didn't write it or make it up."

"No." Luna twitched a few strands of hair free from the knot. "But I think you may have lived it."

"You're crazy."

"I know."

Amanda ignored this. "I'm not even seventeen yet. How could I get married and have a family?"

"Your body isn't seventeen yet." Luna looked up through her hair. "But your soul doesn't fit like it should." Her eyes traveled slowly up and down Amanda. "I've always known you had a

difference about you, but a lot of people have differences about them, so I never knew what yours was until I thought about it. You're not in your body the same way I am."

Amanda goggled at her for a moment, then burst out laughing, a trifle shrilly. "You... are so far round the twist you can see yourself coming." She got herself under control and shook her head. "I didn't do anything to Professor Black. I just opened the door to see what he was doing, and if he was all right, but he was working, so I left without saying anything."

"I know you're not telling the truth." Luna finished working the knot out of her hair and tucked it behind her ear. "But whatever you did, it didn't hurt him. And Draco likes you. It isn't more than a friend liking, not yet, but he knows it could be more. He doesn't want to say anything, because he thinks that if he doesn't talk about it, maybe it will go away."

Amanda sat back down, her forehead wrinkled. "You're not angry?"

"Maybe a little." Luna pulled forward another handful of hair to work on. "But you haven't done anything that you shouldn't do, at least not yet."

"You don't know that," Amanda said half under her breath.

"If you have done anything that you shouldn't, I don't know about it," Luna amended. "And I like you. I would like to be your friend. I think we could help each other. But we can't if we're going to be fighting over Draco."

"So what do you suggest?" The words were only half-sarcastic.

Luna smiled as a thought came to her. "We could have a Challenge, I suppose. A fight between us, and the winner gets him."

Amanda laughed again. "I might like that, but it wouldn't be fair to him," she said. "He has to be able to make the choice." A thoughtful expression drifted onto her face. "What if we had a different kind of challenge?"

"What kind?"

"The kind where we take turns being... whatever it is we'd like to be to him. Let him see which of us he really does prefer." Amanda's tone had the faintest touch of gloat in it, but was otherwise firm and sincere. "What do you think?"

Luna wrapped her hair around her hand and considered it. "Would we tell him?"

"I don't think so." Amanda chuckled. "If he figures it out, then we'll tell him about it, but until then we should keep it to ourselves."

Luna nodded briskly. "How long would we have? A month? Three? No, two, to make up for the summer, when I see him and you don't."

“Two months sounds adequate to me. Shall we agree on terms, then?”

“Yes, I think we shall.” Luna drew out her wand and flicked it at the blackboard, and a piece of chalk rose up, ready to take notes. “So we don’t accidentally forget anything we agree on,” she said blandly. “Or accidentally remember it wrong.”

Amanda smiled. “Are you sure you were Sorted correctly? You have the intellect of a Ravenclaw and the instincts of a Slytherin.”

“The Hat was a bit puzzled when I insisted on Gryffindor,” Luna agreed. “But it came around in the end. I knew it would when I started to tell it how Daddy’s been studying some of the ancient legends of the Founders, and that he thinks it might not be Gryffindor’s brains in the Hat at all...”

“If you have July and August,” Amanda interrupted politely, “I should have May and June, yes?”

“Yes. Which would give me March and April, and you January and February...” Luna paused while the chalk caught up with their words. “Should we declare the rest of December neutral, and begin at the first of the year?”

“That seems fair. And we’ll want to have it clearly defined what kind of contact we can and can’t have with him, both in and out of our times...”

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It was, in one sense, fortunate that Draco Black was sleeping soundly elsewhere in the castle, for it meant he was unable to hear two intelligent and ruthless young witches planning his future for him.

In another sense, it was thoroughly unfortunate, as was his twin’s similarly sound sleep.

xXxXx

Remus jerked awake, panting. Beside him, Danger’s even breathing continued unchanged. For one instant, he envied her, but then recollection of what she’d done to get herself into this state intervened and put things in perspective.

I don’t think I want to drain my magic just to get a night’s sleep.

Though after a few more dreams like that, it might start looking good.

He slid out of bed, replacing the covers over his spot, and assumed Animagus form, padding around the bottom of the bed to curl up in the moonlight. Full moon had been two nights ago, and the slightly out-of-true circle comforted him with the familiar message that the curse had come and gone, done its worst and left him in peace for another month.

Of course, its worst is hardly as bad as it once was. An appreciative breath through mouth and nose, tasting the clean-hair-baking-bread scent that was his mingled magical and mundane sense

of Danger. *And under normal circumstances, she even drags me out of dreams like that one.*

Not that it made much sense... it has no right to be bothering me like it is...

He tried to recall the images of the dream that had disturbed him so. Two came to mind quickly—Draco's face, shifting from fear and sorrow through blankness into a sneer Remus had seldom seen his son wear, and a long and slender wand, vaguely familiar and dripping with blood of different colors.

Those didn't come together, though, except by accident. In fact...

Remus reached into Danger's magic and found her dreamsculpting power. A moment's concentration, and he was within the dream again, in his lion body. He sniffed carefully, first to one side, then to the other.

Ah-ha. I was right. This isn't one dream at all. It's two.

But why am I having two dreams simultaneously?

A deeper sniff, and he sneezed and sat down hard, shaking his head in distaste.

Not to mention, why am I having dreams that don't seem to be mine?

Better explore quickly, before I forget too much about it.

He moved off into the passages of the first dream, the one featuring the wand. The walls around him dripped blood as the wand had, its color ranging from a bright fresh crimson to a sullen ancient brown, and he changed quickly back to human after verifying that the general scent here was the same sickly-sweet half-rotten odor he'd caught in the original moment.

I don't like this at all. And it's only the first one.

Maybe I should start sleeping down in the Heart of Hogwarts like Harry...

xXxXx

Sirius finally set his quill aside, yawned, and stretched.

Two good-sized chapters of two different stories. Maybe I'm getting my touch back.

Time for Valentina Jett to make her big return to the publishing world, what say?

He cracked his back, then climbed onto the bed behind Aletha, draping an arm over her to stroke Meghan's cheek. His daughter made a sleepy noise of contentment and turned her face into his caress, and Sirius tightened his arm around his wife's shoulder in a half-hug.

What would I be doing right now without you two in my life... I don't know, but I don't think I want

to find out...

He drew his wand, conjured a light blanket over the three of them, and closed his eyes, tucking the wand back into its pocket by feel and instinct.

We'll get through this. We won't enjoy it, but we'll make it.

And someday, I'll see my son, and hold him in my arms.

Someday.

xXxXx

Remus pulled himself free of the dream, shuddering.

That was horrible. If I never have to be in that mind again, it will be too soon.

Thank God I've been able to shield Harry from it so far.

But he must be shielding me as well, or I should have been having these dreams long before this...

Or maybe Danger's been shielding me. I'll have to ask her when she wakes up.

Now for the other dream. And maybe to take care of some unfinished business.

He closed his eyes again and dived into sleep, falling through darkness with whirling fragments of color, until at last he landed lightly on a chill stone floor.

“Oh, that didn't work so well, did it?” said a mocking voice behind him. “Shall we try it again?”

Remus stood up and turned around in the same motion, and his fingernails dug into his palms.

Lucius Malfoy, his clothing disarranged and a contented smile on his scarred face, sat on the edge of a bed. A bed to which was chained a sobbing girl, her face hidden in her arms but her wild mass of brown hair making her identity obvious.

Calm, Remus, whispered the voice he almost always heard as Danger, even when, as now, her actual sense in his mind was shut down in sleep or unconsciousness. *Stay calm. It's only a dream.*

But if she's in it—if he's pulled her in somehow, used her blood bond—

He can't have. She's in the Heart of Hogwarts, remember? She's safe.

Yes. Remus felt his heart rate slow, consciously slowed his breathing, relaxed his stance. *Safe.*

“No,” another voice croaked nearby as Malfoy reached for Hermione. “Leave her alone—”

Remus forced himself back to some semblance of calm, reminded himself firmly of the other

occupants of the Hogwarts Den tonight, and only then turned to look for the voice's owner.

Draco crouched in a far corner, his clothing torn, hate and terror warring in his eyes. "Leave her *alone!*" he shouted again as Malfoy stroked Hermione's arm, eliciting a little whimper of fear. "Stop it!"

"And why should I do that?" Malfoy asked without turning, seemingly devoting all his attention to his hand where it touched Hermione's skin. "Why should I stop using her for the purpose for which she was made?"

"You *bastard!*" Draco flung himself out of the corner, hands poised to strike—

And a magical shield manifested across the room, throwing him backwards into the wall.

"You still have not learned, it seems," Malfoy said, disdainful even to look at his son, who was gasping open-mouthed for breath. "I am the master here. Not you. You exist on my sufferance. As your sister and your brother do, or did, on my Master's." He glanced up idly, towards the only door out of the stone-lined room. "I wonder if he has tired of them yet. The girl, perhaps, but somehow I do not think he will be done so quickly with Harry Potter..."

As though it had been timed—and *this is his dream, so it probably was*—a young man's hoarse yell of pain and anger echoed down the stairs visible through the door. Hermione shuddered once, as though she'd been struck, and Draco pushed himself half-upright, his whole body shaking in rage.

"Stop it," he demanded, his eyes fixed on his father. "Make them stop."

"How?" Malfoy finally turned to meet his son's gaze, his face innocent and wondering. "I have no such power."

"He listens to you. You said so yourself. You said if you asked him to do something, if you gave him a good reason, he'd do it. Ask him to stop... what he's doing. Ask him now."

"Again, why should I?" Malfoy turned back to Hermione, his hand moving forward from her arm. "I find myself comfortable where I am..."

"I'll do what you want."

A moment of total silence.

"I'm sorry," Malfoy said in the politest of tones, but Remus could see the twisted smile beginning to spread over his face. "I don't believe I heard you correctly, Draco. Would you repeat what you said, of your kindness?"

Draco snarled silently at Malfoy's back, then slumped, weariness and defeat in every line of him. "I said I'll do what you want," he said tiredly. "I'll be what you want. Your son again. A Malfoy again. Just... stop hurting them. Give me your word, the word of a Malfoy, that they won't be hurt

again, and I'll do whatever you say."

"I can make no promises for the Potter boy," Malfoy cautioned. "The Dark Lord's whim rules."

"Just do your best." Draco grimaced once. "Father."

"Ah, excellent. I do believe I shall." Malfoy stood up, patting Hermione's shoulder once more. "As for the girl, disposition of her fate will be in your hands."

Draco blinked. "My..."

Malfoy picked up something metallic from the top of a nearby table and flipped it towards Draco, who caught it neatly in one hand, then stared at it.

It was Hermione's dagger, the blue gem in the handle dulled by a pattern of cracks running through it.

"One small pain, and then she need never suffer again," Malfoy said, gesturing grandly to the bed. "Or you could turn it on yourself, but then your siblings would have no savior. You could even try to attack me." His wand was in his hand, too fast for the eye to follow. "If you wished to witness her further torment, and then be forced to do what you have already agreed to. The choice is yours. Make it quickly."

The memory of an old, old dream slipped into Remus' mind—Hermione's pleading, terrified face, the handle of the knife against his palm, and the knowledge bitterer than any poison, that this was mercy and not betrayal—

Not again. Not ever again.

Not even if they are just dream-figures.

He does not deserve the satisfaction.

"Enough," Remus Lupin said aloud, and his voice shook the dream-world like the voice of God.

xXxXx

Rubeus Hagrid unlatched his front door and stepped inside, bracing himself against Fang's exuberant welcome.

Might've been nice to bring little Grawp home with me, but he'll be fine where he is now. Not even a giant's likely to fight a dragon just for fun.

He chuckled as he poked up the fire. *I'll have one over on Charlie, though. The great dragon expert, never noticing my little Norbert was actually a little Norberta.*

The kettle went on the hob, and a thick slice of bread on a toasting fork. *Nice to see her and*

Grawp taking to each other that way. ‘Course, he figured out pretty quick how she could protect him, and once he learned where to scratch her and what sorts of animals to bring her, she was his...

Hagrid settled back on the bench, rubbing Fang’s head with the hand not holding the fork, his feet on the hearthstone.

Probably have visitors tomorrow. I wonder what they’ve been getting up to while I’ve been away? Likely nothing as exciting as me...

xXxXx

Lucius Malfoy spun around, his face astonished. “You!”

“Me.” Remus made a tiny gesture of negation with one hand, and the room and its other two occupants vanished. He and Malfoy stood alone on a featureless plain. “I’ve come to speak to you about a matter of a life.”

“Whose life?”

“Yours.” Remus smiled, letting some of his inner lion show. “And the fact that you owe it to me.”

“I owe you nothing of the sort!”

“Oh, but you do.” Remus summoned the appropriate memory and set it in motion around them.

Malfoy watched through slitted eyes as Bellatrix ran from the room barely ahead of the wall of water she’d conjured. The memory-Remus created a net around himself, sent it shooting upwards to the ceiling, then leaned down and pulled Danger and Arthur Weasley into it alongside him. He glanced at the memory-Malfoy where he floated limply on the surface, swore under his breath, and Summoned the Death Eater as well.

“Bellatrix left you behind,” Remus said quietly. “I would not.”

Along with dream-Malfoy came a huge wave, and dream-Remus barely kept hold of the net as he blasted the top of the door away. He threw the net into the next room, guided it to a soft landing with his wand, then leapt after it, conjuring a panel behind him to keep the water safely within the room he’d left—

The memory-dream faded, and Remus and Malfoy stood again amid softly glowing gray.

Malfoy’s face contorted. “Very well,” he ground out. “I acknowledge the debt.”

“By the power of a life debt owed, then, hear what I would charge you with.” The exact words Remus wanted came easily to him after what he’d seen. “You will honor the lives of my children as you do your own—no, better than that, for you might lay down your own life at your Master’s command, and their lives you will not. You will keep them alive, and you will not harm them, nor

will you allow another to harm them if it lies in your power to stop. If you disobey this charge, my gift of your life is forfeit.”

“You have no children,” Malfoy snapped. “This command is meaningless.”

“I have by law a daughter,” Remus countered. “And she has by blood a brother. They have also by love a brother and a sister. I charge you with those four lives, and with the lives of their four closest friends, with whom they have sworn their oath of friendship. You will guard them as I have commanded, or you will die by your own magic as you should have died tonight.”

Malfoy twitched a shoulder, as though throwing off an unwanted hand. “Eight lives for one is too much. The bond will not hold.”

“If it breaks, then no penalty shall apply to you. But while it holds, you will honor it, or you will pay the price.” Remus never let his eyes waver from the other man’s. “So I speak, so I intend, and so let it be done.”

He waited just long enough to feel the magic snap into place before departing the dream, leaving Malfoy to vent his rage on an empty world.

xXxXx

The Captain lay just inside the entrance to the Den from the Headmaster’s office, his black eyes peering through the crack in the stone to the room beyond.

Dad said Mr. Weasley’s going to be okay, but Ron and Ginny still aren’t back, and Luna’s asleep. And I don’t think the Pack will be up for anything today except maybe going down to see Hagrid.

So that leaves me.

Some part of his mind marveled at himself. A mere five years ago, he would have been horrified at the idea of spying on a private conference among adults, especially about something as important as a war. Of course, that same five years ago, he never would have believed himself capable of an Animagus transformation, and that was the least of the strangeness which had overtaken him since.

I guess I’m growing up.

The office, as far as he could see, was empty. Most of the portraits were snoozing in their frames. Fawkes wasn’t on his perch behind Dumbledore’s desk, but a single bright feather lay in the tray beneath it. Captain wondered idly how often phoenixes molted, and what they looked like when they did. Or did burning take care of that for them?

The door opened, jolting him from his thoughts. Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, and his parents entered, with Mad-Eye Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt close behind, already in conversation.

“...major upheavals,” Kingsley was saying. “But I think it’ll settle out to Scrimgeour in the end.”

“Well, could be worse.” Moody Summoned a chair and sat down with a grunt, pulling his hip flask free. “Scrimgeour’s competent, and not a complete fool.”

“No, but he is a Ministry man through and through,” said Mum acidly. “He’ll look with suspicion on anything that seems to threaten the Ministry and its power, no matter what that is.”

“No, Alice, it’s more than that.” Dad crossed to Fawkes’ perch and picked up the feather, stroking a finger along it idly. “He’s learned the hard way that what you *are* often takes a twig seat to what you *look like*. Why do you think he’s been so careful to preserve his face? There were a lot of people in the Auror Office I had trouble recognizing after twelve years. Not him.”

“It’s why he antagonizes Sirius,” said Kingsley. “Sirius made the Office look bad. That’s the one sin Scrimgeour can’t forgive. And why I don’t think we should necessarily tell him everything we’re doing.” His eyes flickered towards Snape.

“Agreed,” said Professor McGonagall. “Especially since any spies the Aurors may try to send into the Death Eaters will probably be found within their first week.”

“Day,” Snape corrected coolly.

“You would know better than I, Severus.” Professor McGonagall looked around. “Where is Albus, anyway? This is the time he asked us to meet him...”

“He’s in the reading room,” said a voice from above Captain’s head and to the left. A portrait, Captain assumed, from the way everyone’s eyes gravitated that way. “Said he needed to calm his nerves with a book.”

“The reading room?” Moody frowned. “Didn’t know he had one.”

Professor McGonagall had a peculiar expression on her face. Peering closer, Captain decided it was made of about half amusement and half annoyance. “He doesn’t,” she said in clipped tones. “Pardon me a moment.”

Crossing the room, she knocked briskly on a door beside the main entrance. If he’d been asked, Captain would have thought it was the door not to a room, but to...

“Yes?” called a voice from within.

“Albus, it’s time,” Professor McGonagall said firmly, as Mum covered her mouth and Dad raised an eyebrow at Kingsley, who shrugged. “Do come out of there.”

“Ah. Just a moment.” The door opened from the inside, and Professor Dumbledore emerged, ducking his head to clear the lintel. “Good morning, Alastor, Severus. Kingsley, Frank, Alice.” He smiled at McGonagall. “Really, Minerva, you must tell all my secrets to the world, mustn’t you?”

“All you need to do if you want privacy,” McGonagall said with a strong sound of forced patience in her voice, “is change the password on your door. Why you insist upon hiding behind your coats...”

“I find it quiet, congenial, and less distracting than the office.” Dumbledore bent down, and when he straightened, he had Fawkes on his wrist. “Besides, there are excellent magical precedents. But enough of that. Has Rufus been officially asked to take over Cornelius’ position, Kingsley?”

Kingsley nodded. “He’s accepted, too. No surprise either way.”

“What of the Department of International Magical Cooperation? How are they taking the news?”

“That their head was actually his own Death Eater son, Aged into looking like his father, and playing all three sides?” Moody said sarcastically. “Not so well. Percy Weasley’s moved back over there, though, and he’s getting things in hand fairly well. Born bureaucrat, that one.”

“A shame we didn’t believe him last year,” Dad said. “Why we didn’t have another look at his story after we found out he hadn’t been mistaken about Igor Karkaroff attacking him...”

“Because Barty Crouch the Younger was useful as a spy about whom I knew,” Dumbledore said, letting Fawkes sidle onto the perch before taking his seat behind his desk. “I was able to keep our most vital secrets from him, while seeding several pieces of disinformation into Voldemort’s ranks.”

Dad nodded.

“Dumbledore, I have to ask,” Mum said. “Did you know Dolores Umbridge would be there with Harry in the Atrium? Did you plan for that?”

“I did not.” Dumbledore sighed, rubbing the fingers of his right hand. “Harry had seen her rendered unconscious, and I admit I did not look farther than what he told me, even after Remus’ story of rescuing Arthur Weasley from the room Bellatrix Lestrange flooded. I should have recalled that the two incidents happened in the same place, that Dolores had therefore either been removed or removed herself before Remus happened along, but I did not...” He sighed deeply. “I see less and less, it seems.”

“You try to see too much, and always have,” McGonagall said sharply. “Stop blaming yourself for a foolish woman’s refusal to see what was in front of her eyes. If she’d had a Knut’s worth of sense, she’d never have tried this in the first place. Now. We need to plan, and we need to plan well. Now that You-Know...”

Dumbledore looked at her.

“Oh, all right. Now that *Voldemort* has lost the element of surprise, what will he try to do next?”

“Create it again, from another angle,” Kingsley said. “He can’t surprise us by existing now, so he’ll work up some plan we won’t think of.”

“Probably go after Muggles,” rumbled Moody. “It fits his ideology, and the wizarding world’s forewarned now. Muggles won’t be. Besides, it’ll amuse him to see us trying to hush it up.”

“I’m sure Rufus will be explaining things to the Muggle Prime Minister this very evening, if he has not already done so.” Dumbledore sighed. “Under normal circumstances, Cornelius would have gone with him, but these are hardly normal circumstances. I doubt he will be able to take on any duties at all for some weeks.”

“He at least told us who killed Andromeda Tonks,” Mum said. “Not that I felt guilty blaming Lucius Malfoy for it, but it’s better to know the truth. I certainly hope the Ministry’s going to take a long, hard look at itself soon.”

“Why don’t we focus on winning the war first?” suggested Dad. “Not that a long look at the Ministry wouldn’t be a good idea, but if it comes at the price of letting Voldemort have the place, I’d rather do without.”

“Might not be so much of a loss,” Mum muttered. “All right, yes, enough from me for the moment. What do we know?”

“The Dark Lord’s priorities at the moment are to secure his power base within the ranks of the purebloods,” Snape said, startling everyone, including Captain, who had half-forgotten the Potions Master was there. “He hopes after that to either intimidate or bribe the half-bloods to rally to him. There has also been talk, recently, of reviving the ancient rituals of purification, by which even a Muggle-born could become acceptable to those pure of blood.”

“Rituals of...” Mum’s eyes widened. “Dear God. Please tell me you’re joking.”

Snape shook his head minutely. “The Dark Lord holds himself up as a model in that regard.”

“Well then. Something else to cover in class.” Mum pretended to make notes on her hand. “Why killing all your Muggle relatives is generally considered a bad idea.”

Captain gulped. He’d heard the stories, but he’d always thought they were made up, ways to scare kids off to bed or insults status-hungry purebloods traded. To have his own mother confirming them as true...

“Caught a few in my day who were trying that,” Moody said, nodding. “Some of them even had a pureblood family tree all faked up, ready to go.”

Kingsley shook his head slowly. “Sad,” he said. “Such a waste. If you’re so set against your Muggle family, why not just forswear them, then have yourself adopted by some pureblood family desperate for children? A formal oath and adoption makes you just as pureblood as the rituals do.”

“Because many purebloods will not take adoptees, not even those who are willing to sever all ties with undesirable relatives,” said Snape, his tone icy. “They will have what they call true purity, or they will have nothing.”

“Then in only a few generations, they will indeed have nothing,” McGonagall said. “The more fools, they. Shall we continue with our discussion? What needs doing immediately, Albus?”

“We must convince Rufus to secure Azkaban, first,” Dumbledore said, sitting up straighter and pushing his glasses up his nose. “It has been broken into once already, and if the dementors leave Ministry employ, as I fear will very soon happen, it will be even less safe than before. Perhaps the prisoners should be moved to other facilities, less public and better guarded.”

“If he agrees to that, I’ll start believing your publicity, Dumbledore,” said Moody with a rough chuckle. “What Frank said earlier, about *image* ... Scrimgeour won’t want to abandon the idea of Azkaban, the perfect prison, no matter what the current reality.”

“Agreed. But still, for the good of all, we must find some way to reach him.” Dumbledore steepled his fingers. “I expect results very soon from the envoys we sent to the giants this summer, and I can hope they are good. Our liaison with the werewolves reports limited success, but very few flat failures, so I doubt we need to fear any overall defections. We should, however, look into the possibility of securing goblin help.”

“Goblins help only themselves,” said Moody dourly. “They’ll support the side that will give them the highest payoff in the end.”

“Then we must ensure that joining us, or staying neutral, will give them a higher payoff than joining Voldemort’s forces,” Dumbledore rejoined.

“That shouldn’t be too hard,” said Dad, chuckling. “The last time I looked, a Death Eater’s idea of interracial diplomacy was ‘hitting the nonhuman scum once instead of twice.’ I think we can offer better than that, don’t you?”

The adults all laughed, and Captain found himself smiling. War or no war, they were going to be all right.

“I believe that the next few months may be less terrible than what we recall,” Dumbledore said when the laughter had died down. “Lord Voldemort has lost many followers, as well as the possibility of hearing the fullness of the prophecy, unless he cares to try to extract it from my mind.”

Or mine... Captain shivered. Or Meghan’s, or Luna’s, or any of ours... our only safety is that he doesn’t know, and he wouldn’t ever suspect, that Dumbledore told the biggest secret in the war to a bunch of teenagers...

“He is also injured, and Harry Potter has defeated him once more. I am not certain of this, no more than I am certain of anything, but I think it entirely possible that he will take the next few months to recoup his losses and seek new advantages. Of course, he could always decide instead to strike as quickly as possible, before the Ministry can fully mobilize, but in the end this will be a war of attrition.”

“Whichever side gets tired first, loses,” said Mum, nodding. “And that’s based on which side has more resources, more people, and better morale.”

“But how can he really think he can win?” Kingsley said, frowning. “The world’s an awfully big place, and even if he wears us down, there’s treaties and compacts in place all over for times just like this. France and Germany alone—”

“He’s probably looking to put a puppet Minister in place to start with,” Moody interrupted. “Then infiltrate the other countries’ Ministries. Imperius some officials, suborn others, until he’s in control of most of Europe. He could come out of hiding at that point, declare himself openly. Probably completely openly—Muggles as well as wizards—and you know what *that* would do.”

“Panic,” Dad said. “On both sides. Muggles will start killing anyone who even looks odd, and wizards will be trying to find some way to keep themselves safe. There’ll likely be agitators planted to make it worse. The Ministries won’t be able to handle it.”

“And in the end, it comes down to what it always comes down to,” Mum said grimly. “Any order is better than chaos.”

“Precisely.” Dumbledore’s eyes were bleak. “What is it our friends in the Muggle world say? ‘The best disinfectant is sunlight’? We must keep him in the open at all times. Force him to make his true agenda known. He can accomplish a great deal by terror, but I do not think he can win that way.”

“There’s another Muggle saying I like,” said McGonagall. “‘All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for the good to stand by and do nothing.’ If the governments of the rest of the world decide that he’s not their problem, or that they can pay him his Danegeld and he’ll be on his way...”

Moody snorted. “Not likely. We’ll swat him before it gets to that stage. And I know, I know,” he added, waving an irritable hand in Dumbledore’s direction. “It won’t be as easy as that. It’ll take time, and lives, and pain. But I do think we can do it. Us, ourselves, without screaming for outside help.”

Captain shook his fur and rippled through one complete change, invisible to visible to invisible again. *Now you see me, now you don’t.*

Watch out, Voldemort. Watch out, Bellatrix Lestrangle.

Or better yet, don’t watch out. Don’t ever think about the damage one cute little invisible monkey could do.

Like opening the latch on a hideout door, to let in a whole army of Animagi and DA fighters.

He grinned once, then settled in to listen some more.

After all, Dumbledore had promised the Pride wouldn’t be left behind again.

We should know what we're going to be a part of.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 27: Tears and Tokens (Arc 6)

Danger opened the top of the blender, dropped a double handful of sliced strawberries in with the chilled milk and yogurt, shut the lid again, and pressed the button to start it going. Aletha had barely eaten for the last two days, and that had to stop.

Grieving is perfectly normal. Starving herself because she thinks she's responsible for Marcus' death is not.

Or rather, it may be normal, but we can't let her do it.

She was alone in the basement kitchen of Headquarters except for Sirius, who was sitting at the table rearranging scraps of parchment with his wand. Danger had a feeling they might be bits of story, but hadn't asked. When he was ready to show her, he would.

He gets bitten by the writing bug at the oddest times, though...

Slow footsteps on the stairs made her turn and Sirius look up. *There's barely anyone else here, almost everyone's out on missions or errands or working—*

Aletha pushed the door open, her eyes bloodshot but steady. "Good morning," she said, turning her head enough to include them both in the greeting. "Have I overslept?"

"For what?" Sirius pushed his chair back and went to his wife's side, holding out a hand for hers. "You're off from your shifts at St. Mungo's for a week, and I've got the same time away from the Auror Office."

"So we can sit at home and brood?" There was bitterness in the words, but also some real humor, as though Aletha were unable to decide what she felt and had settled for a touch of both.

"If we must." Sirius put his free arm around Aletha's shoulders. "I'd prefer talking, or sitting together, but if you really want to brood, I'll brood." He lowered his eyebrows and glowered at her.

Aletha slapped his ear, a little harder than her usual playful smacks, and Danger cleared her throat. "You can brood, or fight, or do whatever you'd like after you have something to eat, Letha," she said firmly. "I've been watching you. A few mouthfuls of soup and a mug of tea are not going to keep you going."

"And what if I don't want to keep going?" Aletha shot back.

She'll try to bait us, Remus' memory-voice cautioned in the back of Danger's mind. Don't rise to it. "Then, for today at least, you're out of luck. Now sit down and eat some of this."

"What is it?" Sirius said, guiding Aletha to the table.

“It’s called a smoothie. Aunt Amy gave me the recipe when she was here for your wedding. Very soft and cold, good for a sore throat, and if I understand it right, very tasty as well...” Danger reached behind her and pressed a button on the blender.

With a soft *phut* noise, the top of the cup came off.

The pinkish semi-liquid substance within promptly distributed itself liberally all over the kitchen.

“I think,” Danger said after a moment of dripping silence, “I may have pressed the wrong button.”

Sirius scowled. “*I think that thing may have been pranked again.*”

Aletha licked her lips. “I think you’re right,” she said.

Sirius and Danger both looked at her. “Which one?” Sirius asked after a moment.

“Both.” Aletha smiled, a real smile for the first time in two days, if a bit shaky. “And I also think you both look ridiculous.”

Danger laughed aloud. “Did you ever see the picture of ‘We Three’?” she quoted. “Sirius, can you clean this up? I left my wand upstairs.”

“One of these days we’re going to teach you to be a real witch,” Sirius grumbled, picking up his wand from where he’d left it on the table.

“Why should you?” Aletha said. “She’s so much more fun as she is.”

Three brisk wand-waves sent the smoothie back into the blender, and Sirius turned to look at his wife. “I’ve been a bad influence on you, haven’t I?”

“Only in the best of ways.” Aletha closed her eyes and laid her head against his shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she said indistinctly into his robes. “I shouldn’t be...”

“Hard on yourself?” Danger interjected, detaching the blender cup from its base, taking a moment as she did to peer at the buttons. “No. You shouldn’t be.” The smoothie went into a tall glass, and she carried it over to the table and sat down across from the Blacks, pushing it across to them. “You have a perfect right to grieve. If it’s hard on us sometimes... well, we’ll live. For right now, though, I think we need to be worrying about something else.”

“Like what?” Sirius asked.

“Like finding out exactly who relabeled one of those buttons as ‘Eject.’”

Eject, is it? Remus’ voice said in the back of her mind, chuckling as he reviewed the last few moments through her eyes. **Now why does that sound familiar, I wonder...**

xXxXx

Harry poked his sausage with a fork.

“Not hungry?” Ron asked from across the table.

“You can’t have it.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

“Sure you weren’t,” Draco said from two places down.

Ron flicked a vulgar Marauder-sign at Harry’s brother. “Sideways,” he added aloud. “Twice.”

“Wouldn’t that hurt?” Hermione said without looking up from her own breakfast.

“I think that’s the point,” said Ginny, slicing off a lump of eggs. “Harry, why aren’t you eating?”

Harry grumbled under his breath—he’d been hoping Ron and Draco would pull everyone’s attention off him for once. “Not hungry.”

“There are too many people looking at you,” Luna said, pouring herself another glass of milk. “You’ve been by yourself for a long time, except with the DA, and that was different. Now everyone is staring at you again, and you don’t like it.”

“I could stop them,” Neville offered. “Or at least make them look away for a while.”

“Thanks, but…” Harry sighed. “I think I’d better get used to it again. It’s not like it’s going to stop.”

“But you can’t do it all at once,” said Ginny, squeezing his wrist. “And you have to eat.”

“Because I’m not taking care of you if you don’t,” Meghan said, glaring at her big brother with eyes almost as bloodshot as her mother’s. “I’ll just let you starve. You watch.”

Neville put an arm around Meghan briefly. “It won’t be flashy,” he said to Harry. “You won’t disappear. Everyone will just forget there’s anything interesting over here.”

“It won’t drain you too far?”

Neville shook his head. “Not at Hogwarts, not something this simple.” A momentary smile crossed his face. “If I could do it for myself for most of my life, I can do it for you for a few days.”

Harry chuckled once. “All right. I could do with a break.”

Neville shut his eyes and put his arm back around Meghan, who leaned into him. His lips moved, and a ripple of magic wafted past Harry, salt-mint-stone-smelling, with a flicker of gold patterned with purple and gray.

Harry sighed in relief as the palpable pressure of ‘people watching’ lessened to almost nothing. It was as though the entire student body of Hogwarts had decided collectively that he wasn’t important enough to look at anymore. He still didn’t want to eat, but he thought now he could probably manage it.

“That’s not all that’s troubling you, is it?” Ginny asked quietly.

Silently, Harry cursed observant girlfriends. “No, but I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“I understand. When you do, I’m here.” She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, then returned to her own food.

Sometime, maybe I will. But right here, right now, today, you really don’t need to hear that I’m still blaming myself for my baby brother’s being dead.

Harry swallowed against the bitter thought, skewered the formerly offending sausage with his fork, and flicked a bit of fire at it, burning it in half. If no one was supposed to be looking at him, he might as well take advantage of that.

Besides, it tastes better when it’s a little charred.

He shoved the bite of sausage into his mouth and chewed.

At least holidays start soon.

xXxXx

When holly wand met wand of yew,

The endless fight began anew;

A third there is, with cloak and stone—

Who’d win must call them first his own.

But they shall come, as shall those shells

In which unhallowed spirit dwells;

Your task is now to other ways,

To end a spell of ancient days.

A curse once on your best-loved gift

Should start your thoughts in proper drift,

For why had hawk to take it on?

What stopped the wolf in days agone?

But ere your thoughts can reach their peak,

The far-off Seeker must you seek.

Do watch him, yet do not mistrust,

For justice sometimes strikes unjust—

As you shall know when winter's through,

For sorrow is not done with you.

Sleep not the year's first night of care;

Of old safekeepings now beware;

For much has changed, though some's the same,

And naught's yet come of one old game.

Do what you must, wolf's darling kit,

And shed no tears for doing it;

Save tears for those who hold you dear

And fall as seen by owlsight clear.

So help the new-turned nymph be brave

And save the one you've power to save,

For lion's line continue must

Ere elder serpent's fall to dust.

Remus looked once more at the paper in his hand, then up at Danger. "Another one already?"

"I guess we got through a 'year' a little faster than they thought we would." Danger grinned. "Possibly because our cubs drove Umbridge so crazy she left ahead of schedule."

Remus winced. "I hated her as much as you did, love, but I still wouldn't say 'left' is the best word for what happened to her."

"Right." Danger stopped, frowning. "Wait a second..."

“No, don’t.” Remus scanned the paper again. “These first lines are easy enough. Harry’s wand is holly, and Voldemort’s could easily be yew. It fits him. So when they fought, the war started again.”

“Officially.” Danger closed her eyes, and Remus felt her slide in behind his. “‘A third there is’—a third what? Fight?”

“No, only one fight was mentioned.” Remus tapped the word. “But two wands. So a third wand.”

“A wand that has something to do with a cloak and a stone.” Danger grumbled under her breath. “Have I mentioned lately that I really hate riddles?”

Remus chuckled and kept reading.

xXxXx

Ron slumped in a chair in front of the common room fire and stared at the flames.

There are days I hate being me.

Why couldn’t I have been somebody else? Somebody who doesn’t have problems like this? Somebody like... like Neville, maybe. He never had to wonder about what he’s got. He just got it, and he’s never had any real trouble with it. And it’s an awfully nice thing to have, too.

Harry had it like this once, but he figured it out somehow, and of course everything just worked for him. It happens like that when you’re The Boy Who Lived. The thought was grouchy but without much rancor in it. I still don’t really want to think about him with that, though, not with the way it came out in the end.

Even Draco has it good. All he has to do is pick. He doesn’t have to worry about what happens if the answer’s no. And he knows how he feels about them both already, so he doesn’t have to wonder about it every damned day!

His hands clenched momentarily on the arms of the chair. Then he sighed and let go.

It’s my problem. I’ll deal with it. Eventually.

“There you are!” cooed a syrupy voice behind him. “I’ve been looking everywhere!”

Or it’ll deal with me.

“Hullo, Lavender,” Ron said, turning around and grinning. “Sit down?”

“But you’ve got the only—oh!” She squeaked as he hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her down onto his lap.

A moment later, neither of them were in a position to make any further noise.

What the hell. At least she's nice.

Worry later. Snog now.

xXxXx

Draco stood at the top of the Astronomy Tower, looking off into the distance. The wind whipped up around him, and he leaned into it, feeling invisible snowflakes brush his cheeks.

If I jumped off the Tower right now, would something save me? I'm not supposed to die for another year and a half—does that mean I'm immortal until then?

He snorted. *Right. With my luck, I'd survive the fall and cling to life in terrible pain for eighteen months before finally succumbing to the mercy of oblivion.*

“And why I'm thinking of it in those particular terms, I have no idea,” he said aloud. “Probably Padfoot's fault.”

A soft footstep crunched the snow behind him. “Probably,” agreed a feminine voice. “Everything is, you know.”

Draco half-turned with a smile. “Morning, Neenie.”

“Good morning, Fox.” Hermione finger-combed his hair back into order where the wind had disarranged it. “Looking forward to the holidays?”

“I think so. But we have something else to do before then.”

Hermione nodded somberly. “I know. I was just making sure I had all my homework in order so I don't fall behind.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Only you, Neenie. Only you.”

“Oh, don't give me that. I've seen you studying like mad the week before a Quidditch match so you wouldn't have to do any work while you were practicing.”

“That's different.”

“How?”

“I don't know. It just is.” Draco turned back to stare into the wind again. It would make a good excuse. “I don't really want to go,” he said quietly.

Hermione came up beside him and slid her gloved hand into his bare one, pressing the skin of her wrist against his. **I don't think any of us do. It hurts to even think about it, doesn't it?**

Yes. Draco tugged at Hermione's glove, cutting off the mental connection before she could see

why it stung him particularly. "It isn't fair," he went on aloud. "We should have been getting excited about him, playing jokes on Letha and Padfoot, laying bets on when he'd be born. Not getting ready to go to his funeral."

Hermione sniffed once. "It almost seems silly to cry," she said, her voice distant. "We never saw him or held him or had a chance to love him. Except we did start loving him, the minute we knew he was there. And now he's gone..."

Draco reached around and turned her so that she was leaning against him, and she buried her face against his cloak, her shoulders shaking.

And this just makes me more afraid for you, for everyone, because if this is what happens to us now with Marcus, what'll happen to you when...

He shied away from the thought, as though it could somehow leap through the layers of cloth between him and his twin. Of all the people in the world, she was the one he least wanted to know about that.

It'll hurt her enough when it happens. I can't make her live through all the waiting too.

Instead he brought to mind the images of a grey-eyed baby from the restored memories Harry had shared with the Pride.

He looks like a sweet kid. Probably trouble, but he's a Marauder's cub. We're all trouble in the end.

A tear fell into Hermione's hair, freezing solid like a crystal woven into her wild curls.

He never even had a chance...

xXxXx

Harry stood outside a small church, staring across the square at the war memorial in its center. It was an illusion, he knew; if he walked a few steps closer to it, he would see what it really was, but Ginny was working and he didn't want to disturb her.

I hope they like it. When Moony told me what was here, it popped up right away, like somebody put it in my head. Maybe somebody did...

He glanced upward, but no answer was forthcoming from any source, worldly or otherwise.

All right, be that way. Maybe I'll just go and dance on your grave.

Harry smiled a little at his own mock indignation, but the joke was less funny than it could have been. Somewhere in this place, possibly in the very graveyard behind him, were buried the mortal remains of Godric Gryffindor, probably of his wife and children as well. If so, though, the gravesites were long lost.

Good thing it's not them I'm here to visit, then.

He turned away from the square and started for the graveyard. Danger was waiting for him just inside the kissing gate leading into it, holding it open for him.

“Aren't you supposed to be watching both of us?” Harry asked as he stepped through the gate.

“Help is on the way.” Danger looked past him and smiled. “Hello, help.”

Harry turned and smiled. “Hello, Mrs. Weasley.”

Tonks planted her hands on her hips and glared. “There are only four people in the world who're allowed to call me that, and you're not one of them.”

“It's your name, isn't it?” Harry ducked a swat. “All right, all right. Hello, Tonks.”

“Better. Wotcher, Danger. Ginny back in the square?”

“Just head for the memorial. You've been here before, you said?”

Tonks nodded. “One of those places you have to go if you grow up magical. Well, maybe not in some cases,” she amended, glancing at Harry again.

“We had reason to stay away,” Danger said. “See you in a few minutes.”

“See you.” Tonks wrinkled up her face, and a moment later there was a Danger on either side of the kissing gate. They nodded to each other, Tonks started for the square, and the real Danger looked at Harry.

“You don't have to do this if you don't want to,” she said.

“No.” Harry shook his head. “I should have done it a long time ago.”

Danger inclined her head silently, and they set off into the graveyard.

The snow was deep around the gravestones, and Harry glanced over his shoulder more than once to see the deep furrows his feet and Danger's left. Some of the names engraved all around were familiar, ones he knew from Hogwarts, Abbotts and Goldsteins and Cauldwells, a Boot or two, one solitary Lamb—

And then he stopped dead, staring at a particular stone.

Who—

“Harry?” Danger was at his side, her hand on his shoulder. “What is it?”

Numbly, Harry pointed.

Danger turned, and her eyes went wide. “Oh my.”

Gently, she knelt and brushed away the snow from the spotted granite stone, then ran her fingers over the numbers which were carved under the names. “I knew he had a brother,” she murmured, “but not about this...”

Harry blinked several times, coming out of his momentary shock. “Who were they, do you think?” he asked.

“From the dates, I’d guess his mother and his sister. Kendra and Ariana... pretty names, both of them...” Danger chuckled suddenly. “And his parents seem to have had an obsession with the letter A.”

Harry peered past her. ““Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,”” he read aloud, then frowned. “Wait. If this is his mother and his sister, then where’s his father buried?”

“We’ll have to ask sometime.” Danger stood up, brushing snow from her knees. “For now, let’s make sure we know where we’re going tomorrow.”

They set off again, plowing through the snow with their heads down, but now Harry’s mind refused to let go of the headstone they’d stopped by. Why had Dumbledore never mentioned, in all the years he had known the Pack, that he had family members buried in Godric’s Hollow just as Harry did? For that matter, why were they buried here? Had they lived here at some point?

The mathematical part of his brain had been quietly ticking away at the dates it had noted, and now presented him with a different conundrum to puzzle at. Kendra Dumbledore had died in what, for a witch, was the prime of her life, and Ariana...

She was fourteen. Younger than me. And she died only a few months after her mother did.

Was that why Dumbledore never spoke about his family, other than a few jovial references to his eccentric brother? Did he still hurt for their deaths, still miss them and long for them, even after all these years?

“Harry.” Danger’s hand closed on his arm, halting him. “We’re here.”

Harry nodded, head still bowed, and closed his eyes for a second to remember his father’s smile, his mother’s laugh. He could see them again, he could remember the way they’d looked and spoken to him...

I just can’t remember what it felt like to have them hug me. How Dad shook me to stop me panicking, or how soft Mum’s hair was when we compared heights. The way it felt to laugh when they joked with each other, like I’d known them forever, the way it should have been.

For the memories he’d received back from Dumbledore were not the same as the ones he’d given up to fool Voldemort. They were at one remove, secondhand, as though he’d seen them through someone else’s pendants or in a Pensieve. He could see and hear everything that had happened

between himself and his parents, but he saw it and heard it only as an onlooker. Their touch, their scent, the moments they had shared were forever denied to him.

I knew it would happen. I agreed to it. Beating Voldemort was more important.

I just wish...

Harry turned to his right, lifted his head, and opened his eyes before he could finish that thought.

The stone's clean edges were the only thing that let him differentiate it from the untouched snow around it. He reached out a hand and touched it, obscurely disappointed when all he felt was the chill of winter-kissed marble.

"Dad was born in March," he said, his eyes roving across the carvings. "Like Moony."

"They used to have a big party near the beginning of March for all four of them," Danger said, her voice distant, as though she were speaking across the years. "Peter was born in the summertime, so they were never at school for his birthday, and they split the difference for the other three, the way Aletha and I do with ours."

"And Mum..." Harry turned to look at Danger and winked. "My mums were all born in a row. November, December, January."

"Brat." Danger tweaked a lock of his hair, her eyes swirling with blue and suspiciously bright. "You're going to make me blubber, you know."

"I know." Harry looked back at the gravestone, at the quotation carved under the two names and lists of dates, and his eyes misted until he could barely see.

He had wondered, sometimes, what it would be like to stand at his parents' grave. Would he be sad, or awed, or proud? Would he cry, or say something, or would he just stand and look at it? Would it even be right for them, for all they had been and all they'd done?

Now he was here, and discovering that it was entirely possible to feel all those things at once. He was crying, yes, and standing and looking, and yes, it was right for them, it was enough, as much as anything earthly could be enough. All that remained was to say something.

Something that isn't silly, that is.

"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death," he read slowly, out loud. He turned back and looked at Danger, and smiled through his tears.

"It already is," he said. "Somewhere, it already is."

Danger smiled back through her own tears, and reached out and pulled him close, and they held each other and cried together there in the snow, mourning two people who had touched their lives deeply but whom neither of them had ever truly known.

Meghan sat beside her bubbling cauldron in Potions, half-listening to Natalie murmuring the directions aloud as she followed them. Her mind was in a snow-filled graveyard far away, where she knew Danger and Harry and Ginny were getting ready for tomorrow.

I've never been to a funeral before. Am I supposed to cry? I'm probably supposed to cry, especially since he was my baby brother, but I don't want to cry where everyone can see me. Every time I've started crying for him when I'm alone, I haven't been able to stop. What if that happens again tomorrow?

“Meghan.” Natalie’s fingers snapped under her nose. “Meghan. I need your help.”

“Oh.” Meghan blinked a few times. “What is it?”

“Stir three times clockwise,” Natalie said, handing her the stirring stick. “Then stop, wait five seconds, and stir twice counterclockwise.”

Meghan lowered the stick into the cauldron and stirred. *One, two, three, stop. One no more Marcus, two no more Marcus, three no more Marcus...*

A tear rolled down her face and fell into the potion before she could stop it. Another followed, and she forgot about stirring, forgot about everything except the storm sweeping through her.

The stick dropped from her hand and clanged into the cauldron, the potion hissed ominously, and Natalie turned around. “Meghan? Are you—oh no. Professor! Professor Snape!”

Meghan barely heard the shout, or the rumble from the cauldron at which she still stared through blind eyes. Some part of her, deep inside, wished it would explode. It might take her away from the pain in her heart.

She hated that pain. It was the first pain she had ever met that she could not heal. She hated it and feared it and raged against it, and it only hurt her more every time she did. Worse than that, it wasn't just her pain, it was her Dadfoot's and her Mama Letha's and everyone else's pain too, and some of theirs had even sharper edges than hers. Harry's pain, in particular, jabbed at her every time she was near him, because Harry thought... she didn't know what, but something bad. About Marcus, and him, like a knife in his heart, and hers too, whenever she was close by.

She didn't know what dying was like, but she couldn't live like this, not anymore, not with so much hurt. Maybe dying would be better. Harry's parents would meet her on the other side, and take care of her the way they were taking care of Marcus, and she would never have to hurt again...

Strong hands closed around her arms and drew her away from the empty cauldron. A deep voice over her head spoke calm words she heard distantly. “Macdonald, Pritchard, my office. The rest of you, dismissed. Homework, sixteen inches on what nearly happened to Miss Black's potion and why.”

She went where the hands took her, her feet feeling their way across the floor, until she was lifted bodily and set in a chair, and the hands released her. More words, undecipherable, and the sound of a bottle opening...

Suddenly something horrible and acrid and bitter was under her nose. She threw herself back in the chair, gasping for air, as her eyes flooded completely in reflex. A handkerchief materialized in her hand, and she scrubbed desperately at her face, coughing and choking on just the memory of that terrible stench.

Finally she blotted her eyes one last time and looked up. She was sitting in a wooden chair in Professor Snape's office, Graham and Natalie standing to one side, watching her anxiously. Snape himself was sitting behind his desk, his black eyes on hers, unreadable.

"I..." Meghan coughed again on the word, and had to spend a moment breathing deeply before she could trust herself to speak. "I'm sorry, Professor. I didn't mean to."

"Miss Black," Snape said, "I have given weeks of detentions to students for less than the chaos you nearly caused in my classroom just now."

"I know." Meghan turned her head away. "I'm sorry."

"So you said." Snape rose abruptly and came around his desk. "Hold out your hand, Miss Black."

Meghan looked up at him, startled. "Why?"

Snape glared at her. "Do as you are told, Miss Black. For once."

Timidly, Meghan extended her hand, and Snape seized it in his own. Leaning over her, he stared into her eyes.

"It is time you learned," he said softly, "the meaning of real pain."

xXxXx

"What is he doing to her?" Graham hissed to Natalie.

"I don't know, but I don't like it." Natalie fidgeted. "Should we get someone?"

"To do what? They're just standing there. Well, standing and sitting."

It was true. Neither Professor Snape nor Meghan had moved since Snape had grabbed her hand, leaned over her, and said something neither Graham or Natalie had heard. Meghan was crying again, but the only things moving were the tears rolling down her face.

"They are breathing, right?" Natalie said nervously. "I mean, you see them breathing too?"

"They're breathing." Graham shivered. "If it were any colder in here, you'd be able to see their

breath.”

“I always wondered about that—why don’t they...”

Why they didn’t do whatever they didn’t do would never be known, as Professor Snape picked this moment to drop Meghan’s hand and whirl away from her as though she’d burned him. Meghan went limp, falling forward onto her own lap, her whole body shaking convulsively.

“You two,” Snape said without turning. “Take her. Get out.”

Graham and Natalie hesitated, looking at each other.

“OUT!” Snape roared, still with his back to them.

That settled it. Graham ran forward to lift Meghan out of the chair, throwing her arm over his shoulder and hoisting her half-upright, as Natalie snatched up their three bags, then raced to help on Meghan’s other side before her near-deadweight pulled Graham down. Three abreast, awkwardly, they stumbled out the door of Snape’s office, out of the dungeon, and up the stairs to the entrance hall, where they collapsed next to a suit of armor in a weary heap.

“Meghan?” Natalie said tentatively. “Are you all right?”

Meghan blinked, her eyes coming slowly into focus. “I don’t know,” she whispered. “It was another hurt, a hurt like my hurt, but it was a hurt my hurt could help, and it could help me...” She laughed a little shivery ghost of a laugh. “That doesn’t make any sense, does it?”

“Not much,” Graham said. “Do you need the hospital wing?”

“No.” Meghan took a deep breath, in and out. “I think I just need to rest. I feel like I’ve been healing. Except I haven’t, I don’t think...”

Out of the corner of his eye, Graham saw a flicker of familiar movement. “Stay with her,” he said to Natalie, and jumped to his feet. “Excuse me!” he shouted, running across the hall. “Baron, sir!”

The Bloody Baron stopped and turned, still most of the way through the wall, so that all Graham could see was his face and one of his knees. “Pritchard,” he said in his coldest tones. “To what do I owe the... pleasure?”

“Please, sir, my friend’s not well, and I don’t think we can get her upstairs by ourselves.” Graham pointed towards Meghan, praying he’d caught the Baron in a good mood. “Can you please find her brother Draco and ask him to come down to the entrance hall to help us?” Draco and Meghan at least had the same last name, even if they looked nothing alike.

The Baron looked past Graham to Meghan and Natalie, and his eyes narrowed. “Gryffindors,” he said softly.

“Yes, sir, but...” Graham’s words dried up on his tongue as the Baron looked back at him.

“But *what* , Pritchard?” the ghost said after a fairly large fraction of forever.

Graham swallowed hard. “They’re my friends, sir. They helped me when no one else would.”

“Friends, are they?” The Baron looked piercingly at him. “Friends change. Turn away. Lose their nerve at the most crucial moment. Don’t rely on them.”

“I, er, I won’t, sir. But right now, Meghan needs help.” A tiny stroke of inspiration shot through Graham’s mind. “Besides, if I help her now, then she’s indebted to me. And so is her family. She’s related to a lot of people.”

“I see.” The Baron glanced once more from Graham to the girls, Meghan now with her head pillowed against Natalie’s bag, then nodded once. “I will see to it Draco Black gets your message. Be careful of your friends, Pritchard. And even more careful of what enemies your friends may make you.”

“Yes, sir.” Graham bowed. When he straightened up, the Bloody Baron was gone.

I hate talking to him. You never know when he’s going to come over all prophetic on you.

Dismissing the shudder which had come over him at the Baron’s last words, Graham jogged back to the girls. On his way, he recalled what he had tucked into his bag.

“Meghan, I have something for you,” he said when he was sitting beside them again. “Or for you and your family, really.”

Meghan opened her eyes. “What is it?”

Graham dug into his bag and produced it.

“It’s beautiful!” Meghan pushed herself more upright to get a better look at the small bouquet of flowers. “Did you make it?”

Graham shook his head. “No, but I wish I had. It’s perfect. All the right meanings.”

“Meanings?” Natalie said, taking the dark red and blue bouquet from Graham and sniffing it. “Oh, it’s spicy.”

“That’s the greenery. It’s—”

“Rosemary,” Meghan finished before Graham could. “Danger uses it in her cooking.” She smiled sadly and reached out to touch one of the long, spear-like leaves. “It’s for remembrance.”

“That’s right. And the sweet peas are for goodbye, and this color of rose is for mourning.”

“Flower language,” Natalie said, stroking one of the tiny, deep crimson roses. “I learned about that in school. My old school. Before... everything.” Her hand encompassed Hogwarts, magic, and the

entire wizarding world. "I liked the idea. A secret language." She stopped, frowning. "Except if everyone knew it, how could it be secret?"

"Well, if you sent bouquets back and forth to each other's houses, it could be," Graham said. "Or if you wore flowers and nobody knew who they were meant for. But I always thought it wasn't so much secret as it was shy. A way to say things without having to make the words come out of your mouth. Especially if they're things you might be embarrassed about."

Like telling a girl you might really like her.

He sat on that thought before it could go any farther.

"But Graham," Meghan said, pulling his attention back outside his head. "If you didn't make this, who did?"

"You're not going to believe it."

"Tell me anyway."

"It was Nott."

A second and a half of silence.

"Well." Natalie pouted. "If you aren't going to *tell* us..."

"But I just did tell you—" Graham broke off and scowled. "You're taking the mickey, aren't you?"

Natalie glanced at Meghan, and they both went into fits of giggles.

Graham leaned down and very slowly beat his head against his bag.

I will never learn. If I live to be a hundred, I will never learn.

And the saddest part was, he actually thought he preferred it that way.

xXxXx

"Potter!"

Harry froze halfway out of his seat at the Gryffindor table and turned slowly around. "Dursley," he acknowledged.

"Glad I caught you." Dudley Dursley had something in his right hand and a worried, determined look on his face. "Er—can we talk?"

Harry glanced at the table full of Gryffindors all watching avidly, then at the rest of the Great

Hall, all with their heads turned. “We can talk,” he said. “I don’t know how private it will be.”

“Um.” Dursley reddened. “I... well...”

“Let’s try down at the end of the table,” Harry said, swinging his leg over the bench and standing up. Behind his back, he gestured to Neville. *Take us down slowly.* Two coughs were his acknowledgement, and he turned his attention back to Dursley. “Walk with me?”

“Sure. Thanks.” Dursley glanced down at the small circle of wood he was holding, an amulet of some sort, Harry thought. “I... well, it’s sort of...”

“Walk.” Harry pointed down the table. “You know, make the feet move. One in front of the other.”

“Oh. Right.” Dursley started in the right direction, and Harry followed, after a moment to sign his bewilderment to the Pride, most of whom answered in kind.

“So,” he said when they’d reached the end of the table (and when most of the heads had turned back to their dinners). “What did you want to talk about?”

“This.” Dursley held up the amulet. “I heard about your brother, and... this is going to sound stupid, I know it is, but I almost feel like it could have been me. Being your brother. I mean, I know we’re not, we’re cousins, and we barely know each other, and I was a berk to you over the summer, but...” He flushed again, but kept talking. “It’s Dad, he hates magic, I had to be like that so he wouldn’t hate me too, I don’t like him much but he’s the only one I’ve got, and I just felt like... like I owed you somehow.” He extended the amulet. “Here. It’s a sort of magic ‘I’m sorry’ thing. I got it by Express Owl Order.”

He has got to be kidding.

Harry inhaled cautiously, expecting to be flooded by the porcine scents of deception and self-satisfaction—

He coughed in surprise. Dursley’s scent held only truth, laden with an undertone of desperation and a tinge of shared sorrow, both muted but definitely there.

All right, maybe he’s not...

“What does it do?” Harry asked, looking at the amulet again. Up close, he could see the small signs of runes carved into it, similar to the talismans they’d once made in Defense Against the Dark Arts, back when Padfoot and Letha had been teaching it.

“It doesn’t do anything. At least, it shouldn’t. It’s just a message. It says the person who’s wearing it is sad, because they lost their son, and everyone around them should be sorry and hope they have more sons soon.” Dursley shrugged. “I thought maybe you could give it to your godfather. To wear. I mean, if he wants to.”

I don’t believe this. I would have thought...

Harry cracked a smile. "Thanks."

Then again, I've seen him on a broom. Proof enough. Pigs really can fly.

He lifted his hand and accepted the amulet from Dursley's.

And if he's going to be decent, I probably shouldn't think about him as a pig anymore.

Even if it is what he looks most like.

"You're welcome." Dursley glanced back up the table at the rest of the Pride, who had their necks unabashedly craned to see what was happening. "I hope everything goes well. With the funeral. I mean..." He shook his head. "I'll see you."

"See you," Harry answered.

Dursley turned away and headed for the door of the Great Hall, nearly bumping into Theodore Nott along the way. They stared at each other for a long moment. Even as far away as he was, Harry could smell the distrust and hate boiling off them both.

I've never been happier not to be a Slytherin.

Have to ask Zabini what's going on between them...

He turned and started back towards the Pride. This one, they were never going to believe.

xXxXx

On the clear and frosty morning of the thirteenth of December, Marcus James Black was laid to rest in the churchyard of Godric's Hollow, in a tiny plot next to his namesake. His father wore a carved amulet around his neck on a bronze chain, and his mother carried a bouquet of roses and sweet peas. His godparents each spoke a few words, and his siblings and their dearest friends held one another and cried as the earth was shoveled over the small coffin.

Afterwards, they made their way to the center of the village, to the war memorial which had another meaning hidden beneath it.

"I have been here before, you know," Sirius said to no one as their small procession moved forward. "I've seen what it does."

"You've never seen it like this before," said Remus. "Trust me."

"This had better not be some silly plan to make us laugh," Aletha warned.

"Not at all," Danger said. "This was Harry's idea."

Sirius and Aletha both stopped and turned to look at Harry, walking with Ginny on his arm just

behind Remus and Danger.

Harry looked away. “It was Ginny who actually did it,” he muttered.

“Working from your memories,” Ginny countered. “And with your permission.” She met Sirius’ eyes, then Aletha’s. “Just go and see if you like it. Please.”

The Blacks glanced at one another, then moved forward together the last few steps to reveal the statue as it truly was. James Potter, one arm protectively around Lily’s shoulders; Lily, smiling out at the world; and in her arms—

Aletha’s hand went to her mouth. Sirius simply looked, filling his eyes with the sight.

The child Lily held was no longer Harry, but Marcus.

After a long, long moment, Aletha turned and found Harry and Ginny both there beside her. She took them into her arms and held them close, and Sirius embraced them all, and Meghan ran to cling to the outside of the hug and look up at her brother’s face until Sirius shifted an arm and pulled her in.

As though that had been a signal, the entire Pack closed in on one another, and the three remaining members of the Pride held back only for an instant before joining them. They held each other, and shivered in the winter chill, and cried, most of them, for what was lost. But one long and lanky arm dared to slide around shoulders draped with brown curls, and was not shoved away as it had feared might happen, and its owner shed his tears for what was found.

xXxXx

Far away, a man smiled in satisfaction at the tiny, steady pulse of magic being put out by his enchanted token.

I thought they wouldn’t be able to resist it. Too perfect, too apt for the moment. And I was right.

Come next full moon, we’ll see just how well its little secret works...

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Facing Danger

Chapter 28: Home for the Holidays (Arc 6)

“Meghan, was that Nott’s bouquet your mum was carrying?” Neville asked as they waited their turn for the Floo in the Fwooper and Firstie, the wizarding pub of Godric’s Hollow.

Meghan nodded. “Why?”

“I just wondered if I could see it, whenever she’s done with it. There’s magic on the flowers. But I’m sure you knew that already.”

“Dadfoot and Moony checked that and the amulet both,” Meghan said, smiling thanks at a passing witch who murmured her condolences. “The flowers have preserving magic on them to keep them fresh, and a little spell got engraved on the ring holding them to help people feel better. And the amulet is just what Dursley said it was—it sends out magic that makes people around it want boys.” She pouted. “What’s wrong with girls?”

Neville let this question pass. “How far do the spells reach, do you know?”

“Only a little ways. Maybe from one end of the room to the other. And they’ll run out of magic within about a month, so you don’t have to worry about them.”

“I worry about everything. It’s my job.”

“You can say that again—but don’t,” Meghan added hastily.

“Would I?”

“You’ve been around Harry and Draco too long. Yes, you would.”

Neville put an arm around her shoulders. “If you say so.”

“I do.” Meghan leaned into the embrace.

“Good to have that settled.”

The rest of the wait was spent in companionable silence.

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Harry awakened the next morning in fairly good humor, which lasted until he noticed that everyone he passed in the hall was either staring at him or very obviously not staring at him. He ducked into Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom to check his appearance, but everything looked normal.

Myrtle floated up out of her cubicle. “Hello, Harry,” she said. “Why do you have a halo around your head? Does it mean you’re dead now?”

“Why do I have a what?”

“A halo. Like an angel.” Myrtle gestured a circle around her own head. “But it has letters floating around it. R, O, H, E.”

Harry bit his tongue to keep from saying what he wanted. “Myrtle, can you tell where it’s coming from?” he asked instead. “Is it something I ate, or something I did?”

“It looks like someone just put a spell on you while you were asleep,” Myrtle said, swooping around him. “Can’t you see it?”

“No. I can’t.”

“Then maybe that was part of the spell.” Myrtle giggled. “I see what the word is now. You are one, you know.”

“I know. And so does everyone else. I don’t need to advertise.” Harry took another look in the mirror. His reflection looked back, apparently entirely normal. “If I could just see—wait a second!”

He dug into his bag, to the very bottom, and came up with what he wanted—the tinted lenses George had given him to fit over his glasses, the ones which would let him see magic. Snapping them into place, he looked back at his reflection and winced. “Merlin’s socks, it’s *huge* .”

“You’re a huge hero,” Myrtle said adoringly.

Harry considered his options. Opening the Chamber of Secrets and hiding there until the spell went away was beginning to look good, as seeing the spell was giving him no clues as to how to get it off. Unless...

“Myrtle, would you please go get Hermione for me?”

“What’s in it for me?”

Harry took one more look at the halo. Rumors he’d be able to live with. This he couldn’t. “I’ll give you a kiss.”

Myrtle stared at him for an instant, blushed bright silver, and vanished through the wall at her top ghostly speed. Harry settled down to wait.

Hermione arrived a few moments later, breathless from her run, and bit her lip but did not laugh aloud, for which Harry was grateful. “Ginny and Ron are coming too,” she said, waving her wand around Harry’s head. “They think it was probably the twins, and they know more about getting that kind of hex off than anyone but Percy.”

“Great. Wonderful. Can you hold on a moment?” Harry turned to Myrtle. “Come and get it.”

“Oohhhhh,” Myrtle breathed, and drifted closer to Harry, her eyes shut. Harry stepped forward, held out his hands to encompass her intangible body, and laid his lips against where her cheek would have been.

Ginny chose this moment to come through the door. Harry broke off hastily, and Myrtle turned an even brighter silver than before and swooped into her cubicle.

“Well,” Ginny said, crossing her arms, “if I’d known you liked your girls *dead* ...”

Ron stopped in the doorway. “I don’t want to know,” he said fervently.

“You’re right. You don’t.” Harry waved him inside. “Just get it off me, all right?”

Half an hour later, they left the bathroom, Harry mostly halo-free, though a very thin band still circled his head. Hermione assured him it would wear off by the afternoon.

“It was definitely the twins,” Ginny said. “Making you the only one who can’t see it is something only they would think to do.”

Ron nodded. “I thought I heard someone knocking around the dorm last night,” he said. “But by the time I got my curtains open, everything looked normal.”

“Either they were done or they’d hidden,” Hermione said. “How are you going to get them back, Harry?”

“Oh, I have a few ideas.” Harry smiled slowly. “But I want to hear what everyone thinks, to be sure whatever we do is... appropriate.”

xXxXx

That afternoon, the Pride trooped down to Hagrid’s hut, Meghan walking importantly in the lead, her wand in one hand melting a path in front of them and an envelope in the other. Fang came charging around the house as they approached, and Hagrid opened the door to greet them.

“Dumbledore tol’ me what happened,” he said roughly, coming down the steps to take charge of Fang, on whom Draco and Harry were sitting to subdue his frantic welcome. “Thought I’d wait an’ let yeh come down when yeh were ready.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t come sooner,” Meghan said, holding out the envelope. “This is for you.”

“Fer me? Not my birthday, is it?” Hagrid took the envelope with the hand not holding Fang and looked at it curiously, then shook his head. “An’ where’s my manners—come in, come in, all o’ yeh...”

“We want to hear all about the giants,” Ron said, kicking snow off his boots against the front step. “What’re they really like?”

“Did you find your mum?” Hermione asked. “Is she all right?”

Hagrid sighed. “She died, Hermione. Years ago.”

“I’m so sorry,” Hermione said, her voice catching a little. “Do you know what happened?”

“Bad food, I think they said it was.” Hagrid rubbed at one eye. “But livin’ so rough, what d’yeh expect?” He brightened a bit. “Found sommat I wasn’t expectin’, though—but I prob’ly shouldn’t tell yeh abou’ it now...”

“No, tell us,” Draco said, hanging his coat on the tree and closing the door. “We want to hear.”

“Well...” Hagrid set the kettle on the hob. “Yeh may’ve noticed Norbert’s not with me?”

“Thank Merlin,” Harry muttered.

“Yes, tell us why,” said Ginny, kicking Harry gently in the ankle. “Did you find him a good home?”

“Found *her* th’ best home I kin think of.” Hagrid beamed. “Safe, quiet, an’ with a friend ter take care of her. Name of Grawp.”

“Grawp?” said Luna, tilting her head to one side. “Is that a giant name?”

“It is, and do yeh know what giant has that name?” Hagrid looked around the room at the Pride. “Well?”

“Some relation of yours?” Neville hazarded.

“Right first time!” Hagrid pulled a plate of cakes from the shelf and handed one to Neville. “Well done!”

Neville nodded thanks, then waved the cake where Fang could see it when Hagrid turned away.

“So Norbert’s actually a girl?” Harry said. “And you left her with one of your giant relations?”

“But not just any relation, Harry.” Hagrid visibly hesitated before continuing. “He’s my brother,” he said at last. “Little brother, I suppose, but he’s on’y little if you’re a giant—an’ yeh think I’m big, yeh ought’ve seen them!”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” Ron said. “So you’ve got a brother, Hagrid?”

“Half-brother, really, but it’s not worth quibblin’ about.” Hagrid waved a huge hand, dismissing such small concerns. “It’s part o’ the reason I was so sad ter hear what’d happened—almos’ feels indecent, me bein’ happy over meetin’ Grawpy, when Letha and Sirius jus’ lost little Marcus...”

“Don’t, Hagrid, please don’t,” Meghan said, coming over to hug Hagrid’s arm (which was what

her own arms could fit around). “I’m glad to hear you met your brother. Is he nice?”

“Well, nice fer a giant.” Hagrid hugged Meghan back gently, then scooped her up and set her on one of his shoulders. “Sommat yer size, he’d think was a snack!”

“Oi!” Harry protested. “No snacking on my sister!”

“It’d get her out of the house,” Draco reminded him in a pig’s whisper. “Forever.”

Harry pretended to consider it. “Not worth it,” he said finally. “There’d be too much trouble.”

Meghan made a face at both of them from her lofty perch.

“Will the giants help us fight, Hagrid?” Luna asked. “Or at least stay away?”

“Don’t quite know, Luna.” Hagrid moved to the fireplace, where the kettle was whistling, bending as he did so that Meghan could slide down his back and land on her feet on the floor. “Olympe an’ I were able ter head off the Death Eaters who were tryin’ ter talk ter the giants this time, but that don’t mean You-Know-Who won’ send more now that we’re gone. We might’ve got through, an’ we mightn’t’ve... s’pose we’ll know if they start showin’ up on the other side...”

More giant stories, and the Pride’s tales of the term just past, filled up two hours comfortably. Hagrid had heard a great deal about Umbridge and her ridiculous policies in the days he’d been back. “Good thing I wasn’ here,” he said at one point. “I’d’ve thrown her out meself if she’d tried expellin’ you in front o’ me, Harry.”

“And you’d just have been thrown out for it too,” Harry said. “I did fine going into hiding.”

“So yeh did.” Hagrid chuckled. “So yeh did.”

It was only as the Pride was getting ready to leave that Hermione noticed the envelope still lying unopened on the table and pointed it out to Hagrid. He ripped it carefully open, pulled out the parchment within, and read it to himself, then came across the room in three strides and hugged the whole Pride at once.

“Does this mean yes?” Draco wheezed.

Hagrid loosened up on the hug, grinning. “It does. Yes, an’ many thanks besides.”

“Good,” Hermione said, squirming out of the hug and swinging herself on top of Hagrid’s arm. “I think it’ll make Christmas even better to have you there. And Padfoot said we might even be able to have it at the Den, not at Headquarters.”

“I think he’d prefer that,” said Harry as Hagrid let them all go. “And I know Letha would. Especially since Kreacher’s back.”

“Little pest.” Hagrid made a fist. “He’d best stay out o’ my way, or I might jus’ step on him... by

accident, o' course..."

The Pride laughed all the way back to the castle at the half-guilty tone in which Hagrid had added that final phrase.

xXxXx

"This will be our last DA meeting before holidays," Harry said, standing in front of a mostly-full Room of Requirement. "When we come back, we're going to be an official school club, under Professor Longbottom."

"Does that mean you won't run the meetings anymore?" asked Su Li.

"Not unless you want me to leave—"

Harry barely got the word out before the room erupted in denials, each House trying to outdo the others in vehemence. "All right, *all right!*" he shouted, willing his words to carry, and the DA fell silent once more. "If you want me that badly, you've got me. Professor Longbottom will sit in on meetings when she can, she'll demonstrate the things I don't know yet, she might arrange for guest lecturers sometimes, but I'll keep running the show day-to-day, as much as I can."

"Why would you not be able to?" Tessa Malloy asked, looking confused.

"Because we're going to expand." Harry spread his hands to include the entire DA. "Tell all your friends about us. Tell the people you sit with in class, the others in your dorms, everyone. Try to get them to come to meetings, or at least to pay better attention in Defense—it's going to stop being a joke after holidays."

"About time," Lee Jordan said loudly.

"It's not Professor Longbottom's fault—" Neville began heatedly.

"No one thought it was," Danielle cut him off. "We all knew it was Umbridge who was keeping her from teaching us anything worthwhile. Now she's gone, we can finally start learning what we'll need to know to pass our tests."

"And to survive," Roger Davies added. "With You-Know-Who come back, another war starting..."

The DA shivered collectively. Knots of people huddled closer together.

"I think we've discussed this already," Harry said, drawing everyone's eyes back to him. "If we haven't, we should have. Drop the 'You-Know-Who' nonsense. He picked out the name himself, he shouldn't mind us saying it. *Voldemort.*"

A much larger shiver, combined with little gasps and cries. Harry ignored it. "If you can't say that, try 'Dark Git' or 'Old Moldy,'" he advised, and grinned at the nervous laughter rippling around the assembled students. "See? That's what we have to do. Laugh. Smile, play games, enjoy life."

We'll have to fight, yes. But if we lose who we are, what makes us different, then we've become what we're fighting, and Voldemort wins."

The gasps were slightly fewer this time, but still present. Harry scowled. "I'll stand here saying it all day if I have to. Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort!"

"Oh, stop!" Fred cried in a high-pitched, trembling voice. "Stop, or I shall swoon!"

A real laugh this time. Harry joined it, then nodded to the Pride. They joined in his chant. "Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort!"

"Oooohhhh!" Fred pressed a hand to his forehead and wobbled in place. "How *can* you be so cruel!"

"Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort!" Harry and the Pride repeated, getting louder every time. Other DA members were joining in now—most of the Gryffindors had come in around the fourth repetition, the Hufflepuffs were gaining in strength every second, here and there a Ravenclaw joined in, and the Slytherins (to Harry's secret delight) had been shouting almost as long as the Gryffindors. "Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort!"

"Oooooooooohhhhhh!" Fred collapsed theatrically to the floor.

George dropped to his knees beside his twin, his face tragic. "Fred! Damn you, you've killed him!" he shouted at the rest of the DA before returning his attention to his brother, lifting his upper body off the ground and cradling him against his chest. "Fred, speak to me! Say something!"

Fred twitched, groaned, and opened his eyes. "Voldemort?" he said hopefully, peering up at George.

The DA exploded in laughter as George, his expression now completely disgusted, let go. Fred caught himself on his forearms and grinned around cheerily, George's expression magically changed to his usual mischievous smile, and they both took a bow from their respective positions, soaking up the applause.

Harry gauged the proper moment, then raised his hands for quiet and got it within a few moments. "Thank you, gentlemen—which term I use loosely—for making my point," he said, nodding to the twins. "It's a name. Only a name. Granted, it belongs to an evil wizard who wants us all either dead or doing whatever he wants. We're not likely to stop being afraid of him. But we shouldn't be afraid of his name. If you still want to say 'You-Know-Who' out there, that's fine. In here, we call a wand a wand." He held up his own, to renewed laughter. "Voldemort."

"Voldemort," the DA echoed in a prolonged rumble.

"So now, since we've got that out of the way..." Harry jumped down from the dais where he'd been standing. "To return to the earlier point of this meeting, about having fun and enjoying

ourselves... house-elves, please!”

A loud series of cracks echoed through the room, and at least two dozen house-elves materialized, each bearing a large bowl or platter. Tables burst from the floor to receive them, and the house-elves whisked away the covers to reveal the contents.

“We get our own feast!” Colin Creevey burst out. “Wicked!”

“Thank you, house-elves,” Harry called, prompting a chorus of “Thank you!” and “It looks great!” from the DA. The house-elves flushed and disappeared, though a few of them waved their hands in return, and Harry saw Kady giggle a bit before she vanished last of all.

“I’ve had something in the back of my head about them ever since Mum turned up in Dumbledore’s office with Winky,” Ginny said, putting her arms around Harry’s waist from behind. “I talked it over a little with Ron while we were waiting at St. Mungo’s for visiting hours...”

“How’s your dad doing, by the way?” Harry interjected.

“He’ll be all right. Home in time for Christmas, even.” Ginny chuckled. “They’ve got him taking so many potions he sloshes every time he turns over, and he still hurts some, but he’s cheerful. He’s hoping you can come visit when holidays start. He wants to say thank you in person.”

“I’ll do that.” Harry turned to face Ginny and put his own arms around her. “Do they know?” he asked. “Your mum and dad? About us?”

“I haven’t told them, if that’s what you mean, but they’ve been expecting it a long time. I’m pretty sure Dad’s in on whatever bet Mr. Padfoot and Mr. Moony have going.”

Harry sighed. “Why am I not surprised they’ve bet on my love life?”

“Because you know perfectly well they’ll bet on anything?” Ginny let go of Harry’s waist, but only to grasp his hand and tug him towards the tables. “Let’s get some food before it’s all gone.”

“Ginny, this is Hogwarts. The food is never gone.”

“That’s no reason not to get it while it’s hot.”

“Good point.”

They joined the line just behind Justin Finch-Fletchley and Heidi Mills, who was still giggling. “Your brothers are so funny!” she told Ginny. “I don’t think I’ll ever be really afraid to say...” She lowered her voice. “*Voldemort* ... ever again!”

“Yes, they’re good at what they do,” Ginny said fondly. “It almost makes me sad to think what we’re going to do to them tomorrow.”

“Something planned for tomorrow?” Justin looked interested. “A prank, maybe?”

“No spoilers,” Harry said, shaking his head. “You’ll see when everyone else does.”

“Awwww,” said Justin, Heidi, and several other people in front of them in the line.

Fred and George, on the other side of the room, turned around. “Did we hear the word ‘prank,’ perchance?” said George.

“Coupled with our noble appellation?” Fred picked up.

“Could it be—no, perish the thought...” George shuddered dramatically.

“Never fear, brother mine, I shall finish it for you.” Fred threw out a hand. “Could it be that our beloved sister cares for us less than she should?”

George recovered enough to clasp his hands soulfully at Ginny. “Less enough, perhaps, to play a prank on us?”

“On the very people who taught her the meaning of the word!” Fred appealed to the DA. “It wrings my heart.”

George laid a hand on his chest. “It wounds my soul.”

“We are broken men.” Fred shook his head sadly. “Broken beyond repair.”

“Good,” Ginny said. “Then what we’ve got planned for tomorrow won’t break you any further.”

Snickers ran around the room as the twins looked apprehensively at one another.

xXxXx

“So what were you talking about with house-elves?” Harry asked Ginny later, as the Pride sat in a circle around one of the small round tables the Room had sprouted for them.

“Well, what’s the one magical thing you can’t do at Hogwarts?” Ginny asked, looking around the entire table.

“Apparate,” Hermione said promptly. “Or Disapparate.”

“It comes to the same thing,” Ron said, waving a fork loaded with roast beef. “The point is, that’s only true about wizards and witches. Not about other creatures.”

“Other creatures like house-elves!” Meghan bounced once in her chair. “Can they take people with them when they do it?”

“Winky can,” said Ginny. “She brought Mum to Dumbledore’s office while Harry was missing,

remember?”

“And if Winky can, other house-elves should be able to,” Draco said, nodding. “Ginny, I think you’re onto something.”

“The Flying Squad,” said Harry. “Pair up DA members with house-elves. Snap into a spot, throw a spell, snap out again. They’d never be there long enough to be shot at, and there’d be no way to predict where they’d show up.”

“The only problem would be if the Death Eaters started booby-trapping whole rooms,” Neville said. “Or setting up deadfalls that would respond to house-elf magic.”

“They wouldn’t do that if they didn’t know we were partnering with house-elves in the first place,” said Luna. “It’s why Wrackspurt attacks are so successful—no one can tell they’re there, so no one can defend against them...”

“How would we stop them knowing we were working with house-elves, Starwing?” Draco cut in.

“Easy.” Luna smiled. “The house-elf hides under our robes.”

“Of course,” said Hermione, starting to smile. “As long as all the students who do this are old enough to have learned to Apparate, or at least look it, the Death Eaters would just think that we’d found a way to avoid the wards. They’d never think to look for non-human magic—”

“Because they think all non-humans are scum,” Harry finished. “Ginny, you’ve definitely got something there. Put it on the list for next term.”

Ron snickered. “Another thing we could do,” he said. “Wear a talisman pinned on our robes, or around our necks. They’ll think it’s that we’re using to get past the wards, they’ll try to steal one, and when they get one, they’ll try to Apparate around the castle with it on...”

Ginny winced. “They might manage to bend the wards a little, because they think they can,” she said. “But they wouldn’t get all the way through them. And you know what *that* means.”

Neville ripped a bread roll in half and held up the pieces, making the Pride chuckle. “All we’d have to do would be walk around and pick them up in baskets,” he said. “And maybe they’d get put back together wrong.”

“By accident, of course,” said Meghan, sitting virtuously straight.

“Of course.” Neville grinned at her and tossed her half the roll.

Harry traced a design in his mashed potatoes with his fork. “You know what just struck me?” he said. “We’re assuming Death Eaters will get into Hogwarts. We’re planning for them to get through the best wards in Britain, and whatever defenses the teachers have set up... why?”

“Because it’s better to be safe than sorry?” Hermione suggested.

“Because wards can always be bypassed,” Draco added.

“And because it’s fun to think up ways to stop them being awful,” Meghan said happily. “They’ll think we’re sweet innocent little kiddies who couldn’t hurt a fly...”

“Not if they’ve ever met you, they won’t.” Harry flicked a bit of potato at Meghan. “And I knew all that, really I did.”

“You just wanted to be sure we knew it, right, mate,” Ron said, his face completely straight. “We understand.”

“Our wise and selfless leader, willing to look stupid to be sure that we know everything we need to survive,” said Ginny. “Whatever would we do without you?”

“We would cry.” Luna pulled a long face. “And be very sad in other ways. Because we love Harry.”

Neville swallowed his bite of roll. “I’d probably be panicking,” he said. “I’m not ready to be first-string against Voldemort.”

“And I am?” Harry demanded.

“You’re alive. It’s more than I’d be.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No, but I’ve got a pretty good guess.”

Harry shrugged. “It’s always been more luck than anything. Luck, and help, and him underestimating me. Which I don’t think he’ll do anymore. Which scares me quite a lot.”

“So come up with a trick he’s not expecting,” Hermione said. “Figure out a place you can hit him that he’s not guarding, a place that will hurt. And then do it again and again.”

“And keep losing my friends and family along the way?” Harry set his fork down, his appetite gone. “I’m sick of war already, and it’s barely even started yet.”

“It’s going to take a lot to lose me,” Ginny said quietly, laying her fingers on the back of his hand. “Or any of us. We’re well-protected, we can fight, and we know we might have to. What more can we do?”

“Nothing.” Harry turned his hand over to hold Ginny’s. “Unless we attack him first. And we don’t know enough yet.”

“So that’s something we can do,” Neville said. “Find out more about Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Find out what they really want. They talk about purity and power, but is that everything? And even if it is, how are they going to get it?”

“They’re going to go around killing and torturing people, how else?” Ron said.

“Yes, but which people, Ron?” Meghan asked, setting down her goblet. “If they just kill anyone, then it won’t make a difference. Voldemort’s probably got a plan. If we can figure some of it out, we might be able to stop him from doing it.”

Draco waved a hand for attention. “I thought the point of this feast was to have *fun*,” he said when everyone was looking at him. “Not to keep talking about the war, which is not fun. I move we have some fun now and talk about not-fun things later.”

“Seconded,” Harry said promptly.

“All in favor?” said Ginny.

“Aye,” said the expected chorus.

“Vote is unanimous,” Hermione droned. “Motion passes. We shall only talk about fun things at this table from here until the end of our feast.”

Harry took a deep breath and felt the load on his shoulders shift. It hadn’t gone away, but he was taking a rest from it for a moment. “So. Fun.” He picked up his fork again and scooped up some of the potatoes. “Do you think Angelina will let me back on the Quidditch team?”

Ron, Ginny, and Draco all gave him identical ‘don’t-be-stupid’ looks.

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At another table, Maya Pritchard poured gravy over her roast chicken. “I need some advice,” she said to Selena Moon, who sat next to her. “I wrote my parents the letter I’d been dreading—to say that I didn’t want to be married yet, that I wanted to finish school first—and Mother wrote back just saying we’d talk about it over the holidays. I’m not sure what to think.”

“Would she lie to you?” Selena asked, taking a small bite of bread.

“I don’t think so. Not deliberately. But Father could have concealed something from her. And if I leave here...”

“You’re not seventeen,” Selena pointed out. “They could make you come home. Unless you can prove you’d be in real danger there...”

“And I can’t, because I don’t know!” Maya stabbed her fork into the chicken. “It just doesn’t sound right. Suddenly they’re being reasonable, after their letters have been getting more and more full of duty all through the autumn. My sacred duty, my inescapable duty...”

“I understand,” Selena said, squeezing her friend’s hand. “Be glad you’re not me. I have to tell my parents something even worse.”

Maya raised an eyebrow. “Worse than ‘I don’t believe anything you’ve taught me and I refuse to do what you want me to’?”

“Yes. Worse.” Selena drew Maya close and whispered in her ear.

Maya jerked upright. “No!”

“Oh, yes.” Selena smiled. “Very much so.”

Maya glanced at Roger, sitting across the table and talking with two of the other Ravenclaw boys. “Does he know?” she asked softly.

“Er...” Selena blushed.

“That looks like a no.”

“Yes, it’s a no. There just hasn’t been a good time.”

“There never will be,” Maya said. “And he deserves to know. Before the holidays, not after.”

“Speaking of holidays.” Selena grimaced. “I have parties through most of mine. You?”

Maya nodded grimly. “Formal parties. Dress robes and company manners.”

“Shall we see if there’s a night we’re both free, and we can get together?”

“Oh, yes please.” Maya grinned. “I have a new custom I want to introduce you to. I think you’ll like it.”

“A new custom?” Selena frowned. “Did you make it up?”

“No, but you’d never believe me if I told you where it came from. Maybe some other time.”

“Maybe so.” Selena took another small bite of bread. “Meanwhile, I think I’ll concentrate on settling my stomach...”

xXxXx

At breakfast the next morning, the Weasley twins were noticeably anxious. Both were seen double-checking their food and drink for hexes, and both jumped any time anyone nearby made a sudden movement.

“You’re wasting your time,” Ron said, taking another sausage link. “We’re not stupid, you know.”

Fred stopped in the middle of a bite of eggs. “We, little brother?”

Ron grinned. “You didn’t think they’d prank you without my help?”

“We weren’t sure,” George said. “It sounded like it’d been all Ginny’s idea. Maybe with some help from Harry.”

“It was Ginny’s idea, but I came up with the delivery system. That’s how I know you’re wasting your time.” Ron bit the sausage in half. “Oo oo eh-uh oo eh oh ohs,” he said indistinctly.

The twins glanced at each other and shrugged. Ron glanced across the table at Hermione’s watch, mentally rotating the dial so he could read it. Eight-fourteen and forty-five seconds... fifty... fifty-five...

He swallowed. “I said, you’d do better to check your clothes.”

Fred looked at George. George looked at Fred. Identical expressions of panic crossed both their faces, just as the sweep hand on Hermione’s watch passed the twelve.

With a *poof*, miniature Christmas trees appeared on top of the twins’ respective heads. Fred’s was covered in blue lights, George’s in yellow, and the tiny star on top of each tree had a face engraved on it.

“Aww!” cooed Alicia from beyond the twins. “They’re so cute! What do they do?”

“Say their names,” Ginny prompted. “One or both of them. You’ll see.”

“George!” cried Alicia quickly.

George’s star opened its eyes and began to sing loudly.

“Ye yish woo a Chrerry Mismas,

“Ye yish woo a Chrerry Mismas,

“Ye yish woo a Chrerry Mismas,

“And a Nappy Yoo Hear! ”

The eyes closed again as the Hall hooted with laughter. George turned scarlet and sank down in his seat.

“Fred,” said Angelina without needing to be prompted.

Fred’s star opened its eyes—

“Heck the dolls with hows of bolly,

“La fa fa fa fa, fa fa fa fa!

“’Sis the teason boo gee toly,

“La fa fa fa fa, fa fa fa fa!

“Non ee wow our day gapparel,

“La fa fa fa fa, fa fa fa fa!

“Throll ee tancient cooltide yarol,

“La fa fa fa fa, fa fa fa fa! ”

Fred groaned aloud over the second round of laughter. “Are we going to have to listen to this all day?” he asked.

“Any time anyone says your names,” Ginny said gleefully. “And if anyone says Weasley—”

The two trees burst into song at the same moment. The cacophony was incredible.

“A nappy you hear,” Alicia mused when the music, such as it was, had finished. “I wonder if anyone’s invented something like that? One that’d tell the mum when the baby’s wet?”

“And why would anyone want to heck the dolls?” Katie Bell added. “Poor things. What did they ever do to us?”

The twins’ blushes, which had been fading, renewed themselves instantly.

Harry leaned over. “Any questions?” he said.

“Can we apologize now?” George said.

“You can. I don’t know if it’ll change anything.”

“We’re sorry about the halo,” said Fred. “Really sorry. We won’t do it again.”

Harry folded his arms and gave them his best unconvinced look.

“Promise.”

“Double-promise.”

“Triple-promise.”

“Weasley pro—” Fred began before the trees drowned him out.

“On your family name, then?” Harry asked when the songs were over.

Both twins nodded vigorously.

Harry looked at Hermione. *Lunchtime?* he signed.

That seems fair, her hands replied. *Ginny? Ron?*

Ron nodded as Ginny signed, *Fine with me.*

“You’ll have them removed at lunchtime,” Harry said, turning back to the twins. “Until then... try to relax and enjoy the music. In the spirit of the season.”

The twins sighed in unison. “He’s evil, Fred,” said George.

“Heck the dolls with hows of bolly!”

“Truly evil, George,” Fred agreed.

“Ye yish woo a Chrerry Mismas—”

Up at the staff table, Professor McGonagall covered her ears.

xXxXx

Sirius had just walked in the door when the screeching and thumping caught his ear. Not even bothering to hang up his cloak, he sprinted down the stairs to the basement kitchen.

Dobby and Kreacher were rolling on the floor together, kicking and punching at each other, while Winky stood by watching, wringing her ears in her hands.

“BREAK IT UP!” Sirius bellowed in his best crowd-control voice, and both house-elves froze. Dobby scrambled up, bowed, and cast a venomous look at Kreacher. Kreacher stayed on the ground but snaked his head around to glare at Sirius. “All right, what’s going on?”

“Kreacher torments poor Winky, all the day long!” Dobby said angrily, looking at his wife, who now had her hands over her face. “Calls her bad names and keeps her from her work—and when Kreacher knows Winky has her elflets soon!”

“Twisted, those elflets will be,” Kreacher muttered from his place on the floor. “Think themselves as good as humans...”

Winky wailed aloud. Dobby ran to her and grasped her hands, pulling them away from her face. “Kreacher is the bad elf, not Winky, love, never listen to him... Winky is a good elf, listens to her Mistress and makes her happy...” He glanced over his shoulder, his enormous eyes begging Sirius to help him.

“Kreacher, up,” Sirius said sternly.

Kreacher obeyed, sullenness in his every hangdog line, a sullen mutter escaping his lips as he came. “—disgrace to the house, taking Kreacher’s work away from him, Kreacher’s work that he did for so many years and never a complaint except from this Master, no, and the things Kreacher could tell, the things he saw, but he won’t tell, no, Kreacher is a good elf and keeps the Master’s

secrets...”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Sirius, folding his arms. “Now listen up. You want orders, here are orders. Go to your cupboard. You can come out when you can be civil to everyone else who lives here. Everyone. You understand me?”

“Kreacher understands the Master, yes,” Kreacher croaked, bowing. “Kreacher will obey... Kreacher always obeys, Kreacher is a good elf...”

“Now,” Sirius snapped.

With a crack, Kreacher was gone. Winky slumped in place, shaking. Dobby patted her back. “Dobby is sorry Sirius Black had to see that, sir,” he said earnestly to Sirius. “Dobby would like it better if house-elves did not need to always go to wizards for help...”

“You and me both, Dobby.” Sirius sighed and unpinned his cloak. “But some things take time to fix. And some might be beyond fixing.”

“Not this, sir.” Dobby shook his head hard. “Dobby and Winky will teach their elflets the new way. Serving the Masters, yes, but not like that.” He glared at the closed cupboard door behind which Kreacher’s muttering could still be faintly heard. “Dobby thinks there could be a way that makes wizards *and* house-elves better!”

Great. A house-elf idealist. As if we didn’t have enough problems... “Best of luck with it, you two,” Sirius said, starting for the stairs. “Call me if Kreacher finds some way around those orders.”

Aletha was waiting for him in the hallway. “I heard you shout,” she explained, taking the cloak from his hand. “But I’m afraid I didn’t want to get mixed up in all that downstairs...”

“I don’t blame you. House-elves take some getting used to, even the best of them, and Kreacher’s hardly the best.” Sirius took a closer look at his wife’s face. Her skin held an unhealthy gray undertone, and there were dark circles under her eyes. “Letha, love, what’s wrong?”

Aletha leaned against him. “I want to go home,” she whispered. “I can’t be here anymore, not where it all happened, not where everything went so wrong... it doesn’t have to be forever, but just for Christmas, can’t we go home?”

“Yes, of course we can.” Sirius held her close. “We’ll find a way. We’ll make it happen. Home for Christmas. I promise.”

Long-held tensions drained out of Aletha’s shoulders, and she draped her arms around Sirius’ neck. “Christmas Eve denning under the tree,” she murmured. “So the cubs can get their presents first thing in the morning... Danger and Harry making Christmas morning breakfast, and the rest of us helping and betting on what will go wrong this year...”

“Putting each other in boxes for Boxing Day,” Sirius added. “Staying up on New Year’s and

telling the funniest stories of the old year. And even a regular den night, a few days after that. We'll have it all, you wait and see. We'll have our holidays, just like we always do. Nothing's going to stop that."

The smile on Aletha's face was the first unpaired one Sirius had seen from her since Marcus had died, and he swore silently that he'd do whatever it took to keep her looking that way.

I don't care if I have to set the wards around that house with my own blood. We are going home for the holidays.

xXxXx

In his cupboard, Kreacher muttered to himself.

"—could tell plenty of things, oh yes. Kreacher could tell what Kreacher's new Master said about the girls, oh yes, but the old Master isn't interested in what Kreacher has to say, oh no, he's not... Master knows best, and Kreacher must go to his cupboard, and mustn't say how some are sworn not to kill, and how some are training with the magic that takes away the fright and the rage... Kreacher mustn't say how one thing is harmless, and another thing is harmless, when they're all alone, but when they come together, under the light of the moon... oh no, no, no. Kreacher mustn't say."

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Facing Danger

Chapter 29: The Greatest Gift (Arc 6)

“You’ve got to get around to it eventually, Harry.”

Harry jerked upright from where he’d been staring into the flames in the common room’s fireplace. “Hello to you too,” he said sourly as Draco dropped into a chair across from his own. “Get around to what?”

“You know what,” Ginny said from his other side, draping herself across his chair’s arm and from there into his lap. “You just don’t want to admit it.”

“And you’re trying to distract me from it?” Harry rubbed his cheek against her hair. “I may never remember at this rate.”

“You’re going to make us spell it out, aren’t you?” Draco said with a sigh.

“I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about, so yes.”

Ginny twisted until she was facing him, her expression unusually sober. “Harry, someone betrayed us,” she said. “Someone told Umbridge about the DA, and where to find us.”

“Oh.” Harry looked away. “This.”

“Yes, oh, this.” Draco batted a wadded-up scrap of parchment into the air, keeping it aloft with flicks of his finger. “Whoever it was, they got around Neenie’s spell on the members’ list somehow. She looked at it, and she thinks it was probably done by attrition. Whoever it was didn’t lose the pixies all at once, just dribbled it out bit by bit, and none of the bits were enough to set the spell off by themselves.”

“And because it was so divided up, the spell didn’t recognize that it was all part of a whole,” Harry finished. “Right?”

“Right.”

Harry eased out from under Ginny, leaving her crosswise in the chair, and sat down with his back against its leg. “You don’t have to bother with the ‘whoever it was’ bit,” he said quietly. “I already know.”

“Harry—” Ginny began.

“Look, just let me finish, all right?” Harry directed his attention to the fire again, shaping it into the outline of a face, while he tried to get his thoughts into coherent order.

“I made a mistake,” he said after a moment. “Thinking I cared about her that way. Maybe it was a normal mistake to make, but it was still a mistake. And even after I tried to fix it, it came back to

bite us. Not just me, but all of us.” He held up a hand, forestalling his brother and his mate as they both started to speak at once. “I know it isn’t my fault. I couldn’t have known what she’d do. I couldn’t have known how it’d turn out. But…”

“But you still feel responsible,” Ginny finished, her hand resting against his shoulder. “You still feel like you should have done *something* to stop it.”

Harry nodded without looking away from his fiery face.

“Which makes you either…” Draco’s wad of parchment sailed into the fireplace, straight through Cho Chang’s left eye. “A hero, a leader, or a plain old good person. Any guesses?”

“Where’s none of the above?”

“Not on the list. For a reason.”

“Should be,” Harry muttered.

Small, powerful hands clamped gently onto his skull, and his head was tilted back until it rested on the cushion of the chair. Ginny’s upside-down visage came into view. “Enough,” she said firmly. “You’re wallowing.”

“Am not.”

“Are so. And if you try to take this any further I’m shutting you up.”

“Ah-ha. Incentive.” Harry grinned. “Am not, am not, am—”

Ginny followed through on her threat, and both of them were quite thoroughly occupied for the next few moments. When Harry came up for air, Ginny had slithered herself down into his lap again and wrapped her arms around him.

“Are so,” she whispered into his ear. “And it’s not very attractive.”

“You could’ve fooled me.” Harry held her close for a long breath, feeling her pulse beat in counter to his, then relaxed against the chair. “You’re right. You’re both right. How do you do that so often?”

“Practice.” Draco flicked another parchment wad into the fire. “And the fact that neither of us is quite as high-profile as you, so we sometimes get the luxury of making mistakes that only affect us personally.”

“Lucky sods—ow!”

“You deserve it for using that kind of language.” Ginny glared at him. “And I barely touched you.”

“But it *hurts*,” Harry whined outrageously. “Kiss it better, Mummy? Please?”

Ginny kissed her fingertips, then brushed them across the ear she'd smacked only a moment before.

Harry sighed. "Not quite what I had in mind."

"You think I don't know that?" Ginny lifted her chin. "I have absolutely no intention of engaging in such scandalous behavior in the common room."

"Really now?" Draco bounced a third parchment wad off Ginny's forehead. "Who was that snogging my brother a minute or so ago?"

"It must have been my evil twin Virginia. She pops in every now and then to do something like that."

"Pops in?" Harry raised an eyebrow. "At Hogwarts?"

"Yes. At Hogwarts." Ginny giggled. "Or didn't I mention she's a house-elf?"

"So you have an evil house-elf twin?"

Ginny nodded virtuously. "She transfigures herself into a human when she wants to make everyone think it was me."

Draco dropped his head into his hands. "I'm witnessing the birth of a monster," he said around his fingers. "Lucky me."

"Oh, Draco, don't call Virginia that." Ginny pouted. "I mean, just because she's evil doesn't make her a monster!"

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"Well, what did you mean?" Harry inquired.

"Never mind. You're sure you've got this Cho thing under control?"

"Positive." Harry pushed his glasses up his nose. "In fact, I might just have an idea about how to handle it. But it needs some time to mature."

"All right. As long as you're thinking about it."

"Oh, I am. Trust me, I am." Harry turned his attention back to Ginny. "So tell me more about Virginia. What kinds of evil things does she do and blame on you?"

"Oh, all sorts of things. She likes to steal people's socks..."

xXxXx

Albus Dumbledore signed his name to the last piece of parchment and set it aside, a small feeling of contentment finding its way into his heart. There was still a war to fight, but at least now he had only one enemy rather than two. Rufus Scrimgeour would not be the easiest ally he had ever coordinated with—not least because of Dumbledore’s need to conceal his amusement at Rufus’ unintentional duplication of another wartime leader of the wizarding world—but he would be an *ally*, and a cunning and intelligent one.

The thought of that other leader, and the people most closely associated with him, sent Dumbledore’s thoughts in two directions at once. He tapped his forehead with a finger, lightly chiding his distracted mind, and picked up a quill to scribble a note to himself about one line of thought before devoting his full attention to the other.

Now that Hogwarts is unquestionably mine again, perhaps it is time to make a change in the teaching staff. I should have done so years ago, but I have allowed myself to be distracted. I rationalize that it matters little in any case, that the students are unlikely to be interested in such a dry subject, but I know full well that a truly good teacher could make it come to life. Literally, if he or she is gifted enough.

And the person I have in mind certainly is.

Dumbledore smiled to himself. *Though, in all honesty, she would not likely have accepted this post if I offered it to her before this year. She may not accept now.*

Still, the offer will be made. With any luck, she will accept. And then I will have a full, and fully qualified, staff for the first time in many years.

The smile grew. *War or no war, Hogwarts will give its students the best magical education in the world. In all areas, now.*

And I will have one thing in my life of which I can be unreservedly proud.

xXxXx

The Hogsmeade train station swarmed with students, chattering and craning their necks to see if the train was coming. It could almost have been a normal first day of holidays.

But it’s not. Hermione shifted Crookshanks’ basket in her arms. *Regular genius, that took to notice.*

Still, recognizing the specific differences took, if not genius, at least keen powers of observation. The talk was more subdued than usual, for one thing. Normally the sound assaulted her ears, always good and more sensitive than ever since her Animagus transformation third year. Also, people kept glancing over their shoulders as though they expected Voldemort or the Death Eaters to come popping out of thin air at them.

“The train,” she murmured to herself.

“What?” Ron turned to face her.

“Nothing, I was just thinking aloud.”

Ron shrugged. “Share?”

Hermione dropped her voice, setting Crookshanks’ basket on the ground and waving Ron closer. “Voldemort knows when the train runs to and from Hogwarts,” she said in a half-whisper. “What’s to say he couldn’t attack it?”

“It’s warded up to here, even normally.” Ron drew a hand up level with his own eyes, well above Hermione’s head. “And I’m sure Dumbledore’s reinforced the wards already.”

“But if he hasn’t?” Hermione shuddered all over once. “We’re just so exposed. Practically out in the open. And if something came at us from up front or in the back, we’d never see it until it was there.”

“And when it gets there, we kill it,” Ron said. “Why else have we been practicing all year?”

Hermione bit back an angry reply. “We could do damage, yes,” she said. “But if Voldemort wanted to stage a terror attack... what would stop him blowing up a bridge while we’re on it?”

Ron swallowed. “You’ve got a point there.” He rubbed the tip of his nose for a moment. “I think Dad and Mum need to hear about this,” he said finally. “And your parents, too. They’ll listen to us, and Dumbledore listens to them.”

Hermione nodded, her mind already reaching out to the possibilities. “I suppose a Unity Spell might be a place to start,” she said. “Making the train and the tracks and us, while we’re aboard, all parts of one magical system, so that if anything affects any part of it, the other parts know and can move to fix the problem.”

“Erm.” Ron started rubbing his nose again. “But back to your idea. If...” His voice dropped in volume, but remained firm. “If Voldemort hid out somewhere and cast the spell that blew the bridge just as the train was on it, there wouldn’t be any warning. It’d just be boom, and gone. There’ll have to be actual spell-detectors and repellers on there as well.”

“Of course.” Hermione scooped up Crookshanks’ basket again as the train pulled into the station in a great cloud of steam. “But the Unity Spell would stop anything being done ahead of time, and that cuts down on what it could be...”

Discussing possibilities and necessities, they fell in line for the train, and failed entirely to see the grin shared by Harry and Ginny just behind them.

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Corona Gamp stood just behind Danger Granger-Lupin, watching the Hogwarts students appear out of the seemingly solid wall between platforms nine and ten.

So strange. The Muggles, even the ones who see it directly, never seem to notice.

A dark head of hair caught her eye, and she waved. Su Li turned her head and smiled as she saw Corona, and Corona smiled back, amazed at the rush of warmth in her chest. Su had taken the initiative of writing a letter to “my brother’s newest friend”, and Corona had gladly written back, the two of them sustaining an almost weekly correspondence over Hogwarts’ first term.

I will always miss my own sister, but it is wonderful to be the elder, the guide, for once.

Su vanished in the crowd for a moment, then emerged at its front edge, pushing her trunk in front of her on a trolley. Her head tracked back and forth even as she started towards Corona, and Corona had to cover a smile.

“Brian could not be here,” she said as Su came into earshot. “Information arrived just as we were preparing to leave that he had to remain behind to discuss. He asked me to take you on ahead—if you would not mind?”

“Of course not.” Su smiled brightly. “That means I get to introduce you to our parents, and help them tell you all the stories he doesn’t want you to hear.”

Corona chuckled. “I have been looking forward to this.”

“I just bet.” Su pulled a scarf from the pocket of her coat and wrapped it around her neck. “How are we getting home?”

“I have money for the Muggle Underground.” Corona tapped her handbag confidently. “And there is a stop not far from the Leaky Cauldron. We can manage your trunk between us for the distance, and Floo from there.”

“That makes sense.” Su pushed her trolley back into motion. “You mentioned in one of your letters that you’d been learning about Muggle London. I guess riding the Underground was part of it?”

Corona kept pace, nodding to Danger in passing before turning her attention back to Su. “Yes, and Muggle money as well. It is not so very different from ours, though the numbers they use are strange and I find it hard to understand why anyone would make money out of parchment...”

xXxXx

Danger threw Corona the thumbs-up, then looked back towards the wall just in time to see Ron and Hermione emerge from it, each freeing a hand from his or her trolley every few seconds to better emphasize a point.

“Dear heavens,” Molly murmured from beside her. “Do I see what I think I see?”

“I don’t know. What do you think you see?”

“My son and your sister, *not* fighting. Discussing with spirit, certainly, but not fighting.”

“I think I see it too, so yes, I think you do see what you think you see.” Danger frowned. “If that made any sense at all.”

“About as much as Molly made in the first place,” Aletha put in. “Which is to say, not very much.”

Molly sniffed. “I *beg* your pardon.”

“And I grant it.” Aletha chuckled, then turned her attention to the arriving cubs. “Yes, yes, hello to you too... no, love, Dadfoot’s still at work, and Moony’s back at Headquarters discussing something with Mad-Eye and Brian Li and Emmeline Vance... I don’t know, we’ll find out when they’re ready to tell us, but there is a surprise waiting for you...”

“Two surprises, actually,” Danger put in, hugging Hermione and Harry at once. “And good ones, for a change. So let’s move along, everyone—the sooner we get going, the sooner we get there!”

xXxXx

Meghan stood in the hall of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and let the chaos of her friends and family swirl around her. She knew her Dadfoot didn’t like to be here, that it reminded him of a very unhappy part of his life, but she was in the middle of that same part of her own life, and to her, the house meant something totally different.

It means yesterday, and all the yesterdays before that. All the people who came before me, and are part of me. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply of the scent of old wallpaper and roasting meat. Maybe they wouldn’t have approved of me, of who I am and what I am. But maybe they would. They can’t all have been bad.

Besides, even if they were, they’re gone now. It’s Dadfoot’s house, and someday it will be mine. That means we can decide what to do with it. We can decide what it is and what it becomes. Maybe, after the war’s over, we’ll sell it.

Or maybe not. She peeked with one eye, scanning back and forth across the crowd until she found the person she wanted. Maybe Neville and I will live here when we’re married.

A thrill ran through her at the thought, as it always did. Hermione and Ginny and Luna had passed along certain relevant information long ago, and Meghan knew for a fact that she would never want any boy but Neville to do *that* with her.

Anyone else would probably make me feel so strange I’d start giggling, and then he’d think I was laughing at him... and that would be very, very bad.

But that wasn’t what marriage was all about. It wasn’t even the most important thing about a marriage. The most important thing about a marriage, Mama Letha had told her years ago, was making sure the other person was happy.

As long as what makes them happy isn't hurting you. That's bad.

So the most important things about being with Neville, Meghan had discovered for herself.

Like how to snuggle with him so he doesn't mind it. Where to put my hands when we're kissing. When to smile and bump shoulders to make him feel better, and when to let him be. Every boy is different, so I guess every girl has to work out how to make her boy happy for herself.

She wiggled her shoulders against the wall, feeling its solid support behind her. *Do you want me here, house?* she asked it in her mind. *Will you be happy if I come to live here when I'm married, and have babies here, and make you alive again?*

The house didn't answer, but somehow Meghan thought it would like that a lot.

Houses are made to be lived in. So a house that's not being lived in must get lonely.

I hope the Den isn't lonely for us...

She giggled once at her own silliness and opened her eyes. Most of the Pride was already gone, Fred and George were just vanishing up the stairs, and Neville was beside her, waiting patiently. "Did you have a good imagine?" he asked, taking her hand.

"Very good. Do you think houses get lonely if their people go away?"

"Maybe. But there could be other houses that prefer to be alone, and get irritable when there are people in them."

"That's one way poltergeists get born," Luna said, coming up behind them. "When houses don't like their people."

Meghan frowned. "Does that mean Hogwarts doesn't like us, if Peeves is there?"

"No. Peeves happened because students at school are always upset about something. Homework, tests, girls, boys, clubs, Quidditch, even laundry and meals. There are so many of us, and Hogwarts is so magical..." Luna spread her hands. "Peeves."

"Luna, that makes a lot of sense," Neville said. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

Luna held out her hand to Meghan, who took it with her free one and frowned. "Just as I suspected," she said, trying to put on the manner of her mother's friend Healer Young when he was pronouncing the result of a case. "You've been infected with... Sense-Making Disease!"

"Oh dear." Luna regarded her hands. "Is it very serious?"

"It could be." Meghan turned to Neville. "I think we'd better treat it right away."

"How should we do that, Healer Black?"

“We have to do a Trouble-Taking Dance. Immediately.”

Neville chuckled. “If you insist. But quietly.”

Meghan nodded, then started to jump around Luna, making tiny screeching noises between her teeth. Neville joined her, hooting under his breath. Luna watched them for a few rounds, then caught Meghan’s arm and pulled her into the center of the dance instead, hopping out to join Neville. They danced in opposite directions three times, and then Meghan changed places with Neville and the girls finished the dance in double-time.

All three of them were breathless and laughing as they went down the stairs to the kitchen, and the Pride and the strange black-haired woman at the table looked up at their arrival.

“This is Hestia Jones, you three,” Harry said, waving at the woman. “Professor Jones, Luna Lovegood, my sister Meghan Black, and Neville Longbottom.”

“Professor Jones?” Neville repeated, crossing the kitchen to shake the woman’s hand.

Professor Jones smiled. “That’s right,” she said. “I’m taking over from Professor Binns in History of Magic.”

Neville smiled broadly. “*Very* pleased to meet you, Professor.”

“I would imagine,” Professor Jones said blandly. “I had Professor Binns myself when I was at school, and I doubt he’s improved any since then.”

“My only question is, where have you been for four and a half years?” Draco interjected from further down the table.

“Working in the Ministry. Doing research for the Department of Magical Games and Sports.”

“You research Quidditch?” Ron said, sitting up straighter. “For a living?”

“Among other things.”

“Now that would be an essay I’d enjoy writing,” Harry said.

“I’ll make a note of that.” Professor Jones sat back in her chair just as Winky emerged from the pantry, a large tray of pastries floating in front of her.

“Is young sirs and misses, and madam, wanting drinks with their snack?” the house-elf piped, settling the tray onto the table.

“I’d like tea, please,” said Professor Jones.

“For me as well,” called Hermione, and the rest of the Pride chimed in with their requests. Meghan sat down on the end of the bench nearest her, shut her eyes, thought an incantation

carefully, then opened them. Everyone in the room had auras of color around them now, but Winky's was the clearest of all. It pulsed the bright delicate green that Meghan knew meant *good health*, and—

Meghan caught a delighted breath. There were two smaller auras pulsing near Winky's midsection, which was rounder than it had been, and both of them were the same clear green. One had tinges of blue, the other of red, and Meghan clapped a hand over her mouth to keep herself from blurting out the secret.

I'll have to ask her later if she wants to know...

Winky turned, frowning, to look at her. "Is Mistress Meghan wanting a drink?" she asked.

Meghan blinked twice, breaking the spell. "Yes, milk for me, please."

Winky nodded and bustled back into the pantry, and Meghan spun herself around on the bench just in time to beat Ginny to the last nut roll.

Fred and George came down partway through the slaughter of sweets and joined in wholeheartedly, which seemed to amuse Professor Jones. "I knew a pair like you once," she told them. "Not quite as well matched, but close. Always hungry, always looking for trouble. Quidditch players, too, but one of them was a Chaser, and you're both Beaters, aren't you?"

The twins nodded. "Who were they, Professor?" Fred asked, swallowing a mouthful of éclair.

"Ah, that would be telling." Professor Jones looked smug.

Harry looked her up and down. "Do they both have children in this room?" he asked.

"Very good, Harry!" The older witch grinned at him. "Yes, they do."

Meghan wiggled with happiness. "Dadfoot and Harry's dad," she said surely. Then particulars of certain den-night stories popped into her head, and she almost squealed.

Judging by Hermione's expression, she'd thought of the same thing. "Professor," she said carefully, "your Christian name is Hestia?"

"Yes, it is." Professor Jones took a sip of her tea, watching Hermione over the top of the cup.

"And you were at school with Padfoot and Moony, and Harry's father?"

"Oh, yes. His mother, too, and one Miss Aletha Freeman."

"Did I hear my name?" Mama Letha said from the stairs.

"Just reminding the children who I went to school with."

“Go on, don’t let me stop you.” Mama Letha crossed to the table, and Meghan quickly scooted down to make room. “If I remember right, you can go on for hours once you get started.”

“Indeed I can,” said Professor Jones with a wicked smile. “Indeed I can. But Hermione, you were saying something...”

“Well, Professor, we’ve heard some stories from the time when our Pack-parents were in school.” Hermione rubbed a thumb across her lips. “And there was only ever one girl named Hestia in those stories.”

“Would this be Hestia the second-best Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team?” Draco inquired. “The one whose cousin went on to captain the Holyhead Harpies?”

“She is the one I’m thinking of, yes.” Hermione turned to look at Professor Jones. “So... are you?”

The Professor lifted her hands. “What can I say? You’ve caught me.” She frowned. “Except I was not the ‘second-best Chaser’ on that team. I was the best *Chaser* they had. James was a dilettante who couldn’t decide what position he wanted to play.”

“That might have been because he played both Chaser and Seeker so very well,” Mama Letha said. “But he stayed mostly with Chaser, and you know it. Stop being contradictory just because you can.”

“I am not being contradictory.”

“Yes you are.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are.”

Professor Jones huffed. “Look, I came here for an argument!”

Mama Letha smiled. “And isn’t that exactly what you’re getting?”

The Pride snickered.

“All right, enough silly quoting.” Professor Jones leaned back in her chair. “Time for the important things in life. Stories. Specifically, stories with which to embarrass your parents. At least, your fathers,” she amended at Mama Letha’s glare. “Far be it from me to tarnish the glory on what are, I’m sure, your mothers’ heretofore unblemished names.”

Meghan sighed happily and settled in for a good long listen.

xXxXx

Luna told her ears to remember the stories Professor Jones was telling so that she could enjoy

them later, and her mouth to smile or laugh when everyone else did. She needed her attention for trying to figure out what, exactly, she was Seeing when she looked at the older witch.

She's not like Amanda, she decided finally. She belongs in her body. But there's something about her that isn't like anyone else I've seen. A little like an Animagus shadow, but this isn't an animal—it's another person, another woman...

Luna squinted slightly, trying to See that other woman clearly, and succeeded with a suddenness that startled her. She stared, wide-eyed, for a few seconds, then refocused her eyes to see as little extra as possible.

I know I haven't ever seen her before. But I know where I've seen people who look like her.

I think I know who she is.

The conclusion made no sense, in the way Draco or Hermione or any other of the Pride would think of sense. Luna was sure of it, though, and she knew where she could find final confirmation.

But it can wait. It will mean something someday, but not today.

Today, Professor Jones is just that. Our new History of Magic professor.

Now we can finally get the truth on some important events.

She brought her attention back to the present moment and waited until Professor Jones had finished her current story. The idea of Mr. Prongs covered in melted ice cream with Mr. Padfoot, in his dog form, trying to lick him clean struck her as just as funny as it did everyone else, though she was a bit baffled as to how the ice cream had got to where it had. She was sure it would make more sense when she listened to what her ears had recorded later.

“Excuse me, Professor?” she said when the laughter had died down a bit. “I was wondering if you know anything about the Similarity Suppression of 1348?”

“Luna,” Draco hissed without moving his lips. “Not now.”

“Yes, actually, I do,” said Professor Jones, her eyes resting on Draco, whose cheeks went instantly pink. “But I think that would bore most of the people here. What do you say we make an appointment to discuss it during my office hours once school's back in session?”

Luna smiled. “That would be wonderful, Professor. Thank you.”

She carefully filed away the shocked expression on Draco's face for future reference as to how she should be able to make him look any time she wanted. Not only would it win points in her competition with Amanda, but it would be fun.

I'll need to be creative. He's too used to my usual things...

The second surprise, besides a new History of Magic professor, was revealed to the cubs when Sirius arrived home from work, and the result was a hall full of shrieking teenagers. Remus, released from his meeting a half-hour earlier, retreated upstairs to the bedroom where Danger was waiting.

“Might I guess they’re happy to be going back to the Den for a little while?” she said as he opened the door.

“You might. And thank you for respecting my privacy.” Remus shut the door behind himself, then crossed the room and sat down on the bed beside her.

“Evidence to the contrary aside, I can take a hint if it’s applied with enough force.” Danger laid her head on his shoulder for a moment, then sat up again. “And you had me fiercely blocked while you were in there. What in the world were you discussing, or is it still off limits?”

“No, no, it’s not off limits. I just didn’t want to worry you while you were bringing the cubs home. For that matter, I don’t want to worry them. I…” Remus sighed and shook his head. “I’m not good at being a leader,” he admitted to the floor. “My natural tendency is still to step back and blend into the woodwork.”

“And you still step forward and stand out from the crowd when you’re needed,” Danger finished with pride. “Just the way you always have.”

“Just the way I always have, since I met you,” Remus corrected, looking up to meet brown-blue eyes. “I don’t think you really understand that. Not here, where it counts.” He laid a hand against her chest, over her heart. “The greatest gift you’ve given me. Far greater than the taming, greater even than our marriage—though let me rephrase that, the *third* greatest gift.” His hand moved upward to stroke her hair. “You and my Kitten are still in my top two.”

Danger leaned her head into the stroking. “You know,” she murmured, “before I met you, I had no idea a man could be romantic and irritating at the same time.”

Remus laughed aloud. “Thank you, I guess. But the gift I’m talking about is so simple that I think you overlook it, most of the time. Do you know what I needed most, when I was a boy? What I still need most?”

“I can think of several answers to that question, but I doubt any of them are what you’re looking for,” said Danger dryly.

“No doubt. I was referring to approval. The agreement of my peers, or at least some of them, that I was worthwhile, that I was even human. I hadn’t had it for so long when I was young, and then suddenly I did. I had friends, and I would have done anything for them. For their approval. And I did do some things that I’m not proud of.”

Danger slid a hand onto his shoulder. “As have we all.”

“But that’s exactly my point.” Remus started to detangle the knot his fingers had encountered in Danger’s wild hair. “Everyone has done things that they’re not proud of. Not everyone has done those things just because they couldn’t bear to tell their friends no. And a person who does a thing like that, for that reason, seldom makes a good leader. He lacks a type of courage that is rarer than the kind that stands up to physical pain or humiliation.” The tangle came loose, and he slid his fingers free. “There were days I wondered why I was Sorted into Gryffindor.”

Danger scooted around behind him and began to massage his back. “How did I change anything?”

“When I met you—ahh, yes, there—when I met you, for the first time I had someone whose opinion of me I could know for certain.” Remus flinched as Danger’s probing fingers hit a sore spot. “At first, I was sure of you because you were candid with me. And then I was sure of you because I knew you. The same way you knew me.”

“And I still cared for you and wanted to be with you, even though I knew you and all the things you’d done in your life.” Danger rubbed small circles around the knotted muscle. “The things you were proud of, and the ones you weren’t.”

“Yes. And—” Remus sucked air through his teeth, then continued. “And because you were still there in the morning, because you didn’t take one look and run away, I knew that you approved of me. That you would always approve of me, as long as I was doing my best and making the choices I felt I needed to make. And that if, in your eyes, I was straying, you would *tell* me so—and expect me to make good on it. To come back to the right path.”

“Well.” Danger continued her steady, relentless kneading of his back, but the wall she’d put up between their minds was beginning to fray, and Remus could feel the pulse of her thoughts, working in the same rhythm as her fingers. “This time, instead of irritation, you’ve coupled romance with embarrassment on my part, and I don’t seem to have much I can say about it.”

Remus started to chuckle, but Danger wasn’t finished. “‘No I don’t’ is not only rude, but makes me out to be worse than you believe, and that’s never a winning solution. ‘I’m not the witch you’re looking for’ has the same problem. And ‘you’re out of your mind begs the question, ‘well, who’s in it, then?’ And unfortunately, the answer is ‘me’. So I think I’ll just go with...”

She leaned forward and laid her lips against his ear. “Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you, thank you, I don’t deserve you, I love you, thank you.”

“No, thank *you*.” Remus twisted his torso and slid his arms around his wife’s waist. “For loving me, for giving me the strength to be things I never thought I could, for being my sanity in a crazy world, thank you.” He kissed her once, gently, on the lips. “I love you. Now and always.”

“Now and always,” Danger repeated, and kissed him back, a bit less gently. “And aren’t we a sappy little pair?” she asked when they broke it off.

Remus waved a nonchalant hand around at the otherwise empty room. “I don’t see anyone here to complain. And if someone should happen to be watching...” He peered upwards, then grinned. “They can take it up with the management.”

Danger snorted. “The management are the most likely voyeurs we’ve got.”

“They brought us together, they can live with the results.” Remus pulled his wife in close and gave her lips the full attention they deserved. **I love you**, he murmured between their minds. **And I don’t care who knows it.**

Oh, I know you don’t. Danger reciprocated the kiss gladly, almost hungrily, but then broke off. “More in a minute,” she told him when he looked indignantly at her. “Right now, I need to know what you were discussing in that meeting. Since you decided you could tell me, but we got busy with other things before you got around to it.”

“Meeting. Yes.” Remus deliberately bit his tongue, focused on the pain, and told his hormones firmly that he was no longer sixteen years old and they could by Merlin wait a little while longer. “There have been rumors about planned attacks over the holidays.”

“Attacks? On whom, or what?”

“On some of the Hogwarts students, home for the holidays.” Remus’ desire vanished as he recalled Moody’s grim face, Emmeline Vance’s cool recitation of facts. “Apparently they were hoping to get at them while school was in session, but Hogwarts is still too heavily defended. So they’ll go after them while they’re at home.”

“It’s not just any students, is it?” Danger asked quietly.

“No.” Remus’ hand tightened into a fist. “No. It’s not.” He laughed a little, bitterly. “Who are the one group the purebloods can’t afford to lose, love? Who are the ones who ensure that the next generation will come?”

Danger said nothing, but Remus could feel her growing understanding, and the horror that matched his own, in her mind. **Not—**

“Breeders,” he confirmed aloud, but so softly that the word hung on the air between them. “Children the same age as ours. The ones just coming into their time. If they got the chance, if they were sufficiently motivated, they could repopulate this island with purebloods. There are still enough of them for that. But they’re not sufficiently motivated.” He hissed between his teeth. “Yet.”

“And some of them may never get the chance.” Danger sounded stunned, and one hand had moved without her conscious prompting to rest over her belly. “It’s risky, though—he’ll make them so angry—”

“Angry? No, love. No.” Remus shook his head. “This won’t make them angry. Not the proper

purebloods. This will frighten them. More than that—terrify them. They think that no one and nothing dares to touch them. That they are inviolable. Voldemort plans to teach them otherwise.”

Danger blinked. “And he thinks that instead of fighting him, they’ll come flocking to his side?”

Remus sighed. “The worst of it is, he may well be right. Most traditional purebloods, these days, have been trained to be bullies. What’s the one thing a bully respects?”

“A bigger bully,” Danger said automatically. Then her eyes went wide. “Oh.”

“Oh indeed.” Remus squeezed Danger’s hand. “If—God forbid—but if that happened to one of our cubs, we would be angrier than ever. We would fight harder than we ever have. Both for vengeance’s sake, and to be sure it never happened to another child. But them... no. If Voldemort can demonstrate his power to them, they’ll roll over and show their throats, and then fight as he commands them. Because, after all, if he could beat *them*, what chance does anyone else have?”

Danger made a little sound that was half-sob, half-laugh. **Have I mentioned yet that I hate this crazy world?**

Only every day. Remus drew her into his arms, and she buried her face in his shirt. **But I’m here. For what I’m worth.**

And you are worth quite a lot, and don’t ever let anyone tell you differently. Her shoulders shook twice, three times, four, but then she brought herself back under control and sat up. “So does this change our holiday plans?” she asked.

“It shouldn’t. This attack isn’t about us—it’s about solidifying his own base.” Remus grinned. “Besides, we’ve strengthened the wards around the Den and the Burrow twice in the last week, and Frank and Alice and Gerald did the ones around the Landing Zone and Fireflower House. If there are faults, I can’t see them, and neither can Albus. No hostile spell or person can get onto our property. We’re safe enough.”

And if I say that a few hundred more times, I might just believe it.

xXxXx

On Christmas morning, Cho Chang found a strange package at the foot of her bed when she woke up. She checked it carefully for dangerous magic, for potion residues, for anything at all that might be harmful to her, but found nothing. Finally, gingerly, she opened it, her wand at the ready.

The lid of the flat, square box lifted away to disclose a shining silver necklace. Cho frowned and leaned closer. It seemed to be some kind of round disks, strung together on a chain—

The necklace leaped up and clasped itself around her neck. Cho shrieked, snatching at it, but it did not tighten to cut off her airway or grow burning hot against her skin. It simply lay on her collarbone and shoulders, heavy with its own ponderous weight. The clasp seemed to have grown together, for all her fumbling behind her neck could find only a smooth length of chain under her

probing fingers.

Shaking, she slipped out of bed and crossed the room to her mirror.

The necklace was made of coins. Not Sickles, but ancient-looking coins, with a man's profile stamped on them and bay leaves on the alternate side. She was sure, even without counting, that there were thirty of them.

She pointed her wand over her shoulder at the bed and the discarded box. "*Accio card,*" she whispered in a trembling voice.

The small, elegantly calligraphed slip of parchment fluttered across the room into her hand. She held it up and looked at it. Hot tears of shame welled into her eyes but would not let her release them, for she did not deserve such mercy.

The card read simply:

With the compliments of Dumbledore's Army

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Facing Danger

Chapter 30: Unfelt and Unseen (Arc 6)

“Here, take this, quick!” Ginny dashed up to Ron and stuffed a red, dripping object into his hand. “Thanks I love you bye!”

“What—” Ron started to say, but Ginny was already gone, up the stairs to the Den’s first floor. He regarded the lump of raw steak in his hand. “Okay...”

He looked up again just in time to yell in shock as Wolf slammed into him, knocking him flat. Snow Fox and Neenie landed on top of them, the latter transforming just before she landed into a hysterically laughing Hermione. Snow Fox yelped, Wolf whined and Ron gave a strangled grunt, the air driven out of his lungs by her impact.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Hermione rolled off them quickly, still half-laughing. “Are you all right? Did I hurt you?”

Snow Fox slid to the floor, looking rather stunned, and shifted into a cross-eyed Draco. “Ow,” he wheezed, one hand on his midsection. “Nine pound fox... *not* nine pound you...”

Hermione drew herself up. “Are you calling me fat?”

“Do you want me to be?”

Wolf rolled off to Ron’s other side and came up as Harry. “Sorry about that,” he said, shaking his hair back and adjusting his glasses, which were hanging by one earpiece. “You all right?”

“Think so.” Ron got his breath back and took a quick mental inventory. “Yeah. What was that?”

“We were playing around in the kitchen. Danger was cutting bits of steak to toss us, and then Ginny grabbed the whole piece and ran off with it.” Harry glanced at the now battered lump of meat in Ron’s hand. “You going to eat that?”

“Not unless it’s cooked, or in much smaller pieces.” Ron rubbed at a sore spot on his ribcage with his free hand. “And I want all Ginny’s share.”

“Hmph,” said Ginny from the stairs. “Just because none of you bother to look where you’re going, or see what’s coming at you...”

“You have a point,” Harry said, giving Ron a hand up. “We’d better learn to pay more attention to what’s around us. But you still don’t get any more.”

Ginny stuck her nose in the air. “I’m going back upstairs,” she informed everyone. “To listen to Mr. Moony and Mr. Padfoot tell each other lies about what you were almost named, Harry.”

“Are you sure they’re lies?” Harry said, frowning.

“I’m telling you, Prongs, unisex is the way to go!” Ginny produced a creditable replica of Padfoot’s voice, though it was an octave or so high. “That way you won’t have to worry about boy or girl! How d’you like Elvendork?”

“Actually, I think that one might be true,” Harry said after a moment. “As little as I like to admit it.”

Ginny shook her head. “Your family is very, very odd.”

Harry chuckled. “Saves money on entertainment. We can just watch each other. Coming, all?”

xXxXx

Corona stared out the window of the Marauders’ Den at the falling snow and the leafless trees beyond. She had come at Sirius’ invitation for lunch and lingered afterward, drawn by the feeling of family the Pack seemed to exude, the feeling she was beginning to wish she could find for herself.

I know why he had to go. I know what he is doing, and how important it is to girls who are where I was only a few short years ago. If I were still with my sister and my grandmother, I might even be on the list myself.

But knowledge affects the heart little if at all.

“Knut fer yer thoughts,” rumbled a deep voice from behind her.

Corona gasped and whirled. “Hagrid! How in the world can you move so quietly?”

Hagrid chuckled. “It’s a gift. Father Christmas brought it fer me when I was jus’ a little tyke.”

Corona found herself smiling in response. “It seems like the sort of gift you would ask for.”

“Been a grea’ help ter me, one time an’ another.” Hagrid sat down on the floor, putting his head more or less level with Corona’s as she leaned on the windowsill. “Yeh look troubled,” he said, laying a hand on her shoulder. “Thinkin’ abou’ him, are yeh?”

Corona nodded reluctantly. “It seems so unfair that he should have to be away for our first Christmas,” she said. “And this before I can even be sure that there is a ‘we’ for there to be an ‘our’ about. I like him very well, and I think he likes me, but...”

“Yer not sure.” Hagrid sighed deeply. “Tell the truth, Corona, I don’ think anyone’s ever sure. Not if yeh mean sure like two an’ two make four, or *Scourgify* means clean. It’s th’world’s bigges’ gamble, that. Tossin’ yer heart onter the duelin’ grounds as stakes, hopin’ yeh win it back again, or another in its place... but yeh can’ win unless yeh try. An’ what’s a life ‘thout love?”

“The life I had,” Corona murmured, thinking back on days spent in wary watchfulness for tricks played by those who should have been trusted, nights lying wakeful and lonely wishing for a

heartening whisper in the dark. “The only life most of my friends ever knew.”

“An’ were yeh happy?” Hagrid asked simply. “Any of yeh?”

“If you had asked me then, I would have said yes. I was happy. But...” Corona paused as gleeful shouts rose from somewhere beyond the door. “I think I was only content. No, not even that... I was complacent. I did not question my life, because I knew of no other way that lives could be. But as I grew older, as I read more and learned more from my half-blood and Muggle-born peers, I began to question. I began to wonder. And then I was not happy, and I knew I was not happy.”

“Have yeh been happy? These pas’ months, workin’ with the Order, seein’ him when yeh can, livin’ fer yerself?”

Corona drew a long breath. “Yes,” she said, and knew as she said it that it was true. “Yes. I have been happy.”

“Well then.” Hagrid patted her shoulder, nearly knocking her off her feet. “I think that’s yer answer righ’ there. Now, if you’ll excuse me...” He turned his head towards the shouts from the other room, which were becoming less gleeful and more angry by the moment. “I believe there’s somewhere’s I have ter be.”

Corona nodded. “Of course.”

Hagrid got to his feet, ducked under the lintel of the door, and disappeared around the corner, his voice booming ahead of him. “All righ’, break it up... no sense fightin’ over a friendly game o’ Wizard’s Monopoly...”

Corona turned back to the view outside the window. It seemed somehow more peaceful than it had a moment before.

Perhaps it is because there is peace within my heart.

Or at the least, more peace than there was a few moments ago.

Deciding that you were going to declare your feelings to the man you cared for was nervewracking in its own way.

Still, having decided means I no longer must suffer two sets of terrors at the same moment...

From somewhere within the house, a bell shrilled.

xXxXx

He was fading fast. The wounds he’d thought were healed enough had broken open again, rendering him weaker every second from loss of blood, giving his pursuers a clear scent to track. He had no idea if the spell he’d thrown so desperately a few moments before had done its job, and he might not live long enough to find out.

Not like this. Not so close. Not when I know almost everything—I even know that there are only two pieces I do not know—

Darkness nibbled at the edges of his vision, numbness and pain warred for control of his limbs. The branch to which he clung wobbled under his hand. He heard harsh breathing and could not tell if it was his own or another's.

Not like this—please, not like this—someone, help me—

xXxXx

Draco, squirming in Hagrid's grasp to try to reach Ron, froze at the sound of the bell. Harry's and Hermione's heads came up, and Meghan squeaked.

"What's that?" Hagrid demanded, letting Draco and Ron fall to the floor absently.

"It's the wards," Hermione answered, starting to stand up. "Something's breached them..."

"Down," Hagrid snapped, pointing to the floor. "All o'yeh, down, now!"

"No problem," muttered Ron, rubbing the hip which had impacted with the floor. Hermione nudged him in the shin with her toe, and he shut up.

Draco rolled over onto his belly and scooted across the floor until he was next to Luna. She had her face covered with her hands. "What's wrong?" he asked, touching her arm.

"I'm trying to See what it is," Luna answered muffledly. "But something's blocking me. It's... it's the wards." She spread her fingers enough to peer at him through them. "The wards are still up. Still strong. Whatever set off the alarm, it didn't knock the wards down, it wasn't strong enough..."

"It was a spell," Padfoot said from the door, his wand out in his hand. "Someone shot a spell at them. A nasty one, one of the Unforgiveables if I'm reading it right, but it still doesn't make sense. Luna, Fox, come here."

The Pride squirmed out of the way as Draco and Luna crawled hurriedly to the door. Padfoot crouched down to meet them. "There're blood components in the wards," he said, holding out his hands to them. "Our blood. See if you can Look through when you're touching us. Hagrid, keep us covered."

Draco twisted to see Hagrid nodding grimly, his pink umbrella in his hand. *Where'd that come from? Maybe Harry or Hermione Summoned it for him...*

Luna's hand in his reminded him of what they were doing, and he rolled back onto his stomach and took the hand of Padfoot's not already holding Luna's. *I love you*, he signed silently to Luna, pressing his index, little, and ring fingers against the back of her hand in that order.

Luna squeezed his hand to acknowledge the message, then closed her eyes. Draco felt her magic at the edge of his own and looked over Padfoot's shoulder to try to calm himself enough for Luna to find what she needed.

The sight of Letha, kneeling beside the glass door in the kitchen, her wand steady in her hand and her eyes scanning back and forth for possible threat, slowed his heart all by itself. Danger's voice from the den room, along with the slight green glare on the bit of wall he could see, added to his sense of relief. *She must have her Zippophone out, she's probably talking to Headquarters right now—there'll be reinforcements here in two minutes, we can hold out that long—*

“Help him!” Luna shrieked, her eyes shooting open. “They’re trying to kill him, he can’t last much longer, hurry, *help him!*” She wrenched her hand from Draco’s and pointed out the back door. “Hurry! That way!”

Padfoot shot to his feet. “Moony, Letha, let’s go!” he shouted. “Out the back, come on!”

“We can help—” Harry started to get up, his hand going towards his wand pocket.

“Stay,” Padfoot snapped, his tone making it non-negotiable.

Harry slumped back where he had been. “Stupid Pack instincts,” he grumbled under his breath.

Padfoot spun in place and vanished with a crack. A second, fainter crack outside marked his Apparation point. Letha Disapparated and re-Apparated outside as well, Moony only a second behind her. The three adults raced for the boundary of the Pack’s land, where the wards were laid.

“Who was it, Luna?” Ginny asked, her hand white-knuckled around Harry’s.

“I’m not sure.” Luna rubbed at one side of her face, her expression fading from panic through worry back into her usual look of interested surprise. “He’d fallen down and his hands were over his face. But there were three men attacking him, and he’d already bled a lot. I hope they’re in time. He cast that spell, you know.”

Draco, practiced in weathering Luna’s quick changes of topic, followed this with little trouble. “The one that set the wards off? Wouldn’t that mean he was an enemy? The wards only respond to unfriendly spells...”

“But what if he was a friend trying to get here?” Luna countered. “What if he needed help?”

“Why not send a Patronus?” Hermione asked. “That would be faster, and it would have been able to tell us who he is and that he needed help.”

“Maybe he was too badly hurt,” said Neville. “It takes a lot of concentration to cast a Patronus, even just a messenger. Setting off the wards might have been the only way he could think of to get our attention in time.”

“We’ll know soon enough,” growled Hagrid, his umbrella point never wavering from the door.

The Pride huddled together, hands near wands, and waited.

xXxXx

Aletha forced herself to ignore the wheezing breaths of the injured Death Eaters lying behind her. A member of the Order, a friend, lay critically injured under her hands. Every second could make the difference between life and death.

Peripherally, she was aware of Sirius returning with Corona at his side, of the younger woman dropping to her knees. “No...” she gasped out, her face whiter than the snow as she captured one limp hand and clung to it fiercely. “No, please, you can’t die... please, don’t leave me, not now...”

Aletha wove an element of Corona’s desperation into her spells as she continued to work. *You pushed yourself nearly to death to get back here. Whatever you have to tell us must be important. I hope I can keep all your work from being for nothing...*

xXxXx

Inside the Den, the Pride picked themselves up off the floor, Danger having sounded the all-clear and explained the situation. Hagrid immediately headed outside to reinforce the temporary perimeter. Meghan darted upstairs, pulling Neville behind her, intent on an unspecified mission, while Hermione started tidying away the Wizard’s Monopoly set. Ron and Ginny excused themselves and Flooed home to reassure Mrs. Weasley they were all right, Ginny letting Ron go first so that she could steal one kiss from Harry without Ron looking stricken.

“If he doesn’t get over us soon, I’m going to start gagging every time he kisses Lavender,” she said, scent-touching Harry. “And every time she calls him that stupid pet name.”

“Won-Won.” Draco shuddered. “No. Just... *no* .”

“He’s almost there,” Luna said comfortingly. “He only needs one more big push and he’ll be over her.”

“Wonderful.” Ginny grimaced. “You wouldn’t happen to know what *kind* of big push?”

Luna shook her head. “It’ll happen when it’s supposed to,” she said with calm certainty. “You shouldn’t worry, Ginny. We’re all in very good hands.” An emotion too fleeting for anyone to identify flickered in her eyes and was gone. “Most of the time.”

Draco turned away. Harry looked him up and down out of the corner of one eye, took a cautious sniff (fear-sadness-anger, nothing specific) and decided to let it go this time.

But the next time he starts acting strange, I’m going to find out what’s going on between him and Luna. It’s been long enough. He needs to come clean.

The green flames had barely died down in the fireplace from Ginny’s exit when thumping noises on the stairs announced the descent of Meghan and Neville with the Pack’s camp bed and linens

for it. The Pride, thus armed, descended upon the den room, politely evicted Danger, and set about turning it into a temporary hospital ward.

“Mama Letha won’t want to move him any further than she has to,” Meghan said importantly, pulling one corner of the fitted sheet over the camp bed’s mattress. “And this is the room we can make the quietest in the whole house. Madam Gamp, I mean Corona, can even stay here with him if she wants to.” The lady in question had requested that they use her first name only an hour or two earlier. “So it’s the best place for him to be.”

“You did well to think of it, Meghan,” Harry said, letting his tone and his use of his sister’s full name shade into a warning. She was allowed to be proud of herself for what really was a good thought, but with Meghan, ‘proud of herself’ turned into ‘full of herself’ quickly.

I’d rather stop it before I have to do something neither of us will like.

“I know,” Meghan said, bouncing around the bottom of the bed to pull down the other corner of the fitted sheet. “I know, I know, I know...”

Of course, I might still have to.

Neville coughed once into his hand from where he was setting a quiet spell on the doorway into the living room with Hermione, and Meghan made a tiny noise and was silent.

Or not. I wish I knew how he does that... on second thoughts, scratch that, I don’t want to know. Harry made a face. For exactly the same reason Ron doesn’t want to watch me kissing Ginny. I’m happy for them, I’m glad they understand each other so well, but that’s still my sister we’re talking about...

Thoughts of kissing and Ginny sideslipped into thoughts of Cho. Had she opened the box with the charmed necklace in it? Had she realized the significance of the thirty pieces of silver, the traditional price a traitor was paid? Had the charm worked the way it was supposed to?

Of all the things I could worry about, I don’t think that’s one I need to. Hermione set the charm. Hermione’s charms... well, let’s just say I haven’t seen one fail yet.

So the silver necklace was around Cho’s neck right now, and would stay there, resisting all efforts to remove it by magic or physical force, until the spells on it detected that its wearer was acting to help another without regard to herself. Then and only then would it come off.

But if she starts being selfish again, it’s back on her, and there’s no getting it off this time. It’s there for good. I hope she figures that out in time...

Harry snorted at himself. No amount of fretting on his part was going to make either alternative more or less likely, and Cho was no longer his problem. She was neither Pack, Pride, Order, nor DA, so he had no reason to be concerned about her.

Which doesn’t mean I’ll stop.

A faint noise at the back door drew Harry's attention. He stepped out of the den room in time to see Padfoot, carrying one end of a stretcher, step inside and shake snow off his hair. The rest of the stretcher followed, with Moony at the other end.

"Why didn't you just levitate it?" Harry asked curiously, waving his fingers towards the den room.

"One of the curses he was hit with makes him oversensitive to certain kinds of magic," Letha answered, shooing Corona inside before coming in herself. "Not healing spells, that's too obvious, but other common charms. Levitation is one of them. If they're used near him, his own magic will react very badly."

"How badly is very badly?" asked Hermione, ducking between Moony and Corona to get out of the den room.

"You wouldn't sleep tonight if I explained how badly."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh. Fortunately, it has a short lifespan. He should be completely recovered from it within the next twelve hours." Letha shook the excess snow from the hem of her robes. "Until that time, no one is to use magic at this end of the Den."

Harry leaned through the entrance of the den room and urgently waved Draco, Luna, and Meghan out. Neville appeared to have left when Hermione had, though through the opposite entrance. *I hope none of the spells we used will set off that curse... it sounds nasty...*

"It doesn't react to residue or existing charms, or to potions," Letha added. "Just to new spells being performed around it. As long as you leave your wands in your pockets, we should be fine."

"Good to know," Harry said. "Anything else we should do? Or shouldn't?"

"You know the basics." Letha came into the business part of the kitchen and gave him a quick hug. "Watch for ways to help, keep from antagonizing each other. Don't tease us for information—we will tell you everything we can, you know that, but we have to decide the time ourselves without being rushed."

Harry and Hermione both nodded. Pushing the Pack-parents to explain things was fatal. Waiting patiently, no matter how hard, was always the wisest thing to do.

Of course, since when have I been wise?

Rather than hang around and invite temptation to get the better of him, Harry headed into the music room and picked up the Wizard's Monopoly box, waving at Hagrid through the back door and receiving a wave in return. *He's probably making sure no one tries to break through the wards before the Pack-parents get a chance to put them back to full strength.*

"How about it, Neenie?" he asked his sister, coming back into the kitchen. "Think you can

remember who had what?"

"Ron was winning," Hermione said promptly, with only a half-hearted grimace at her nickname. "And Draco was wrong. Ron wasn't cheating. It's perfectly legal to have three broomsticks on one property as long as you have two on the others of that color." She giggled. "Draco just doesn't want to admit he was wrong. Or that Ron was smart enough to put the three broomsticks on the property that has the highest rent on it."

"Ron is smart and Draco doesn't want to admit he's wrong?" Harry looked out the window. "Look at that. The sky *is* falling."

"Not all of it. Just little bits." Hermione rescued the game box as it threatened to fall out from under Harry's arm. "If we're going to play, let's play."

"Fine. Last one to the other room picks last when we split Ron and Ginny's properties!" Harry took off running.

"Ooooh..." Hermione hissed through her teeth. "May you land on Hogwarts with a broomshed on it, Harry Potter!"

"Land on Hogwarts?" Harry stopped long enough to stick his head back into the kitchen. "That sounds painful. Unless I hit the lake, or the grass. That wouldn't hurt so much..."

He ducked into the hallway, laughing, just ahead of a tiny silver Snitch.

xXxXx

Brian Li came slowly awake. Pain was his first impression, surprise that he had awakened at all his second.

Either Greyback's flunkies decided I could give them more sport at another time if they let me live, or...

He hardly dared hope for the other alternative. But he was comfortable and warm, his wounds had been tended, and the only clear scent nearby was not the acrid musk of a feral werewolf but a soft smell of clean spice, a scent he had come to know well over the past months.

And someone is holding my hand.

Cautiously, he opened his eyes.

He lay in a crisp-sheeted camp bed in a clean, white-walled room. Blue curtains hung at both doorways, blocking light and most sound, though now that he was listening he could hear the vague noises of everyday life beyond them. Beside the bed, in a cushioned chair, slept Corona Gamp, her fair hair hanging in limp strands around her worried face. One of her hands clutched his loosely, as if even in her sleep she would not let him go.

Relief overwhelmed him, threatening to sweep him back into a healing darkness, but he resisted. *I came this far for a reason. I must deliver my message.*

He squeezed Corona's hand. She roused instantly. "What—I was not—Brian! You're awake! Lie still, don't try to move—"

"I will be good," Brian said carefully, surprised and pleased to find speech so easy. He had been sure several of his ribs were broken before he'd lost consciousness, and one of his last clear memories was of a foot descending towards his throat. "But I have information—Corona, what is today? The date?"

"The thirtieth of December. Why?"

Another wave of relief. "Because that means I am in time."

"In time? In time for what?"

"To prevent deaths." Brian closed his eyes as the room seemed to spin for a moment, then opened them again. "I know for a certainty how many attacks are planned, Corona. I know the locations and the targets of all but two. And I overheard rumors about those I do not know. I need to speak with Dumbledore, as soon as possible."

"Which will be tomorrow at the earliest," Corona said firmly. "You were badly injured, Brian. You need to heal. These attacks literally cannot occur until the night of the fifth of January, or am I mistaken?"

"You are correct, but—"

"No buts." Corona gave him the look usually reserved for the use of wives and serious girlfriends. "Aletha claims it is a miracle you made it as far as you did. You nearly died twice, once before we could reach you and once after. I refuse to let you make yourself worse. You *will* spend the rest of today resting, and speak with the Headmaster tomorrow if you are able. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Perfectly." Brian closed his eyes again to hide his smile, not resisting as the darkness slipped over him once more. He was safe now, from everything except those complications which came with romance.

And when I consider that I thought I would never have that in the first place...

It was a good thought to fall asleep to.

xXxXx

Dumbledore was busy on business of his own on the thirty-first, so it was the first of the year before Brian's information was passed along. That left four days for the Order to prepare, and they used their time well.

“They’ve pulled everyone into this one,” Ron said on the morning of the fifth, swinging by his knees from a branch in the Weasleys’ orchard. “Mum and Dad, Bill and Fleur, Charlie and Tonks, Percy... even the twins, but Mum only agreed to let them go if they promised to stay in the car.”

“But this is your dad’s car we’re talking about, right?” asked Draco, hooking his leg over a branch on the next tree over. “The one that flies?”

“He’s only got one.”

“I’d be more worried about them than about any of the wizards, if I were a werewolf,” said Ginny from where she knelt in the snow, scraping a pile together. “They’ve been experimenting with fireworks these last few weeks and I think they’ve got a couple of basic rockets sorted.”

“Werewolves don’t have to worry about wizards,” Harry said, tossing and catching a snowball idly. “Not as such. They’re immune to spells.”

“Not all spells,” Hermione corrected from high above. “Spells that don’t conjure anything or change their surroundings. A Stunner or an Imperius won’t work on a werewolf. But a Binding Spell that conjures ropes, or even an Aguamenti to throw water in its face... as long as you can keep it away from you until the moon sets, you’re safe.”

“And we have another trick,” Neville added, giving Meghan a leg up into Hermione’s tree. “We eight, I mean, if we were going out. Which we’re not. But your parents are,” he said to Harry. “And they have it too. Mum said she and Dad might look into it if they ever get any spare time—since Robards took over the Auror Office full time it’s been crazy for Dad, and Mum’s working like mad to get a *real* curriculum ready for winter term...”

“Hallelujah,” Harry said, catching the snowball on his head as it came down and shaking the snow out of his hair. “Real Defense lessons at last. For everything we can’t learn out of books.”

“There are things we can’t learn out of books?” Meghan inquired, brushing snow off the branch she was sitting on. “Does Hermione know that?”

Hermione made a rude noise.

“Actually, I have to take back what I said.” Ginny started to squeeze her snow together. “Fred’s been working on the rockets, and George has been helping when he’s not down in the village. Apparently there’s a girl in the paper shop who thinks his card tricks are amazing—‘just like real magic’.”

“Does your mum know this yet?” Draco asked. “I remember how she was when she thought there were Muggle kids in her house...”

“She was getting ready for one of her big blow-ups,” Ron said, grabbing the branch and flipping himself back upright. “But then she calmed back down for some reason. Told him he was an adult now, he’d have to make his own decision.”

“Huh.” Harry bent down and brushed a bit of snow out of Ginny’s hair. “That doesn’t sound like her. Is she feeling all right?”

Ron shrugged. “She’s got a lot to worry about. There’s the war, and there’s Fleur...”

“What’s wrong with Fleur?” asked Luna, looking up from the tiny pattern she’d found in the snow.

“Mum doesn’t like her much,” Ginny answered. “Thinks she’ll break Bill’s heart. Then there’s Tonks—Mum’s glad she’s finally found out who really killed her mother, but now she keeps saying things about getting back at Fudge...”

“Would that be so bad?” asked Meghan. “He did know about her mum, and he never said anything.”

“Her getting back at him would be bad,” Harry reminded his little sister. “Because if they caught her, then she’d be in trouble.”

“So let’s help her!” Meghan peered down at the rest of the Pride as if this should have been obvious. “We can design a really good prank and help her play it and no one will ever know!”

“We’ll think about it after O.W.L.s are over, Pearl,” said Hermione, starting to climb down. “What else, Ron?”

“Let me think. War, Fleur, Tonks... right, Percy. She’s worried about him because Dumbledore thinks Voldemort might be after the Ministry at some point. And us and the twins, because we know Voldemort’ll want Hogwarts.”

“You think so?” Draco said, sliding off his branch to hit the ground with a thud. “One of the oldest magical institutions in Britain, with its own fund of magical power which Voldemort can tap into if he has a connection with the school—and I think conquering it would count—do you really think he’s got reason to go after that?”

“Your colors turn all pink and green when you’re sarcastic,” Luna remarked, adding a stroke to the pattern with her fingernail.

This ended the conversation, for the simple reason that six of the participants were too busy laughing to talk or breathe and the seventh was chasing the eighth with the intent of kissing her into a similar state of oxygen deprivation.

xXxXx

Hermione sat on her bed and fidgeted, glancing at the clock every few seconds.

I shouldn’t worry so much. All the girls Mr. Li, Brian, found out about are protected, even the ones he only heard whispers about. And the Pack-parents will be fine. Neville said it this morning—werewolves only attack or infect humans. All of them have their Animagus forms, except Moony, and he’s a werewolf already! What can one do to him?

“Except bite and claw and rip and tear,” she muttered aloud, “not much.”

That’s what I’m most afraid of, I think. She shivered. Seeing one of them, or more than one, come back like Brian. Hurt and bleeding and weak and shaking. I don’t want them to get hurt. I don’t want them to bleed. And most of all I don’t want them to die.

Of course, who ever does?

She shook her head hard. “Enough,” she said aloud once more. “Time to go find some fun.”

The Pride was all staying at the Den tonight under Hagrid’s watchful eye, since their parents were needed to fill out the Order’s response teams. Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour had politely declined to commit Aurors or MLE personnel to ‘an unsubstantiated rumor by an unstable person’. Danger and Letha had politely declined to give Corona back her wand until she promised not to curse Scrimgeour to the moon and back.

The thought made Hermione smile as she started down the stairs to find the others. But halfway to the den room (Brian had recovered enough to move to his family’s home two days ago), she jumped back as Ginny and Luna shot out of the doorway.

“If you’re going to be idiots, I’m going outside!” Ginny shouted over her shoulder.

“We’re not being idiots!” Ron shouted back. “We just don’t want you around right now! What’s so hard to understand about that?”

“Maybe that I’m good enough to have around when there’s chores to be done, but not when you want to play your stupid game?” Ginny snarled through bared teeth, then marched towards the closet.

Luna stood observing the den room with a faint frown. Hermione approached her carefully. “Starwing, is something wrong?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Luna said slowly. “There’s a haze tonight. It looks like everyone being worried and frightened and wanting only the most familiar things. But I don’t know if it’s all coming from us or not.”

“Where else would it come from?”

“I don’t know that either.” Luna shivered. “But I know I want to get away from it. It doesn’t like me. It doesn’t like any of us.”

“Let’s go outside with Ginny, then. We can get some air, clear our heads, and come back in when we get too cold.”

Luna smiled and started towards the closet herself.

Meghan materialized out of nowhere to join the expedition in the way of little sisters everywhere.

“Hagrid taught the boys a game with dice,” she explained. “They’re betting money and they don’t want me to play because I might lose.”

The older girls laughed. “They don’t want you to play because you might *win*,” Ginny corrected. “Don’t worry, we’ll beat them when we get back inside.”

The evening was cool and clear, the sun almost touching the horizon in the west. One or two of the brightest stars were beginning to show above. The girls took turns pointing them out, naming them, retelling the stories they knew from Astronomy class. Meghan taught Luna how to turn cartwheels in the snow, Ginny crafted a nose and ears onto the lopsided snowman Harry and Draco had erected the day before, and Hermione looked longingly at the trees down by the road, wishing she dared pass the wards to climb them.

I can get a bit closer at any rate.

She walked down the path, shielding her eyes from the bright redness of the sun to one side. The full moon would rise soon. Moony and Brian would begin their controlled transformations, and the werewolves who were to attack tonight their uncontrolled ones...

Or do they use the Wolfsbane too? It would be an advantage for them, if they were only supposed to bite certain people. An uncontrolled werewolf will just attack anything human it comes across.

She stopped several paces short of the translucent wall that was the Pack’s wards at twilight and gazed up at the sky. “So beautiful,” she whispered as another star made its appearance.

Orange light sparked at the corner of her eye, and a slight jolt ran through her frame.

What was that? she wondered distantly, then dismissed it. *No matter. What was I thinking? The stars? Beautiful?*

The words had no meaning. Beauty was something she had read about in books, studied for a test, not a real concept she could apply to her life.

Should I be worried about this?

Worry was another abstract, far away and inconsequential. She had no ability to feel it, and thus, no need.

That makes sense.

She approved of things making sense, as much as she approved of anything. Approval, even, had distanced itself from her, a thing to be brushed with the fingertips at full arms’ length.

Movement on the road caught her eye. A man was standing there, a man who had not been there a few moments before. His face was scarred as with claws, his hair long and white, and his hand was beckoning her.

I know him. Who is he?

Several thoughts came to mind. All were rejected except the final one: *father*. Other images were associated with this word—a smiling man from photographs, two from real life—but this one was in front of her now, and wanted her to come to him.

Is there some reason I should not?

There seemed to be several, but all withered under the eyes of her new, logical self. This man, she knew from stories, had sworn on his life to preserve hers, so no harm would come to her in his care. Besides, he was her father, and it was right that a daughter should obey her father.

Hermione took one step forward, then another. A third and a fourth, a tingle like electricity over her skin, and she was past the wards. Her father pointed a wand at her and spoke a single word, and she was immediately filled with purpose and the sure knowledge of what to do next.

She turned back to the yard and waved to her Pridemates, beckoning them towards her.

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Hagrid half-watched the boys, jubilant and dour by turns, throwing the dice and shoving money towards one another. Something was niggling at the back of his mind.

The girls.

He frowned. Why should he care about the girls? They were more trouble than they were worth, and he was better off without them hanging about and bothering him and the boys. They'd come inside when they were good and ready.

They've been out there quite a while, the tiny voice insisted. And moonrise is soon. Better go check on them. It will only take a moment.

He shrugged. It couldn't hurt.

“Back in a minute,” he said to Harry, who nodded absently in reply, his attention on the dice in Draco's hand. Huge fur coat on, umbrella in hand, and he was out the front door the way the girls had gone.

No girls were anywhere to be seen. Footprints shone in the last rays of the setting sun, but none led to either side of the house. Instead, four sets of tracks went straight and true down the lane. Hagrid followed, growing more puzzled and worried with every second. Surely, surely, the girls couldn't have been foolish enough—but how could they have been, the wards were plain to see in this light—

But I don't see them. I know they've got to be here, but I don't see them—

He took one more step, and the telltale shock spread across his arms and face.

Sure enough, here they are. Some fool went and made them invisible—why, I don't know—

Three voices shouted two words in unison.

Hagrid had just enough time to realize exactly why, and to curse himself for a fool.

The ground shuddered as he fell.

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Twelve dragons, engraved upon golden pendants, flared with greenish light and went out. A chill spread from them outwards to the other pendants in their various sets and to the chains their owners wore about their necks, a chill that refused to lift.

A Pack-friend was dead.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 31: Argent and Gules (Arc 6)

Cho Chang shifted in her chair, her breathing more labored than usual. After almost two weeks, she still couldn't get used to the weight and chill of the silver necklace around her throat. It seemed to scold her silently every second, as effective as her mother's hurt look or her father's disappointed sigh.

I thought I was doing right. Telling the truth, fighting blood magic, helping the person who wanted to make things run the way they should. That can't be wrong... can it?

She had asked the question a hundred, a thousand times, but never allowed herself to answer it. She knew she wouldn't like the answer when it came.

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The dice clattered unnoticed to the floor as four boys yanked at their collars.

"Hagrid?" Draco said in shock, staring at the dimly flickering dragon. "But he only went outside a second ago—what could possibly have happened—"

"This doesn't feel right," Neville said, touching the pendants to the inside of his wrist. "It's... this'll sound stupid, but it's not cold enough. It's not like it was during the Triwizard second task, or when you were at the graveyard, Harry..."

"Everyone come here," Ron interrupted from the front window. "You need to see this."

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It was cold out here, but her coat was thick and warm. Besides, her father would surely never lead her to a place that would be bad for her. He knew best, and she would follow his directions.

Strange, how the other girls had followed her down to the wards so quickly. She thought there had once been a reason for them to obey her, and old habits died hard. No matter, though; once they had come close enough for her father and two of his three friends to lay the orange spells over them, they had obeyed her beckoning them through the wards as meekly as she had obeyed her father.

She had been mildly curious as to the reason for the killing of the large man, but a moment's thought had provided her the answer. The people with whom she had once lived would be upset if they knew her father had come to take her away, and the large man would have told them soon enough that they had a chance of finding her.

Still, it was a shame that he'd had to die. But everything died sooner or later, and he'd probably never known what was happening to him...

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“Do it again,” Maya begged, gasping for breath between her bouts of giggles, her arms supporting her aching pajama-clad belly. “Just one more time...”

Selena Moon, likewise in her nightdress, put on a very earnest face, nodding. “Uh-huh... uh-huh... I understand... wait...” She let her jaw drop and her eyes bulge. “Er... you... you’re... *how?*”

Maya howled with laughter.

“The suave and debonair Roger Davies,” Selena said, giggling herself as she took a bow from her seated position. “Upon discovering that he had accidentally impregnated his girlfriend. Thank you, thank you, you’re too kind.”

Maya caught her breath. “I do hope that by ‘how’, he meant ‘how did this happen to us’, not ‘how does this happen in general’,” she commented.

“I tend to think that was the meaning he intended,” said Selena, smiling smugly. “He has far too firm a grasp of the mechanics of the act to misunderstand such basic things about it as its usual consequences.”

When both girls were done laughing at this, Selena settled herself more comfortably against the cushions they had pilfered from other areas of Maya’s house. “What is this called again?” she asked. “Denning?”

Maya nodded. “It helped Graham, after he had been so isolated for so long. I think it could help some of the people we both know, the ones who don’t understand anything but pureblood rules and get confused when they meet Muggle-borns.”

“And it will also be good for us in times like these.” Selena shivered. “A war, a real war. I know the stories, but I never thought it would happen to us.”

“No one did.” Maya squeezed her friend’s hand. “But a den-night is a time to feel safe and remember the good things in life. We’re even doing it on the right night of the month...”

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Harry got to the window first, but Draco and Neville weren’t more than a step behind. A snap of Harry’s fingers dimmed the Den’s inside lights, allowing the boys to see outside without shading their eyes.

The enormous still form where the lane met the road was unmistakably Hagrid. There was no sign of the girls.

“We have to get out there,” said Neville, starting for the door. “Something’s wrong—”

“No.”

The voice was harsh and rasping, and it took a moment for Harry to recognize it as his own. The sight of three pair of disbelieving eyes helped.

“No?” repeated Draco. “What do you mean, no?”

“I mean no.” Harry’s vision swam, and he closed his eyes, letting his mind understand what his body was already reacting to. “There’s nothing we can do.”

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Her thoughts turned away from the large man who had died, to herself and her own situation. She stood within a metal cage, large enough for herself and the three other girls, along with one of the three men who had come with her father. He was the one who had not used a wand either to bespell her and the other girls or to help kill the large man, and he was pacing back and forth restlessly as though waiting for something.

Sunset, her mind whispered. Moonrise. He is a werewolf, like your father.

She wondered if she ought to feel fear. Werewolves were supposed to be dangerous. Not all of them were, but this man looked as though he could be very dangerous. Still, her father would never put her into harm’s way. Would he?

Not unless he could not help it. Not unless he were directly ordered to do so by one whom he dares not disobey.

She nodded thoughtfully. It made sense. Her world had order once again.

I do wonder what was the purpose of the one who carried me here on his broom touching me as he did. Father and the other men laughed to see it, and congratulated him. Is it a courtship ritual? Has he asked Father for my hand in marriage?

She was not sure whether she hoped so or not, or even whether or not she hoped at all. Hope, like all feelings other than mild wonder and satisfaction, belonged to the past now. Her future was here, in this small cage with the man who was even now falling to his knees as the last rays of sunset stained the snow red as blood.

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Suddenly tired of pretending she was working, Cho set her Charms book down and got up, shivering in the chill air of her bedroom. She would look out at the snow, red with the last of the sunset light and silver with the rising moon, and she would think about good and happy things.

The curtains slid silently apart at her tug, and Cho gazed out at the scene. Leafless, ice-covered trees, the closest near enough for her to touch, held court over the snowy lane and road. The Frobisher house, her family’s nearest neighbor, was dark except for a light in an upstairs room.

Probably Vicky, practicing her showpiece for Charms Club. I need to work on mine, there’s less

than a week until term starts again...

About to turn away from the window and go back to her textbook, Cho stopped.

Something was moving outside the Frobishers' back door.

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“Are you mad?” Ron demanded. “We have to do something! Hagrid’s in trouble!”

Harry shook his head. “Hagrid’s beyond trouble,” he said, half-gagging on the words. They were too commonplace, too banal, to encompass something so fundamentally wrong with his world. “We can’t help him now.”

“What are you—” Neville’s voice broke off in mid-sentence, and Harry tasted comprehension in his scent, grief a heartbeat behind it.

“But he can’t be,” Ron protested. “He barely even had time to pass the wards—he only went outside to check on the girls—”

“The girls!” Draco’s voice and scent spiraled upward into panic in unison. “We have to find them, they must be in trouble, someone’s bypassed their pendants—”

“Stop,” Harry ordered, opening his eyes. Draco was frozen with his hand on the doorknob. *Thank Merlin for Pack instinct.* “We can’t go out there.” Harry drew his wand and flicked a seven-ten lock onto the door. “We have to stay put.”

One instant of shock, then the others all started to shout.

“Have you lost your *mind*?”

“They’re out there with killers—”

“We don’t know what’s happened to them—”

“And what if we go out there and get ourselves caught or killed by the same people who killed Hagrid?” Harry snapped, forcing the words out past the thickening in his throat at the last two. “Fat lot of help that’ll be! They had to wait until he left the wards to...” He swallowed rather than finish the sentence. “They obviously can’t break the wards, or they’d be in here already,” he said instead. “We have to stay put. Getting ourselves in trouble won’t help anything.”

“So we sit in here and let them get away?” Ron shouted. “While—” He choked on the first syllable of a name, caught his breath, and went on. “While they’re out there alone, you want us to sit home and stay safe and do *nothing*?”

Harry’s pendants throbbed hot once with his friend’s anger, and an idea came to him. He shook his head, starting to smile. “Not nothing,” he said. “There’s something we can do without leaving. A

way we can look for them, and try to help them.” He held out a hand, palm down. “Are you with me?”

Three hands piled atop his without a moment’s hesitation.

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The far-off silhouette was dark and four-legged, but at this distance Cho could see nothing else about it.

She drew her wand from her pocket and pointed it over her shoulder. “*Accio Omnioculars!*” A moment later, she had the golden glasses to her eyes and was zooming in. Closer—closer—

The wolf-like creature lifted one paw and flexed it. Long, curving claws sprang from their sockets, one gleaming unnaturally bright. This claw slid into the keyhole of the door, and the wolf—*no, the werewolf*—grinned ferociously as it began to move its paw back and forth.

Cho lowered the Omnioculars to her lap, shaking all over. Her parents were out at a holiday party, quite possibly the same that Vicki’s parents had gone to—there was no time to firecall anyone, the werewolf would be into the house any moment—

A shout from outside drew her attention back. Two robed figures had leapt from the bushes and were now facing down the startled werewolf, wands steady in their hands. One of them made a snapping gesture, and a silver wall sprang up to cover the door. The werewolf snarled and scuttled back from the shining metal, then sprang at one of the wizards. He rolled out of the way, and his companion flung a hailstorm of sparks at the creature, drawing a yelp and a second snarl as it turned to face this new menace.

Cho relaxed in her seat. There was no need to do anything, no need to get involved. Vicky was safe now, and would never know how close she had come to living a nightmare. All would be well.

I wonder who they are?

She lifted the Omnioculars to her eyes again. One of the combatants was a witch, not a wizard, she noted, and unless the sunset light was affecting her vision, a witch with turquoise blue hair...

A flicker of movement in the background drew Cho’s attention, and she refocused the Omnioculars on it.

Hate-filled eyes, flattened ears, bared teeth stared at her from the bushes.

It didn’t come alone—there’s another one—and unless they turn around now they won’t see it in time—

The Omnioculars clattered to the floor as Cho flung open her window. “Behind you!” she screamed. “*Look behind you!*”

She hardly noticed the sudden easing of her breath.

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Maya turned her head as footsteps came padding down the hallway outside her bedroom door. *Two people. Not wearing shoes. What in the world—*

The door handle turned, and the door squeaked open. The figure beyond it stepped into the room with the unhurried hauteur of a predator stalking slow, weak prey.

Maya felt her heart constrict as Selena whimpered in fear behind her. Without her decision, her mind catapulted back to an extra Defense lesson, a year and a half ago.

“Who can tell me which of these creatures is the true wolf, and which is the werewolf?”

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A light touch slid into the back of Hermione’s mind, but she barely noticed it. Her attention was on the werewolf advancing towards her.

I can smell how hungry he is. I wonder if he will kill me to eat, or only bite me and turn me? I might like that better, because it would make me a werewolf like my father. She glanced to one side where a second wolfish figure prowled up and down outside the cage, two hooded men standing nervously behind it.

The one who held me on the broom smells hungry too, but a different kind of hunger. Again she recalled what the young man had done with her on the short broom ride here. The touching only filled him for a little while—now he is hungry again, more hungry than he was before, and he wants me to come to him and fulfill that hunger. Perhaps, after this is finished, Father will tell me to do that... of course, I will do it if he asks, that is only proper—

She gasped for air as a spice-sharp tide of anger surged through her mind. From far away, she heard cries as of pain, but her own pain drowned them out. Desperately, she tried to marshal her forces. *No! This is not right! I must—stop it—*

But it was too late. The surge of hot fury slammed against the walls in her mind which held her in the box of propriety and obedience, and the walls disappeared as if they had never been.

Fenrir Greyback, scarred and lean in his wolf form, lunged. Hermione shrieked and dropped to all fours, shrinking into cat shape without conscious thought.

It was a spell, a spell to keep our emotions bound! The others must be under it too—I have to break it!

Two bounds took her across the cage. Greyback turned and growled at her. Hermione growled back, then flung herself upwards and human, snatching her wand out of her robes. *“Finite Incantatem!”* she shouted, swinging the wand wide to cover the other three corners of the cage,

where her Pride sisters stood dull-eyed and listless. “Quick, everyone, *forms!*”

Luna came alert instantly and shrank almost as fast into her feathers, Meghan twisted into four legs and fur only a moment behind her, but Ginny staggered back a pace instead, her hand to her forehead, moaning in pain.

Greyback’s head snapped around, and he pounced.

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Draco forced his eyes partway open. Even the dim light in the front room pierced his eyes and went straight back into his aching brain. Neville lay flat on his stomach, hands pressed over his ears, and Harry had his arms across his face, clutching the back of his head as though trying to hold it on. Only Ron sat where he had been, his lips pulled away from his teeth and his hands balled into fists.

Ron, Draco sent through Harry’s chain, still linking them all, though the effort cost him further stabs of pain. **Whatever you’re doing, stop it.**

Me? What? Ron blinked several times, his expression returning to normal. **I’m not doing anything—**

Well, stop whatever you’re *not* doing, Harry put in. **It bloody well hurts.**

“That’s not me!” Ron protested aloud, though luckily for his continued existence, it was in a whisper. “Didn’t you feel it? The spell they were under?”

I didn’t get a chance to feel anything, said Neville. **I’d barely touched their minds when you went off like a firework. What was it?**

“A spell to stop them feeling. It’s why the pendants didn’t go off—because they weren’t afraid or angry or upset or *anything*.” Ron’s fists clenched again. “Fenrir effing Greyback stalking her, and they don’t even have the decency to let her be afraid of him—”

Who? Harry demanded, his arms coming down in a rush. **Who was Greyback stalking?**

Ron ducked out of the chain. “I don’t know,” he said, coloring. “It was too fast—we linked up, we reached, and then I was there, in her mind, and I could feel the spell around her and see Greyback coming at her, and I panicked but she didn’t care at all—and then I heard what she was thinking, about what one of them had done to her and what he wanted to do, and she didn’t care about that either, and it got me so mad the spell shattered—”

“Which explains the headaches,” Draco said wearily, closing his eyes again. “It’s backlash. The spell broke so fast, everyone connected with you who wasn’t either you or her is going to feel it.”

Ron grimaced. “Guess it was me, then. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Harry rubbed along the line of his scar, breathing deeply. “You did the right thing. The girls can fight back now, and we’ll get over this.”

“Speak for yourself,” Neville mumbled. “Somebody kill me...”

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“Selena,” Maya said without turning. “Run.”

“Not without you,” Selena answered harshly, but Maya heard the shuddering terror under the tone. “We can go together... if we get up slowly, maybe it won’t attack, and then we can Apparate out...”

Maya kept her gaze fixed on the werewolf, and hissed under her breath as she saw comprehension dawning in its eyes. “Too late!” she shouted, jumping up. “Hurry, get out, save your baby, *go!*”

The werewolf made a rush around the edge of the room, obviously trying to get at Selena. Maya flung herself at it with a scream and tore two handfuls of fur from its back, and it snarled and turned on her.

She had just enough time to hear Selena’s sobs cut off by the crack of Disapparation before the teeth closed on her shoulder.

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“*Ginny!*” Hermione shrieked over Luna’s owl-scream, Meghan’s hooves clattering, and the sickening crack of Ginny’s head striking the bars of the cage.

Greyback looked up and wolf-grinned at her, licking his chops deliberately.

On Ginny’s left arm, a double row of teethmarks welled fresh blood.

Hermione dropped her right hand to her hip, feeling rage pulse hot and cold inside her. “It’s me you really want, isn’t it?” she whispered, pulling her robes taut against her skin. “It’s always been me. Ever since you found out who I am, you’ve wanted to turn me. To hurt Moony, and help Voldemort. Isn’t that right?”

The wolf nodded his head deliberately, grinning even larger.

“Well, here I am.” Hermione took two steps forward and beckoned with her left hand. “Come and get me.”

Her right hand closed tightly around what it had been seeking.

xXxXx

Lucius Malfoy growled under his breath, feeling the wolf-mind raging at the back of his own, contained by the Wolfsbane but seeking some way to break free. *Curse that stupid girl—if she*

provokes Greyback into trying to kill her, his oath is broken and he dies, and I have to intervene or I die as well...

He allowed himself one moment of smugness for the way in which he had avoided part of the meddling proscription Lupin had tried to place on him. *I am sworn only to let them come to no harm if it lies within my power to stop. And my Lord's commands are in no way within my power. I do his bidding, not the other way around.*

Which is as it should be.

Greyback launched himself across the cage, the scent of his blood-lust coming clear and strong to Lucius' nose. Granger-Lupin watched him come, her right hand clenched at her hip, her whole body poised as for some rapid movement. The other two girls in their animal forms were huddled together in the far corner, the owl with a wing tucked protectively around the deer's foreleg. The Weasley girl lay unmoving where Greyback had dropped her.

The feral werewolf lunged for Granger-Lupin's throat. The girl dropped to her knees and threw her torso backwards as though trying to touch her head to the floor behind her. Her right hand flew upwards—something in it gleamed blue and silver in the moonlight—

Silver!

The terrifyingly sweet smell of the poison metal flooded through Lucius, even as his eyes registered the shape in the girl's hand.

A dagger—she carries a dagger made of silver—

With a shout like a battle cry, Hermione Granger-Lupin slashed through Fenrir Greyback's front left paw as it passed over her head.

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It worked—it worked—I don't believe it worked—

Hermione rolled out of the way just as Greyback, keening in pain, crashed into the bars and rebounded to the cage's floor exactly where she had been a second before.

Serves you right. Biting my best friend.

Anger and grief for what Ginny would suffer tried to swamp her, but she forced them back. *He's only wounded, not dead. If I can't finish him, he could still kill us all...*

A strange smell came to her nose. Burning, it was as though something were burning, but there was no fire, no smoke anywhere—

Wisps of steam rose from her dagger's blade. Where Greyback's blood had coated it only seconds before, now there were flecks of ash falling from it. Greyback himself was staring in horror at his

gashed paw, which was starting to turn black around the line of the cut—

How could I have forgotten—silver, the daggers are silver, and he's not immune the way Moony is—he would never tell us what happened to a normal werewolf who was cut with silver, and I never thought to look it up—

The blackness spread outwards from the cut, faster every second, racing up Greyback's leg towards his torso. The feral alpha growled once, then levered himself up onto three paws, hatred blazing in his yellow eyes as he stared at Hermione. One stumbling step towards her—another—

His front left paw, now entirely black, grazed the floor of the cage and crumbled away. His leg followed, and Greyback fell to the floor as the blackness of silver poisoning spread up his chest and into his other legs. As he tried to push himself upright again, his back right leg broke away at the hip. His howl of despair died away seconds after it began, when the tainted blood reached his head and face.

The black form on the floor of the cage held its shape for the space of one breath, then collapsed into a pile of ashes.

Hermione fought down her stomach. There was no time to be ill now. Ginny was hurt, and there were still three Death Eaters, one of them a werewolf, watching their every move—

She pulled herself up to her knees, turned, and discovered that she was only half right. Ginny still lay where she had, unconscious with her arm oozing blood, but the other Death Eaters were gone.

Good riddance.

Luna fluttered across the cage and landed beside Ginny, dropping out of owl form to land on her knees. "This isn't right," she said, touching the skin between the puncture wounds on Ginny's arm. "This isn't the same..."

"Not the same as what?" Hermione demanded, crawling to Ginny's other side.

"Not the same as Mr. Moony, or Brian." Luna looked over at Meghan, who had returned to human form but was still shaking so hard she had to hold to the cage's bars to stand up. "This looks like something else. Something I've seen before."

"Something... something else?" Meghan faltered. One hand passed across her face. "Something else..."

Hermione held out her arms. Meghan stumbled across the cage and fell into them, and Hermione held her sister close, finding some measure of courage in the need to console another. "We're alive," she whispered into Meghan's ear. "But Ginny was hurt, and you're the only one who knows how to heal her. We need you strong, Pearl. Please."

Meghan nodded and squirmed around in Hermione's arms until she could reach out a hand to touch Ginny. "Something else," she repeated, frowning. "You're right, Luna, it is something else."

Something I know, something we all know. It's—" She stopped, shook her head hard, and looked again. "But that doesn't make sense!"

"What?" Hermione demanded. "What is it?"

"It's a *curse* !"

Hermione rocked back on her heels. "That's impossible," she said almost to herself. "There's no way lycanthropy can be caused by a curse. Someone would have found a way to lift it by now. I've read the books, all the Healers who've ever studied it agree it's a disease..."

Meghan added her other hand. "They're right," she said distantly. "But they're wrong too."

"It is a curse," Luna said, her eyes unfocused. "Not the same as the other curses I have seen, but a curse."

"A curse *and* a disease," Meghan murmured, stroking her fingers across Ginny's bitten arm. "They're linked, they work together—if the disease gets a chance to settle into the person's body, then the curse turns permanent and becomes part of the person's mind and soul—and that's why no one ever knew about it, because no one ever got a chance to look at someone who'd just been bitten, they were always studying people who'd been bitten days or months or years ago..."

"If the disease gets a chance to settle in," Hermione repeated slowly, swallowing hard to control her combined terror and hope. "Meghan, can you—do you think you can—"

"Maybe?" Meghan giggled once, shakily. "It's so *strong* . Almost as strong as dying. And it doesn't want to leave. Most diseases know they're not supposed to be there, but this one thinks it is, and I don't know if I'm strong enough to stop it..."

"You have to be," Luna said, looking up. "Meghan, you have to be strong enough. It's important."

"I know it's important!" Meghan shouted. "Ginny's my friend too, you know, you don't have to tell me it's important to stop her being a werewolf if I can!"

"That's not the only reason." Luna's voice was perfectly calm; she might have been in her own bedroom at the Landing Zone telling them about a piece from next month's *Quibbler* . "The last two lines of Mrs. Danger's prophecy, the newest one. 'The lion's line continue must/ ere that of serpent fall to dust.' Do you remember them?"

"Well, now I do," Meghan said, still sounding resentful. "What about them?"

Hermione frowned—the lines didn't sound quite right, somehow—but Luna was already going on. "The lion's line is the Heirs of Gryffindor, and the serpent's is Slytherin. So there has to be a new Heir of Gryffindor before Voldemort will fall. And if Harry is the Heir of Gryffindor..."

"Oh," Meghan said, and then, "*Oh!* "

Her hands clamped onto Ginny's arm, and Hermione felt the subtle shift in her sister's body that she had come to know meant concentration and healing. Carefully, without disturbing Meghan, she drew her pendant chain from under her robes and pulled it out long, then laid it gently around Meghan's shoulders and handed Luna a loop to put on. Almost whimsically, she slid it around Ginny's neck as well, then closed her eyes to concentrate.

I know I'm not the alpha female of the Pride anymore, but I guess I'm still the beta, and our alpha's hurt, she thought upwards. It isn't her fault—I don't know why she couldn't change in time, but she couldn't—can I just this once call the Pride magic to help us? To let Meghan heal Ginny, so that we still have a chance to win?

A long, long pause, as Meghan trembled in her arms and Luna continued to watch a particular point on Ginny's robes.

There is a price, little sister, said a voice almost reluctantly.

Hermione breathed again. **There is always a price,** she answered. **Tell me.**

A curse cannot simply be lifted—it must be transferred. This you know.

Yes, I do. Hermione nodded. **I will take the curse from Ginny, if I can.**

You can. But this is only part of the price.

What is the rest?

Luna's head came up. "It's not like a normal curse," she said softly. "It has hooks and barbs and claws to keep it latched onto your soul. And even if it goes away, it will leave scars behind. Forever."

Your Pride sister speaks truly, the voice murmured. **Such is the price.**

Hermione's stomach lurched. She glanced over her shoulder at what was left of Fenrir Greyback. *His soul was nothing but scars... he treasured them, he welcomed them in... could I become like him? If I take this curse, will that happen to me?*

Unbidden, her hand stole up to her cheek.

Not all scars are evil. And even the worst thing can be turned and used for good. If Moony weren't a werewolf, there would never have been a Pack.

"I accept the price," Hermione whispered. "So I speak, so I intend."

And so let it be done, replied the voice—Rowena herself, rather than one of her daughters, Hermione thought. **So let it be done indeed.**

Meghan lifted one hand from Ginny's arm and laid it on Hermione's. The little girl was shaking,

her skin cooler than it should be and damp with sweat. “She’s fighting me,” she muttered as if to herself. “She doesn’t want to be moved...”

“She?” Hermione asked.

“The curse,” Luna said. “Every curse looks like something. This one looks like a woman in robes. She looks sad and angry at the same time, and she wants to stay where she is.”

“Well, that’s just too bad,” said Hermione, turning her arm to clasp Meghan’s hand. “She can’t.”

I’m ready, she sent silently. **Whenever you are.**

Meghan nodded once to her, then again to Luna as the other girl laid her hand over Meghan’s grip on Ginny’s arm. “Girl power,” she said.

“Girl power,” Hermione and Luna echoed.

Meghan closed her eyes and began to concentrate once more, and Hermione reached out mental hands of her own cream-spice-parchment magic towards Luna’s active white-and-gentle-shock and Ginny’s warm-red-roses power, lying dormant.

We will not be defeated, she vowed silently. *No curse can stop us, not when we fight as one. Whatever the price for victory, we will meet it, and we will win.*

Moonbeams lanced across Ginny’s face and Hermione’s hands as the girls of the Pride fought for their alpha.

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Draco glared away the Weasley twin who had moved into his pacing lane, then continued his trip up and down the room. The girls had been missing for nearly an hour, and the Den was getting fuller by the minute as Order teams coming off werewolf-catching duties responded to this new call. Padfoot, Harry, Professor Dumbledore, and Mad-Eye were in Letha’s potion room discussing a possible reason for the girls to have left the house, and most of the other adults were out looking, but that left all the student-sized people in the Den, and no one wanted to leave the music room, because that was the room with the Floo and the room where any news would come first...

As if on cue, the flames in the fireplace turned green, and a dark-haired girl stumbled out, coughing. A DA member, a Slytherin—Selena, Draco recalled after a second, Selena Moon. He caught her shoulder and held her up while she got her breath back.

“Thank you,” Selena said, looking around the crowded room. “Is—yes, thank goodness, Lee! Lee Jordan!”

Lee looked up from where he was discussing something with Ron and the twins. “Hello, Selena,” he said, getting to his feet. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere. I tried your house, but Lindz said you were out with the Weasleys, so I tried the Burrow, but no one was there, and then I remembered how close they are with the Pack and I had to come here anyway so…” Selena pressed a hand to her forehead. “I’m sorry, I’m babbling, forgive me, it’s just been such a night.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Lee said. “Are you all right? Did something happen?”

“Not to me.” Selena brushed a bit of hair out of her face and met Lee’s eyes. “It’s Maya. I was staying at her house for the night, we were laughing and telling stories, and then the door opened and there was…” She shuddered.

“Is she alive?” Lee asked, almost under his breath but perfectly audible in a room which had gone dead silent.

“She’s alive. But… she fought it, it attacked her, I think it bit her…” Selena’s voice wobbled, but she regained her composure quickly, though Lee’s face had grayed. “She’s at St. Mungo’s, and she asked for you. But she says if you don’t want to come, she understands, and she doesn’t blame you at all…”

“Move,” Lee said shortly. Selena stepped out of the way, and five seconds and a shouted “St. Mungo’s Hospital!” later, Lee was gone.

“I’ll go with him,” Fred Weasley said, standing up. “Just… in case. You know.”

“Thank you.” Selena smiled at him, then turned back to Draco. “They were looking for your mother, too,” she said. “Healer Freeman-Black. To help handle the people who got hurt tonight.” She covered her mouth for a moment. “Because she’s had… experience.”

Everyone snickered.

“Well, she’s out looking for the girls at the moment,” Draco said. “But I can try to get her on the Zippophone…”

Neville, on the couch, sat straight up. “Don’t bother,” he said, pointing to the glass doors.

Everyone turned to look.

A white-feathered owl fluttered wearily to a landing on the snow-covered back patio.

Draco was across the room with the door open before he knew he’d started to move. An instant later, he had Luna in his arms, warm and human and alive and safe.

“We’re all right,” she said over his shoulder to everyone else. “The others are coming. Out in the front.”

Draco’s nose twitched. “What are you not saying?” he asked quietly as the music room emptied like magic. “What happened out there?”

“It’s a very long story.” Luna pulled back enough to meet his eyes. “But the part of it you need to know is about Hermione.”

For a long story, it took surprisingly few words to tell. None of the adults or the girls had arrived by the time Draco went outside to join the others in the front yard, leaving Luna in the music room to call her father on the Floo. Hagrid’s body had already been moved, leaving only the packed imprint on the snow where he’d fallen.

I can’t believe he’s gone. Just... gone, like that. At least he got to meet his brother first, and see little Norbert, or little Norberta, one more time. And fall in love—oh, Merlin’s hat, someone’s going to have to tell Madame Maxime about this...

“Look!” Ron shouted, pointing.

Moonlight glinted silver off the jet-black winged mare gliding into sight beyond the trees, and off the wild hair of one of her riders and the smooth mane of the other. Draco peered below her, and saw three forms emerging from the woods, two predatory and one more prey-like, the latter running as though at the end of her strength.

But of course she wouldn’t accept a ride. Pigheaded little brat. I wish Mr. Weasley had found them with the car, that’s got room for them all...

Pearl the doe staggered through the wards, turned human again, and missed falling on her nose only because Danger was beside her and caught her. Neville ran out to them and scooped Meghan up into his arms. She smiled at him, kissed his cheek once, then went limp in his grasp, and he carried her inside through friendly chuckles.

Letha descended to the yard majestically and furred her wings. George and Ron were beside her almost before the last feather was in place, lifting down a groggy and shivering Ginny. She hugged them both, then slapped Ron on the side of the head. “You pick bloody inconvenient times to give people headaches!” she snapped, and promptly burst into tears.

Draco tuned the rest of this out in favor of getting to Letha’s side and holding up his arms for Hermione. She swung her leg over and slid off, and he caught her halfway down, lowering her the rest of the way. **Twins forever, no matter what**, he told her through their handclasp. **You know that.**

Yes. Yes, I do. Her mind’s touch was bemused. **And I know... I know...**

“What?” Draco asked aloud, touching her shoulder. “What do you know?”

“I know...” Hermione’s eyes widened, and she began to tremble. “I know... that I don’t know... that I don’t...”

Abruptly, she backed away from him, holding up her hands in a warding gesture. “Stay away!” she shouted. “Just—just stay away! Don’t come near me!”

“Nenie, it’s me!” Draco almost took a step forward, but stopped himself in time. “It’s me,” he repeated quietly. “It’s Draco. You know me. I’m your twin.”

“I know.” Hermione nodded, wrapping her arms around herself. “I do know. I know who you are. But I just... I just... please stay away!” She crumpled to one knee and began to sob, fisting her hands in her hair. “Everyone, everyone, just stay away from me!”

Danger, stepping carefully on the fresh snow to make her footsteps audible, came up behind Hermione. “Does everyone include me?” she asked softly.

“I...” Hermione looked up at her sister, her face torn. “I don’t... I...”

Danger’s arms went around Hermione, who slumped against her Pack-mother, sobbing. Moony came up to the two of them, leaned against their legs for a moment, then snorted at Hermione. She lifted her face from Danger’s shoulder and knelt to look him in the eye. A few seconds later, Nenie the cat allowed Danger to pick her up once more, and the three started for the Den.

“Quite a night,” Letha remarked from behind Draco.

“Yeah,” Draco said, watching his twin disappear into the house. “Yeah, it has been.”

Off to one side, Ron also turned to watch the Lupins go.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 32: Tales for Sorrow, Words for Joy (Arc 6)

Neenie the cat lay between lupine paws with her tail over her nose, listened to a soft crooning song, and pondered.

Why am I not afraid?

The question was more than academic, given her night to this point. It needed an answer, and a good one.

I was afraid in the yard. When Draco touched me, and I saw all the boys, I was terribly afraid. I know that they're my friends and they'd never hurt me, but it didn't matter. I was still afraid of them. Because of... Her mind shuddered and skipped over exact words in favor of generalities. *What happened to me. Earlier tonight.*

Neenie looked up at Moony and mewed. *Why?* she was asking, cat-fashion. *Why am I not afraid of you?*

The question seemed to have no good answer.

With a heavy sigh, Moony lowered his head to hers and began to wash behind her ears. Neenie shivered at the contact but felt no fear, only the same shaken sorrow which had racked her all night. Forlornly, she purred a little, and felt Moony match the rhythm of his strokes to her purr.

Why am I not afraid?

It made no sense. Tonight, a man had violated her, a father had betrayed her, and a werewolf had attacked her. The person caressing her now was all of the three in one. By all rights, she should be screaming and clawing and fighting to get away. Instead she lay between his paws quietly purring, comforted more every second by his touch. As he washed her fur, he was also cleaning her soul, wiping away the marks of unclean hands and saving her from the worst of the pain and the horror.

Why am I not afraid?

And the answer came to her.

I am not afraid because my true father has come, and I know he will keep me safe.

Moony moved on to her back, his movements still in perfect time with Neenie's purr. Beside the window, Danger sat howling her quiet song to the moon. For this night, for this moment, there was nothing more to fear.

Neenie closed her eyes, allowing the gentle tugs on her fur and the music of her sister-mother's voice to soothe her into sleep. She knew what she wanted to dream about, and that meant she would. Dreams were wonderful like that.

She slept, and did not feel the tears which fell from the werewolf's eyes onto her side.

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"Tell me a story?" Neenie begged, squirming in Moony's arms.

They were at the London Den, sitting in the big orange chair that had always been in the cubs' room there. Neenie thought she was probably about four. Her size was right for four, and the cub-pile in the bed at the other end of the room had blond hair along with the two different shades of black. But that didn't matter now, no more than this night never really having happened. What mattered was that she was dreaming the dream she needed, and Moony was there with her, holding her safe.

"What kind of story do you want?" Moony asked, quietly so as not to wake the others.

"Tell me a scary story," Neenie said after thinking a bit. A scary story would make scary things only in stories, not real anymore. "But make it sad too." That would do the same thing for sadness. "And about werewolves!" She bounced, very proud of herself.

Moony laughed. "You don't want much, do you? But as it happens, I know the perfect one. It's the story of how werewolves were first made. It's scary and sad and very, very old. Do you want to hear it?"

Neenie nodded and snuggled close to Moony, closing her eyes so she could make the pictures in her mind come to life as he told the story. She was good at that.

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Long, long ago, before there was a city called Rome, there lived a princess of the kingdom of Alba Longa, whose name was Rhea Silvia. She grew from a girl to a woman in the palace of her father, King Numitor, and was happy there, until one day her father's wicked brother Amulius came with his soldiers and seized the palace to try to make himself king. Numitor fled into safety, but Rhea Silvia was captured by her uncle's soldiers and brought to him.

Amulius did not want to kill his niece, but he could not let her have children who might someday try to take Alba Longa away from him. So he sent her to the temple of the goddess Vesta, whose priestesses were called the Vestal Virgins. They must not come near a man for thirty years, and by that time, thought Amulius, Rhea Silvia would be too old to have children and the throne of Alba Longa would be safely his.

But the gods were watching over Alba Longa, and Mars, the god of war, took matters into his own hands. He met Rhea Silvia as she walked in the forest one day, and some say one thing and some say another about their meeting, but what is sure is that nine months after that day, Rhea Silvia gave birth to twin boys, whom she named Romulus and Remus.

What is also sure is that Amulius was enraged. Had he not ordered that Rhea Silvia be kept away

from all men? How had this happened? He rampaged up and down the palace, he beat slaves and broke vases, and the end of it was that Rhea Silvia was to be buried alive (for such was the punishment for a Vestal Virgin who lay with a man) and the twins to be drowned in the river Tiber.

But Rhea Silvia, unknown to anyone, called out to the god Mars, the father of her children, and begged that she not die this hideous death but that she be allowed to care for her sons. For the sake of his children, of whom he knew great things would come, Mars granted her wish, and Rhea Silvia was changed into a she-wolf and transported by the power of the gods safely away from the temple where she had lived. At the same time, the servant Amulius had sent to drown Romulus and Remus found it in his mind that he should place them in a basket and lay it softly in the river, allowing them perhaps to live if they were found in time.

And so it was. The basket washed ashore near the place where Rhea Silvia had found herself in her new form, and she went down to it and dragged it to the cave she had made her home, and gently tipped it onto its side to spill out a pair of rather damp and unhappy babies. She could not hold them in her arms or speak their names out loud, but she could croon a lullaby to them and feed them sweet milk, and this was enough for both her and them.

When the boys grew old enough to walk, Rhea Silvia led them to the home of a shepherd who lived nearby and there left them, though she remained always close to watch them as they grew. She saw them become young men and restore their grandfather Numitor to the throne of Alba Longa; she followed them as they set out for a country where they could found their own city; and she worried when they began to quarrel over which of them should be king there. And then her worst fears came to pass.

The son of Rhea Silvia whom men called Remus, angry at his brother Romulus for beginning to build a city on a spot of his own choosing, ridiculed the beginnings of Romulus' city wall by leaping over it with ease. This was the worst of omens for the building of a new city, for it meant that the city's enemies would conquer the walls with equal ease. Romulus, enraged, took up the shovel with which he had been digging the ditch for the wall's foundation, and with it, he struck Remus dead.

Rhea Silvia, watching this, went mad with grief, and who could blame her? One of the reasons she had lived was murdered, and the other was his murderer. She vented her feelings by tearing at her own flesh and howling great cries to the uncaring sky, and at last, on the night when the full moon rose, she pointed her nose to it and called out again to Mars, the father of her sons.

“Grant me one more favor, great Mars,” she cried. “Let me bedevil mankind until they learn more kindness. Let me sow a sickness among them that shall remind them of the beast that lurks within. Let my bite and the bite of those I shall infect curse them to change from their present shape into the one I now wear, once every month, under this same full moon. Let them be, while in this transformed shape, as bestial and cruel as my son was to his brother, and let them be outcast by all, as my son should be by all the world. And for the only mercy I will show them, I ask that their loins be barren from the day I shall bite them until the day that they die, that they never know this grief which is upon me now. So I ask.”

And Mars, sorrowing for the loss of his son Remus, granted once more the prayer of Rhea Silvia. She received her new power, and well she guarded it, waiting until Romulus' great city of Rome was established and his people safe. Then, on a certain day which Mars had made known to her, she lay in wait near a great field in that city. At a moment of sudden storm and darkness, when the people around Romulus had fled in fear, she rushed forth and fastened her teeth into her son's leg, and Mars caused him to know what this bite would do to him once every month from this day until the end of his life.

In terror and shame, Romulus fled, so that when his people returned, they found him not there. The Roman Senators, to keep the people from suspecting them of killing Romulus, began the story that he had been lifted up to heaven as a god, and this story the people of Rome tell to this day. The man-wolf who haunted the city from that day forward was never connected with the great king and founder of Rome, and for this small mercy he was grateful. Instead he was known to them as Lycanthrope, from the story told by their neighbors the Greeks of a man named Lycaon who was turned into a wolf by the god Zeus. The word became a general one as the numbers of creatures like him grew, and from that we take our word lycanthropy.

That is how werewolves began, and why they are with us always, until we as a people learn more kindness to our brothers and to strangers, until the curse and the sickness that Rhea Silvia laid upon her son and upon all mankind is lifted. That is my story, and now it is over, and if you want another one you can tell it to me.

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Neenie shivered deliciously. "Is it true, Moony?" she asked. "Is it true that Rhea Silvia started werewolves?"

"I don't know." Moony bent and kissed her forehead. "What I do know is that it is time for little cubs to sleep. Do you want to go in with your brothers and your sister tonight, or would you like to come in the bed with Danger and me?"

"Danger and you, please." Neenie clung to her father as he stood up. "Your name is the same as one of the boys in the story. The one who died."

"Yes, that's right, but I certainly hope it doesn't mean my brother will kill me." Moony chuckled. "I never had a blood brother, so the only person it could be is Padfoot, and I don't think he wants to kill me."

"Cept when you take the last sausage before he can," Neenie said, giggling. "Or when you prank him and he's not expecting it. Or—"

"Thank you, Hermione, I think I understand," Moony said in a quelling adult tone, but he was laughing underneath it.

Neenie giggled one more time and cuddled down into Moony's arms. For tonight, she could sleep safely. Scary werewolves and bad hurts and running away from people who loved you were just

things in stories, and nothing could hurt her as long as Moony and Danger were there.

Somewhere very deep down, she knew that wasn't true, but she didn't care. She needed the illusion for just one more night. Tomorrow, she would face the truth, but for tonight, she needed to be safe.

Her eyes closed, and she slept once more.

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Maya Pritchard jerked awake as someone dropped a bottle in the hallway outside the ward where she lay. The tiny smashing sound wouldn't have disturbed her the night before, or any other night of her life.

Maybe it won't again after I get used to this. But for right now, I hear better than I think I should. And see better, too, and smells—there are so many of them, and they're all so confusing, how will I ever keep them straight?

A shift beside her was echoed with a fresh wave of a scent she'd already known. She looked down and smiled. Lee lay asleep beside her, his dreadlocks lying over his face at odd angles. She had only half-expected him to come at all, much less to charge into the room and seize her in a desperate hug, only loosening it to let her get enough breath to assure him that she hadn't been hurt apart from a few scratches and the one bite on her arm, and the Healers said she'd get most of the mobility back there, and it wasn't her wand arm anyway...

She let her mind play back the scene for her. It seemed like a good possibility to use for generating a Patronus, when she got back to Hogwarts and rejoined the DA for meetings.

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“Lee.”

“Hmm?” He looked up from her hand, which he was tracing designs on the back of.

“Thank you for coming, but... you don't have to stay.”

“Do you want me to go?” Lee challenged, looking her straight in the eye.

“No, no, *I* want you to stay—but Lee, I'm not the same person I was yesterday.” Maya thought of the stories she knew and swallowed against a dry throat, looking away. “I don't want you to have to be with me, the way I'll be now. It's too much to ask.”

“The way you'll be? What's that supposed to mean? Oh no you don't. Look at me now.” Lee's fingers tapped her cheek, bringing her head back around until their eyes met. “What are you talking about?”

“Being... bitten...” Maya rubbed her bandaged arm and winced at the little stab of pain it sent

through her arm. “It changes a person. They’re never the same. They get angry. Possessive. Suspicious. Cruel. They’re not who they used to be.”

“Dragon dung,” Lee said bluntly. “You’re exactly who you were yesterday. You just have something extra now. Something other girls don’t have.” He grinned at her. “I always wanted to date a monster. Here’s my chance.”

“Lee, don’t!” Maya wanted to cry. How could she make him see what was so clear to her? “What if I bit you, one night while I was transformed? Then you’d be...” She couldn’t finish the sentence. The thought was too painful.

“Then I’d be a werewolf,” Lee finished for her. “There are worse things to be. It wouldn’t be fun, but it wouldn’t be the end of the world either. It wasn’t for Su Li’s brother, or Professor Lupin.” His expression turned speculative. “And there’s a way I could make sure you never turned me. Become an Animagus, the way Professor Granger-Lupin is. Then I could stay with you even on full moons, help you through the transforming. If you bit me, it wouldn’t matter, because werewolf bites only affect humans.”

“How could you become an Animagus? That takes years—”

“Harry did it,” Lee pointed out. “Ron and Ginny too, and Hermione and Draco and the rest of them. They’re all Animagi—they’ve showed us in DA, the day we practiced fending off different kinds of animal attacks, remember?”

Maya nodded hesitantly. “But it still takes a long time, and it’s hard work...”

“Fred and George have been talking about it,” Lee said. “Don’t want to let their little brother or their sister show them up. Plus, they think they can improve on a couple of the steps. I’ll just hop on their carpet, same as I always do. Speaking of which, when’re you seventeen?”

“25 March.” Was she blushing? She hoped she wasn’t blushing. The light was bad in here. Maybe he wouldn’t notice. “Why?”

“Well, the twins are hoping to get their joke shop going sooner rather than later, and they’ll need a couple extra pair of hands to set up and help out. Fred might be able to get that Ravenclaw he’s been walking to class to come help out, but I think George has his eye on a Muggle, and she’d be no help yet, we’d have to explain too much. You and I would fit the scroll pretty nicely, don’t you think?”

Maya swallowed again, trying to hide her disappointment. She had hoped... but it was stupid. He never would, not now. “Yes, I think so.”

“Plus there’s a couple little flats over the storefront they’re looking to rent,” Lee added, his tone studiously calm. “Not very big. Just enough room for two.”

Maya jerked her head up to stare at him. *He can’t mean—*

“The twins want one of them. I thought maybe...” Lee sighed, shaking his head. “You don’t want to. Never mind. I understand.”

“No!” Maya felt her heart starting to pound. “I’m listening. Really. Tell me.”

“Well, it’s stupid, we should neither of us be old enough for this, but...” Lee snorted, an ironic smile coming to his face. “I don’t suppose ‘you make me feel old’ is a terribly romantic thing to say, is it?”

“Not... terribly.” Maya forced herself to stop trembling. This couldn’t be, it *couldn’t* be what she wanted it to be. She was wrong, misunderstanding somehow, she had to be.

“You make me feel grown-up, then. Like a man, not a kid anymore.” Lee returned to his doodling on the back of her hand with a finger, but his eyes were on hers. “I want to take care of you, Maya. I want to protect you, and make sure nothing like this ever happens to you again. I don’t want to lose you, not to anything. So I guess what I’m actually asking is...” He slid off the side of the bed and went to one knee, looking up at her with hopeful eyes. “Will you marry me?”

xXxXx

Maya savored the warmth that rose in her chest at the memory. *Definitely Patronus material. Even if I don’t remember much from the next few minutes except a lot of squealing and crying, and Fred looking in from the hall with that big stupid grin on his face...*

As if thinking of him had summoned him, Fred’s voice echoed down the corridor, distance and quiet making it almost inaudible. Maya concentrated, focusing her mind on the words. She wanted to be able to understand what she could hear now.

A moment later, she did understand, and her heart shrank within her.

I should have known it was too good to be true.

I should have known it would have to end before it began.

Lee stirred beside her, as though he could sense her fear. “Maya?” he mumbled. “Whassgoin’ on?”

“My parents,” Maya whispered, starting to tremble again. “They’re here. They’ve come for me.”

“Come for—” Lee sat up, his eyes hardening to chips of petrified wood. “Over my dead body.”

Fred stuck his head in the door. “Trade,” he mouthed to Lee, whisking a finger rapidly back and forth. “She wants you out there.”

“She?” Maya repeated numbly, her mind still vibrating to the pulse of fear. The proper pureblood response to a child who’d been turned by a werewolf was swift and permanent. She’d heard the stories all her life, but never thought they’d come true for anyone she knew, much less for her.

“Healer Freeman-Black.” Fred stepped into the room as Lee hurried out. “Don’t worry, Maya. She’s not about to let them get through. Trust me. I’ve seen the lady at work, and she is impressive.” He sat down on the bed and grinned at her, the famous freckle-faced Weasley grin, and Maya felt her spirits rise a little in reluctant response. “Your so-called parents won’t know what hit them.”

“I hope so,” Maya breathed, staring at the door and sharpening her ears. “I truly, truly hope so...”

xXxXx

“My name is Magnus Pritchard, and I *demand* to see my daughter at once!” the tall, thin, dark-haired wizard said imperiously. His gold-skinned wife in her tightly wrapped blue robes nodded twice in affirmation.

Aletha crossed her arms and looked down her nose at the wizard, despite his height advantage. Her years of practice with Sirius helped, as did the supporting presence of Lee Jordan (whom she suspected was forcing himself not to harm the witch and wizard in front of him) at her elbow. “I am Healer Aletha Freeman-Black,” she responded in her calmest tone, “and I must ask you to lower your voice, Mr. Pritchard. This is a hospital, and it is very late. You’re disturbing the patients.”

“I will lower my voice when you tell me where my daughter is!” Pritchard snapped back.

“She’s in the ward at the end of this hall,” Aletha said. “The Ward for Serious Bites. It’s how we classify cases such as hers.”

“Ha!” Pritchard spat out the exclamation. “So she was bitten, then?”

“Yes, she was bitten once on the upper left arm. She also had several scratches to her arms and legs, but thankfully none to her face, and they’re all responding well to treatment...”

Pritchard waved this aside. “You have the authority for discharges, I take it, Healer?” The tone made Aletha’s title half an insult.

“I have that authority, yes, but I’m not inclined to use it at the moment.” Aletha made a quick hand motion towards Lee before remembering that he wasn’t Pack and wouldn’t understand, but he stopped grinding his teeth in any case. Perhaps Harry had introduced a few of the hand signs to the DA, or perhaps Lee was simply quick on the uptake. “Maya needs at least two days strict bed rest, and then two or three weeks without much stress, to keep her first transformation from being more of a shock than it must. Counseling with a werewolf who’s adjusted well to his or her new lifestyle can also help—we have a file of volunteer counselors if you’d care to look...”

“We won’t need any of that,” said Mrs. Pritchard, speaking for the first time. Her voice was shrill and grating. “Just discharge... *her* into our care and we’ll be on our way.”

“It is my responsibility as a Healer to be sure my patients receive the best possible care,” Aletha

said, still using the tones she employed to keep the cubs from each other's throats on rainy summer days even as her instincts shrieked at her to chase these predators away from a member of her foals' chosen herd. "If you wouldn't mind telling me how you plan to help Maya through this transition, which is often very difficult..."

"We *would* mind, as it happens," said Pritchard, staring at her with his nose wrinkled. "Maya is our responsibility, Healer Freeman... Black." The second half of her name was sneered, to the point where there was no longer any doubt it was an insult. "Not yours."

"I beg to differ, Mr. Pritchard. Maya is my patient; therefore, she is my responsibility as long as she remains on hospital grounds."

"So we'll take it off your hands, off hospital grounds!" Mrs. Pritchard said impatiently. "Free you up for more important cases—I'm sure you have many!"

Aletha stopped herself from taking a step back. *She can't actually have said... I'm sure it was just a slip of the tongue...*

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Pritchard, but I think I must have heard you wrong," she said after a moment. "Did you refer to your daughter as *it*?"

Mrs. Pritchard emitted a breathy sigh and threw up her hands. "You deal with her!" she snapped at her husband. "I'm going up to the tearoom—if it's even open at this Merlin-forsaken hour!"

Aletha took advantage of the moment Mr. Pritchard was occupied with his wife to pull Lee aside. "Go back to the ward," she told him. "Send Fred out here."

"But—"

"Go back to the ward." Aletha left no space for argument, and after a moment spent reading her eyes, Lee turned and hurried down the hall.

Aletha returned her attention to Magnus Pritchard, who had stepped closer to her while she wasn't looking. "Healer Freeman-Black," he said in a more conversational tone. "I know that you are... that you were not raised in a magical household. You may, therefore, be unaware of some of the less pleasant facts about the wizarding world. I could wish I were not the one to tell you this, but so it must be."

"Please do enlighten me, Mr. Pritchard." Aletha heard and felt Fred arrive behind her, maintaining the effective blockage of the hall.

Pritchard sighed. "There's no doubt at all that the bite took effect?"

"I'm afraid not. However, with proper treatment and help..."

"You see, this is what I mean." Pritchard shook his head. "Talking about treatment, and help... Healer, there *is* no effective treatment for lycanthropy. And even if someone was willing to help a

werewolf, he'd be more likely to lose a hand or an arm than to do any good!" He looked down, his eyes starting to glisten. "As much as it grieves me to say this, Healer, my daughter died the moment she was bitten. What's left in that ward may look and act like her, but it is a vicious beast just waiting for the proper moment to strike. For the good of everyone, please, let me take it home and put it down humanely. It's the only thing to do in these cases."

Fred choked twice, then got himself under control. "I think I need a drink of water," he said unsteadily. Aletha nodded and waved him down the hall behind her, most of her attention being devoted to Magnus Pritchard.

No, he doesn't believe what he's saying, she decided. He's too intelligent, too well-educated to truly believe werewolves lose all humanity the instant they're bitten. But then why...

The answer came to her suddenly. She needed no acting skills to widen her eyes in horror, though her words were pure fiction. "In these cases—do you mean *all* lycanthropes, Mr. Pritchard? *All* werewolves?"

"I'm afraid so, Healer," Pritchard said solemnly. "It's an inevitable effect of the infection. They're very clever beasts, and they retain the memories of their former selves for a time, so they can mimic human behavior for weeks, even months at a time. But sooner or later, they lose control while they're in the human shape in the same way they do as the wolf, and after that..." He looked away again. "I saw the aftermath of an incident once," he said. "A ten-year-old boy who'd been bitten three months previously. He'd managed to keep himself under control for the intervening time, his parents had such hopes... and then one day he simply snapped. By the time the Werewolf Responders got there, he'd killed both parents, his younger sister, and himself. I'll spare you the gory details."

Because obviously a Healer, who works with blood and death on a regular basis, can't handle them. Or perhaps because you've made this all up on the spur of the moment and don't want to contradict yourself later. "Thank you," Aletha murmured. "That's good of you."

"Not at all." Pritchard looked at her quizzically. "No offense intended, but I would have thought your husband..."

"He has his own viewpoint on the issue," Aletha said. *Which happens to be the same as mine, but I won't tell you that. Especially not if you're playing the game I think you are. But the question is, how can I get you to admit it out loud, and in front of witnesses?*

"Ah, I see." Pritchard nodded briskly. "Well, Healer Freeman-Black, I don't want to take up too much more of your valuable time, so now that you understand the situation, if my wife and I might just collect Maya and be on our way..."

"I only wish it were that easy," Aletha said regretfully. *Because if it were, I'd have had her out of here and back at Headquarters hours ago.* "Unfortunately, before we can let any patient go, we have to finish the basic diagnostic tests to be sure the patient won't die in the process of leaving hospital. We tend to frown on that." She smiled self-deprecatingly, inviting Pritchard to share the

joke, and he obligingly chuckled.

Excellent. He doesn't know how we really work. Now, to stall for the time I'll need...

"I'll try to get the process expedited," Aletha went on glibly. "In the meantime, though I'm afraid the tearoom upstairs is closed, may I offer you and your wife the hospitality of the staff lounge? I don't think you'll have more than a half hour's wait, and I'll be sure to tell you if it will be significantly longer or shorter than that."

"Why, thank you, Healer!" Pritchard smiled for the first time since Aletha'd seen him. "On my own behalf, and likely Reshmi's as well, I accept—could you direct me there, and have someone leave word for her when she returns? It won't be long, I'm sure."

"Of course. If you'll follow me." Aletha allowed her feet to trace the well-known path to the staff lounge and her mouth to engage in meaningless small talk. Her mind was racing, tracking down exactly what she'd have to do.

Confirm one of my hunches first. If I'm right, let the appropriate amount of time pass with the correct influences. Then, if Maya's amenable, try out my other suspicion, but be sure to have plenty of strong and well-armed witnesses on my side...

Pritchard safely delivered and a message passed via portrait to his wife, Aletha set off back to the ward, ready to test out her hypothesis.

If it is true, wouldn't it revolutionize the way lycanthropy is treated?

Then she snorted at her optimism. *It would, if anyone could be bothered to care. Werewolves have such a bad name that most people would think speeding their journey into darkness is a good thing. They're doomed anyway, so get it over with quickly, don't prolong the agony...*

Something small and speedy zoomed past her, then screeched to a halt several meters away and raced back, revealing itself to be a black-haired girl of about five or six. "Are you Meghan Black's mum?" she demanded, looking up at Aletha.

"Yes, I am." Aletha held out her hand, which was gravely shaken. "My name is Healer Freeman-Black. What's yours?"

"Bernadette, but everybody calls me Bernie. My brother knows Meghan."

"And what might your brother's name be?"

"Bernie?" called a boy's voice from around the corner. "Where are—oh, there you are," he finished as he came into view.

"Hello, Graham," Aletha said, smiling with real pleasure. She'd met her daughter's Slytherin friend once or twice at King's Cross, and knew him well through Meghan's rambling letters and stories, as well as Harry's over the latter part of this term just past. "Come to see Maya?"

“Yes. How is she?” Graham shook Aletha’s hand as well. “Was she really...” He made a biting motion with his free hand.

“I’m afraid so,” Aletha said with a sigh. “But she wasn’t hurt badly otherwise, and I’m sure she’ll be glad to see you.” A small, wicked thought occurred to her, and she immediately acted on it. “Are your parents here, by chance?”

“They’re coming.” Graham pointed to the way he’d arrived. “What about Uncle Magnus and Aunt Reshmi? Are they here?”

“Maya’s parents? Yes, they’re here.”

“I don’t like them,” Bernie announced.

“Bernie!” Graham hissed at his sister. “Manners!”

“Well, I don’t.” Bernie pouted. “They don’t like Mummy and they make fun of Daddy and they’re not nice to Maya. Why can’t Maya come and stay with us?”

Graham gave Aletha a significant look Slytherins twice his age might have been proud of.

“Why don’t you ask your mum and dad that, after I get a chance to talk with them?” Aletha suggested, starting to smile. “I think you might like the answer. But right now, your cousin’s waiting for you. It’s late, so we need to stay quiet. Follow me, please.”

Graham and Bernie fell in line behind her obediently. Aletha suppressed a laugh. *If only the cubs were half so good... no, to be fair to them, when it mattered they were good, but at other times they had this habit of creatively reinterpreting instructions...*

She led the Pritchards to the door of the ward, asked them to wait outside for their parents to arrive, and let herself in. Lee, Maya, and Fred looked up as she entered. “Are they here?” Maya asked, glancing at the door with a mixture of apprehension, hope, and panic.

“Since there are several ‘they’s involved here, you’ll have to define your terms further.” Aletha shooed Fred out of the way and sat down on the edge of the bed where he’d been. “And I need to run a quick check on you. Right hand, please?”

Maya sighed but extended it. Aletha took it in her own and ran her wand along Maya’s little finger. *Commonstro salubritas animum*, she thought clearly.

Colors winked into being around Maya. Her overall aura was a golden orange, with angry red slashes where the werewolf’s claws had scored her and a grey web spreading outwards from the bite on her upper arm. Most of her body was already covered by the strands of grey, but some strands were thicker than others, and very few of them were wide enough to touch other strands between their intersection points.

Now to see if I’m right.

“Your parents are here, Maya,” Aletha said, holding her wand steady in the observation position. “Your father seems to feel you should be discharged to his care.”

“No,” Maya blurted instantly, trying to pull her hand away. “No, please, no, he’ll hurt me, he’ll kill me, don’t let him—”

“I don’t plan to let anyone hurt you,” said Aletha absently, holding Maya’s hand firmly. The spell was showing her the growth of the grey web—the ‘curse’ portion of lycanthropy, if what Luna had told her before she’d left for St. Mungo’s was correct—and as she’d suspected, the strands which had grown during Maya’s momentary panic were thicker and darker than the ones they had sprouted from.

Now for the opposite effect. “Your cousins are also here, and your aunt and uncle should have arrived by now. Lee, would you mind letting them in?”

Maya perked up instantly, craning her neck towards the door as Lee hurried over and opened it. Bernie flung herself inside, followed closely by Graham, a thin and worried-looking witch, a wizard only slightly taller than his wife, and George Weasley, who grinned and winked at his twin. Aletha chuckled to herself—*Marauding in a good cause, but don’t worry, gentlemen, I won’t tell anyone*—and turned back to Maya.

The strands of web were still growing, but this new section was made of spider-thin lines, almost invisible. Much more of the orange-gold showed through this web than in the previous section.

And wait—no—yes. Yes, they are.

The original, thicker lines were beginning to shrink.

Aletha released Maya’s hand. *Sometimes you get lucky. Luckier than you deserve.*

Now, depending on the answer to one simple question, I think I know how I can bring this off.

A moment of maneuvering got her into a corner with the two adult Pritchards. Introductions were made—Graham’s father, Parvus, went by Par, and his wife Favonia was always Voni—then Aletha asked her one simple question.

“What are your intentions regarding Maya?”

Par and Voni looked at each other. “Well, her parents would never allow what we’d like to do,” Voni began hesitantly.

“For the purposes of the question, her parents are not an issue.” *Possibly in real life, her parents are not an issue. But let that go for the moment.* “Your teenage niece is now a werewolf. What will you do?”

“Give her a home and a family,” Par said, meeting Aletha’s eyes steadily. “Get her the Wolfsbane Potion for full moons if possible, or a safe place to transform and medical care afterwards if not.”

“Remind her that lycanthropy is not all there is to her,” Voni added. “Encourage her to make friends and keep the ones she has. Keep her in school if we possibly could, or train her at home if that became necessary...”

Aletha held up a hand to slow the tide of words. “And she knows that you would do this for her, doesn’t she?”

“She does,” said Par, nodding. “We’ve told her for years that if she ever needed a safe place to go, she could come to us. But while her parents have been strict, they’ve never been insane.” He scowled, looking at Maya, who had Bernie on her lap and was playing a clapping game with her. “Until now.”

“Par, don’t say that,” Voni reproved. “We have no evidence, nothing...”

“To suggest what?” asked Aletha quickly.

Par sighed. “Maya is a strong-willed young lady,” he said. “Her parents wanted a milk-and-water maiden who would do as she was told and marry where she was bid, for the good of our sacred pureblood race.” His last few words were a sneer. “I have no doubt she was chosen to be an example of the price of disobedience. As Graham was, not so long ago.” He regarded his son for a long moment, then looked back at Aletha. “I gave in to blackmail once. I will never do it again.”

“I think we’ll get along well together,” said Aletha, allowing herself the sort of smile that generally frightened Sirius into apologizing even when he didn’t know what he’d done wrong yet. “Now, this is what I have in mind...”

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Facing Danger

Chapter 33: Sleep, Silence, and Secrets (Arc 6)

Magnus Pritchard looked up from his tea as the Mudblood Healer—*though she has been remarkably helpful, so perhaps I should accord her a bit of respect*—the Muggleborn Healer witch, then, opened the door of the staff lounge and nodded to him.

“You’ve been able to settle things?” he asked, standing up, as Reshmi did the same farther down the table. “We can take her home now?” *And start convincing her to be worth something, for once in her stubborn little life.*

“Almost.” The witch grimaced. “There’s one problem. Animal or not, Maya retains her human appearance, and she’s been nearly hysterical since she heard your voices in the corridor. She’s frightened some of the other patients on the ward, to the point where we’ve had to screen off her bed, and I’m worried about the appearance she might present if she were to leave here still so distraught. Perhaps, while the last few tests are finishing, you could speak to her? Convince her, somehow, to appear calm while she’s leaving? What happens outside these walls is your responsibility, as you said, but I can’t have her shrieking her way out of here, it would set back half the patients on this floor...”

“Her bed is screened?” Magnus queried, idly stroking his wand. “Full privacy?”

“The best spells we have,” the Healer confirmed. “Nothing passes them that shouldn’t.”

“We’ll do what we can,” said Reshmi, starting for the door. The tone of her voice, the line of her back and shoulders, told Magnus he was not alone in his sudden uprush of glee.

Finally, finally, we can give the girl some real discipline. No more mewling brother hanging over my shoulder, hinting at reporting me to WFS—‘if I ever see a hint of Maya being unhappy’ indeed! Not even he can argue that she could ever be happy now.

Besides, who would have told him about tonight? By the time he learns of it, all will be over, and Reshmi and I will have our reward. We can turn our attention to working towards new children, to carry our line forward.

The thought of new children—handsome sons, docile daughters, obedient to their father’s will in all things—made him smile even more broadly as the Healer opened the door of the ward and waved him and Reshmi into the tent-like construction of screens to the left. Several of the other beds had screens drawn around them as well, he noticed, likely so their occupants could get some sleep.

Sleep would have been welcome tonight, but this is more important, and I can sleep afterwards...

Magnus followed his wife within the screens. His daughter sat in the center of the bed, her knees drawn up, cradling her left arm with her right. Her eyes went wide and her breathing caught at the

sight of Reshmi, and again as Magnus entered.

A proper daughterly attitude at last.

Yes, I believe I will sleep well tonight.

“So your precious friends have got yourself into trouble at last,” Reshmi was saying snappishly to Maya. “Where are they now? None of them come running to see you, do they? Not when you’re like this. And you know why, too—you know they fear you, and well they should...”

“Don’t,” Maya said hoarsely. “Please, don’t. I know why you’re here—why don’t you just do what you came for?”

“We came to bring you home,” said Magnus, stepping closer to the bed. “The Healer seems to think you might object somehow.”

Maya lifted her head and looked him in the eye. “I heard you,” she challenged. “In the hallway. You said you were going to ‘put me down’. Why don’t you do it right now? Then you wouldn’t have to live with the shame of a werewolf daughter anymore.”

Reshmi slapped the side of Maya’s head. “Don’t be a fool, girl. Do you think we want you dead?”

“I think you’d rather see me dead than this!” Maya cried, pointing at the bandage on her arm that covered the teeth marks of a werewolf, tears springing up in her eyes. “I know the stories! I’ve dishonored us, I’m defiled and worthless now, and the only way to cleanse the family honor is to destroy me, to make sure I don’t live past tonight!”

“Do you want to be destroyed?” Magnus inquired, his heart moving a little faster with the question. This was the truly tricky moment, the time when the game could be lost or won in an instant...

“No!” Maya sobbed. “No, I don’t! I don’t care how wrong it is, I want to live!”

Magnus glanced triumphantly at Reshmi. *And you thought she might be difficult.* “I believe that can be arranged, Maya,” he said, using his daughter’s name deliberately. “If you will come home with us quietly, there is a place to which we can send you. You will be important there, necessary even. And you will not die.” *For the time being.*

The girl stared at him, absurd hope writ large across her tear-marked face. “What is it?” she asked. “What would I do there?”

“You don’t need to know that!” Reshmi scolded. “Be grateful there is such a place, that we don’t insist on following custom to the letter! You say you don’t want to die—start acting like it!”

“I want to know what this place is,” insisted Maya, stubbornness replacing hope in her expression. “Tell me, or I won’t go.”

“Oh, no,” Magnus said, coming closer once again and feeling a thrill down his spine at the way fear wiped every other emotion from his daughter’s face at his approach. “You will agree here and now to behave yourself for us and for those who will come for you, or we will take you home with us no matter what you may wish. There are spells which will make you docile enough to fool even Healers for a little while, and once you are safely home again, we can do what we feel is necessary. Whether that is cleansing our name as custom demands, or sending you away to make yourself useful, we will decide. Not you. Unless you agree to our terms.”

Maya dropped her eyes to the bedclothes. “I will if you will,” she said, her voice trembling. “I’ll promise to do what I’m told and not complain or make trouble. But I want to know what this place is. Who I would be with, and what they would want me to do.”

“Swear it first,” Reshmi commanded, lifting her daughter’s chin with one sleeve-covered hand. “Swear you’ll obey as a daughter should. Swear obedience in all things to your parents as is proper. Swear now.”

“I swear,” Maya whispered. “I’ll obey you the way a daughter should obey her parents, and do what you tell me just as I should. I do swear.”

Magnus nodded, satisfied. It might not be an Unbreakable Vow, but they didn’t actually want the girl dead. “Then we will tell you,” he said, and seated himself on the end of the bed, across from Reshmi. “The Dark Lord feels the need for more warriors, especially the most savage, so he is looking to increase the packs of werewolves who are loyal to him. You could embrace this new life, and go to join them. Females are always welcomed... heartily.”

Maya’s eyes widened in horror. “No! No, I won’t!”

“You’ll do what you’re told,” Reshmi said snippily. “As you’ve promised. As you should have done to begin with. We would never have been forced to this otherwise.”

“You could also choose life among the researchers,” Magnus went on, gliding past Reshmi’s last statement swiftly. “They look for ways to change lycanthropy, to find a method of controlling the wolf, to make the transformation occur on demand rather than having it dependent on the phase of the moon...” He stopped. Maya was staring at Reshmi in undisguised shock.

“You did this,” the girl whispered. “You sent the werewolf.”

“You were out of hand,” Reshmi shot back. “Open defiance. Telling us you wanted to decide for yourself who to marry—as if a marriage of choice was anything but the loins pretending to be the heart! You’d have been miserable within a year or two in any case. We’ve stopped that agony before it can start.”

“So you don’t want me hurt.” Maya stared at the tops of her knees. “And to keep me from getting hurt, you’ve turned me into a Dark creature, and now you want me to choose between life as a toy for werewolves or a specimen for researchers.” She looked up, her eyes bleak. “Would they care at all if they hurt me?”

“Which they?” Magnus asked.

“Either. Both.”

“I doubt it. But you cannot deny you deserve some pain, after all you have put us through.” Magnus stood up. “I will find the Healer. It is time to go.”

Maya rubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. “Will you just tell me once, before we go, that you did it?” she asked quietly. “I won’t ever tell anyone. I swear I won’t. I just want to hear you say it.”

“Why?” Reshmi asked suspiciously.

“Because if I don’t know, I’ll keep wondering forever.” Maya wrapped her arms around herself, bad arm inside good. “I’ll keep thinking maybe it was someone else, and you had to go along with it because otherwise they would kill me. Or maybe it was an accident, and you really didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“You know perfectly well it was neither of those,” said Reshmi, folding her arms. “Why ask for a confession?”

“Are you going to disown me and declare me outcast?” Maya asked instead of answering. “When you send me away, wherever I go?”

“Yes, of course,” Magnus said impatiently. “What has that to do with anything?”

“Professor Binns told us about that spell once. I don’t remember much, but I do remember that it only works properly when both sides want it to work. So if I still believe it wasn’t you, if I love you and want to come home...”

“Shame it took such drastic measures to awaken your proper sense of duty,” Reshmi said, shaking her head. “We shall have to try harder with your siblings.”

“Siblings?” Maya looked up. “But I thought you couldn’t...”

“We couldn’t,” said Magnus. “Before this.” He was going to enjoy this moment, savor every second of the look on his daughter’s face as she realized the entirety of the truth. “Yes, Maya, we agreed you should be attacked. In return for payment.”

“Fertility potions,” Reshmi breathed, licking her lips as if she already tasted them. “The kind with ingredients which are illegal here, because a foolish government won’t see that a few animals killed is a small price to pay for more children of the true blood... but we’ve found a way around that.”

“Indeed we have.” Magnus smiled at his daughter. “We’ve been promised our first brewing as soon as you are delivered safely. You see why we might be eager to leave. To begin correcting the mistakes we made with you, as soon as possible.”

The sick despair on the face once so defiant warmed his heart.

Will any pureblood child in the next twenty years dare stray, when this story becomes current? I think not. An excellent night's work, well worth missing some sleep over. Now home with her and on with the controlling collar, in case she begins to get ideas once we have left. I still do not entirely trust this seeming meekness...

He turned and took an involuntary step back. A tall, dark, bald man in red robes stood in the entrance to the 'tent' of screens, looking down at him. "Magnus Gladius Pritchard?" said a deep voice.

"Yes." Magnus drew himself up to his full height, painfully aware it fell short of this man's as it did of few others. "What do you want with me?"

"And Reshmi Sonal Pritchard?" the man persisted.

"That is my name," Reshmi said, getting to her feet. "And my husband has asked you a question. What do you want with us? Who do you think you are, to intrude on a private conversation this way?"

"I'll explain all that if you'll just step outside here for a moment." The man moved out of the way, leaving the opening free for them. Reshmi marched out with her chin held high, and Magnus followed—

To find himself facing the point of the dark man's wand, backed by a face whose expression mingled professional detachment and contempt. A glance to one side showed him Reshmi, her mouth gaping in shock as Sirius Black, with whom she'd danced not six months before, trained his wand coolly on her.

"I'm Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt," the dark man said, bringing Magnus' eyes back to him. "And you're both under arrest for procuring Dark magic to be used on a minor. That's a very serious charge; do you have anything to say on your own behalf?"

Magnus' heart froze for one second, then started working again. *They have nothing—they hope to frighten us into an admission—brazen it out, the day can still be saved—*

"This is a travesty," he snapped. "How dare you accuse us, arrest us, when all we want to do is take our poor sick daughter home and care for her as she should be cared for?"

"'Care for her'?" a woman's voice mocked, and Healer Freeman-Black stepped out from behind one of the screened-off beds. "Don't you mean, 'put her down humanely'? Or no, you were going to let her live. After you'd disowned her, disavowed any responsibility for her, and sold her into slavery."

She cannot know that. She is guessing. "I refuse to listen to these vile and baseless slanders for one more second," Magnus said, lifting his nose at the woman. "And I refuse to allow myself to be

arrested unless I know exactly what it is I've supposedly done," he added to the Auror.

"It's too late for that, Magnus," said a man's weary tones.

"You." Magnus whirled to confront his brother Parvus. "What are you doing here? Favonia," he added with bare civility as the man's wife (*blood barely pure enough to qualify, three generations magical if that*) appeared behind him.

"I felt obliged to come," Parvus said, glancing at the three young men now dismantling the wall of screens surrounding Maya's bed. "When George Weasley—whichever of you that happens to be —"

One of the red-haired twins looked up and waved a hand cheerily.

"Thank you." Parvus turned back to Magnus. "When George Weasley arrived at our home an hour ago with a story of Maya being bitten by a werewolf in her own house. I know you too well, Magnus. I know the care you take to keep yourself and the things you prize intact. Such an event could not be an accident."

"Oh, could it not?" Magnus smirked at the taller of the two people standing behind Favonia. "By that logic, you willed what happened to your son this past fall."

Graham winced and hunched his shoulders. Favonia shot Magnus a glare of pure hatred before shepherding her children towards Maya's now-exposed bed, where the girl was all but invisible in the arms of a dreadlocked boy about her own age. One of the twins tapped her on a shoulder, and she and the boy moved aside as one to make room for Graham and Bernadette beside them on the bed, Bernadette actually climbing up into their intertwined laps.

Magnus wrinkled his nose. *Disgusting. How typical of the unfairness of life, that my brother, obviously such an unfit father, should be blessed with two children, and one of those a son, while I have only the one unsatisfactory daughter...*

Parvus, who had been watching the whole display with a saccharine look on his face, now faced Magnus once more, his expression shifting from sweet to stony. "Graham was not taken from my home, but from the woods where he always walks in the afternoons," he said softly. "Only someone close to our family, someone who knows his habits, would have been able to tell his abductors so precisely where and when to find him. And only someone who knows him would have been able to tell them how best to break down his spirit."

Magnus matched the expression with his own. "You can prove nothing."

"About that, perhaps not. But about Maya..." Parvus smiled, but there was a trace of sadness in it. "That we can prove, Magnus. You said it yourself, not five minutes ago, you and Reshmi both. That you'd sold your daughter's life and well-being in exchange for the possibility of more children, ones with whom you could 'correct your mistakes'. I don't see that there's any way you could deny your involvement now."

The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees in an instant, and sounds twisted and stretched oddly as they reached Magnus' ears. He heard Reshmi's shuddering gasps in the instants between his own harsh breathing.

They know.

But how could they...

His eyes fell on the Healer, who was watching the tangle of bodies on the bed with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction, and all at once he understood. Judging by the sounds from behind him, Reshmi had come to the same conclusion.

"You *lied* to us!" she shrieked at Freeman-Black, her feet scrabbling on the floor as she fought with Black, who was holding her by the shoulders. "You *lied!* You promised those screens would give us privacy, and you *lied!* You Mudblood b—" She broke off with a cry of pain.

"So sorry, Mrs. Pritchard," Black said nonchalantly. "My hand must have slipped."

"Sirius," Shacklebolt said in a warning tone.

"Kingsley," Black returned in the same manner.

Magnus ground his teeth at the indignity to his wife.

"As it happens, I didn't lie," Freeman-Black said, her arms folded across her breasts and a lazy smile at one corner of her mouth. "I told you the screens were spelled so that nothing passed them that shouldn't. I just didn't tell you my definition of 'shouldn't'. You couldn't hear us, but we could hear every word you said."

"And we got it down on parchment, too," one of the red-haired twins volunteered from within the half-open tent around the bed. "An Extendable Ear and a DictaQuill..."

"And voila, one transcript of a fascinating conversation," the other twin picked up. "Perfect for framing, nostalgic purposes, or perhaps a day in court."

"And what will it cost us to get our hands on this transcript?" Freeman-Black asked.

"No charge." The first twin waved away the idea airily. "When the parents of some of our dearest friends..."

"And the soon-to-be wife of another need something from us, there's never a charge," the second finished.

"Unless you decide there should be, you mean," Black said.

"Well, yes."

“We do retain the power to rethink all pricing policies.”

“Subject to market conditions at the time, necessities of trade, fluctuating wholesale costs.”

“Don’t want to lock ourselves down, after all.”

Under normal circumstances, Magnus would have found the twins’ repartee annoying. Under these, it came close to intolerable. Reshmi’s face suggested she felt the same. The rest of the occupants of the ward seemed to think it was quite funny, though—Freeman-Black and Black laughed outright, Shackbolt chuckled deep in his chest, the children within the tent giggled or grinned as their natures dictated, and even Parvus and Favonia smiled faintly.

As if they do not care that they have ruined a pair of lives and endangered dozens or possibly hundreds of others, depending on how much they coddle Maya.

“Think it’s time for us to go,” Shackbolt said, nodding to Black, who drew Reshmi’s wrists together behind her back and bound them with rope from his wand. The obvious care he was using to hurt her as little as possible paradoxically enraged Magnus, and he barely noticed Shackbolt doing the same to him.

My curse to you, you wretched lying brat, he thought furiously towards his daughter, her eyes shut as she laid her head against Favonia’s shoulder. On your first transformation night, may you kill everyone who has helped you with this treacherous ploy, and save my brother and his family for the last, so that you awaken with the taste of their flesh in your mouth and the stain of their blood on your hands.

May it substitute for your mother’s and mine.

“Let’s go, Pritchard,” Shackbolt said behind him.

His mind in a chaotic tangle of fury and despair, Magnus Pritchard allowed himself to be guided from the hospital ward.

“Maya’s coming home with us, Maya’s coming home with us,” chanted Bernie, bouncing on her cousin’s lap in time. “Maya’s coming home with us, and now she gets to stay!”

“Not forever,” Lee said, mussing Bernie’s hair with the hand not currently holding Maya’s. “Just until she finishes Hogwarts.”

“Is she going to be able to go back?” Fred asked, frowning.

“Well, it’s been done before...”

“I mean for this term.”

“That’s right,” George said, looking at his watch. “Term starts in less than a week. Will she be

ready?”

“*She* isn’t sure yet,” Maya said acidly from where she was leaning against her aunt’s shoulder with her eyes closed, “but *she* thinks *she* ought to know within a few days. And *she* would appreciate it if you would stop acting as if *she* weren’t here.”

“Yeesh.” Fred backed up a couple paces, hands spread. “Sorry. Sorry.”

“Wasn’t thinking, Maya,” George said contritely. “Take the time you need.”

Maya opened one eye. “You’re so kind.”

“I know.” George preened. “I am the kind one. He’s the attack dog.”

Fred panted, his tongue lolling out. Graham and Bernie laughed.

“Some attack dog.” But Maya was smiling. “Aunt Voni?”

“Yes, love?” Voni kissed Maya’s forehead.

“Can we go home now?”

Aletha rapped on one of the metal poles holding up the screens before Voni had a chance to answer. “I’m sorry to intrude,” she said as heads turned, “but I think it might be best if you all came home with me and Sirius for tonight. We have a place in town with plenty of extra room, it isn’t far...” She tapped her wand against the pole twice, then slipped inside the tent, along with Par, and shut the wall the boys had opened earlier.

“And it’s safer?” Par finished for her.

“It is.” Aletha nodded. “I’ve reversed the polarity of the spells on these screens, we can talk freely in here, nothing will get out. Which is the only reason I can tell you I’m taking you all to the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix for the night.”

Graham sat up, interested. Lee squeezed Maya’s hand. Bernie cocked her head inquisitively, and Voni sighed. “Do you really think that’s necessary?” she asked.

“Yes. Very much so.” Aletha smiled at Maya, and got a small but definite return smile before the girl closed her eyes again. “I don’t mean to cast aspersions on your home, but Headquarters is better protected than almost any place in Britain. You said it yourself, Par, these attacks were meant to show the pureblood community the price of disobedience. Don’t you think Voldemort would jump at the chance—” She ignored the jumps which came from most people in the tent. “—to prove that he won’t stop with killing the one who disobeys him, but will branch out to the whole family?”

“He would.” Par let his eyes rest on Maya, and his jaw tightened. “I regret nothing. Still, I do not want to see my family suffer for this choice. Thank you, Healer Freeman-Black, Aletha—we

accept. Gratefully.”

“Then the sooner we go the better.” Aletha nodded to Fred and George, who once again pushed the privacy screens aside, revealing the rest of the ward beyond. “I can take Maya—”

“That’s my job,” Lee said, evicting an indignant Bernie from Maya’s lap. “My girl.”

“Werewolf girl,” Maya murmured, sleepily repositioning herself in Lee’s arms.

“I’m not calling you that.”

“I know. That’s why I did.”

Lee shook his head and stood up carefully, Par helping him find his balance for the first few steps. Graham took Bernie’s hand again and followed Lee and Maya down the hall, Fred and George hurrying ahead to be sure the Floo area was clear. Voni and Aletha, left alone together, sighed in unison, then laughed.

“She’ll be all right,” Voni said, starting for the door. “Really, I think she will. It will take time, but she’ll find her way through.”

“With you to help her, I have no doubt.” Aletha tapped the frame of the portrait of Urquhart Rackharrow on the wall, waking the occupant. “Can you go upstairs and tell Albertus Young it’s all clear to bring the other patients from this ward back down?” she asked. “And thank him for me. I think we may have saved lives tonight.”

“Of course you did,” said Rackharrow, looking down his nose at her. “You’re Healers. It’s what you do.”

“You have no idea. Thank you in advance.” Aletha smiled at him and slipped out of the ward. She’d be needed to Floo to Headquarters with those who were not yet members of the Order.

Though after tonight, I think that number in this particular family will take a dramatic drop...

Wolf lay curled into a small circle at the bottom of Ginny’s bed and watched her sleep.

She’s going to be all right. Letha said so. Once the curse part of the lycanthropy was gone, Meghan could heal the disease part like normal. She’ll have a scar on her arm where a Dark Mark would be, if Ginny ever took the Dark Mark...

Wolf snorted laughter at the thought of that. *She’d have all the Death Eaters taking orders from her instead of Voldemort within a month.*

Voldemort’s name pulled his thoughts into familiar paths.

Dursley and Nott. They gave us the two things that used their combined magic to make the girls

want to leave the Den tonight. Are they both just delivery boys, or is one of them a delivery boy and the other one a Junior Death Eater? And which one is it?

Or are they both Junior Death Eaters, and that line Nott fed us in the Forest was just that, a line?

Wolf sneezed uneasily. No, the Forest was for real. I didn't smell any lie on him. Which means if it's one and one, Nott's in the clear.

But Dursley smelled clear too, when he gave me the amulet. So are they both being used here?

The questions were unanswerable, even to Harry's human mind. Wolf shook his head and moved on to something more important.

Danger's prophecies.

Tonight was in two of them.

And in one of them, the next lines might be meant for me.

He slid off the bed and started for the door. This was something that would need to be talked out, with other members of the Pride if possible.

The girls are all asleep, or should be—I know about Ginny, Hermione's off with Moony and Danger and I don't think I dare disturb them, and Luna's right over there— a glance and a sniff told him the Pride's resident Seer was currently as dead to the world as his alpha female—and I'd bet money we won't get Captain and Pearl away from each other tonight. So that leaves Draco and Ron.

I can handle that.

Transforming at the door, Harry slipped out and headed for the Pride's den, where, as he'd expected, found his brother and his best friend playing a half-hearted game of Exploding Snap. "Help me with something?" he asked as he came in.

"Sure." Draco dropped his hand onto the pile, making it explode. "Ron's not thinking about the game anyway. What've you got?"

"Prophecies." Harry pulled two small scrolls out of his pocket and sat down beside the other boys, unrolling the first one. "There were two of them working tonight. And one of them has a part right after tonight's that sounds like it's talking to me."

"Let's look at the other one first, then," said Ron. "Make sure we don't miss anything from it."

Harry nodded and let the scroll in his hand roll itself up again, unrolling the second one. "This is the one Danger just had a week or two ago. *Do what you must, wolf's darling kit, and shed no tears for doing it...*"

“Hermione,” said Draco. “Moony always calls her Kitten, and she had to kill Greyback tonight.”

“No loss to anyone,” Ron muttered.

Harry went on. “*Save tears for those who hold you dear and fall as seen by owlsight clear.*” He blinked once or twice. “Draco, do you know if Luna ever Saw anything about... Hagrid?”

Draco shook his head. “I’d have to ask her. She doesn’t tell me everything. But she might have. She probably did, if it’s here.”

Ron fiddled with a burnt edge of card. “It’s almost...” he began, then stopped.

“Go on,” Harry said. “It’s almost what?”

“It’s stupid.”

“What else is new, from you?” Draco inquired. “We won’t bite.”

“It’s almost a good thing that Hagrid died. Except it’s not!” The last three words shot out with the force of cannonballs, and Ron scrubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand. “If he hadn’t died, we wouldn’t have known anything was wrong,” he said, his voice threatening to break. “We wouldn’t have known the girls were gone. We wouldn’t have chained up and gone looking for them, and...”

“They’d probably all have been bitten,” Harry finished, feeling his stomach start to revolt at the thought. “Then dragged off to wherever Greyback’s pack holes up. Or maybe Voldemort would have taken a couple of them for himself, to try to tempt us into a rescue.”

“And we would have taken the bait, too.” Draco’s eyes were far away. “We would have known it was a trap, and we still would have gone...”

Harry shook himself out of these dismal thoughts. “You’re right, Ron,” he said, though he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from tearing up again. “It was... almost... a good thing.”

“He’s probably right proud of it,” Ron muttered. “Bet he’s bragging on it over drinks with your mum and dad, Harry.”

“Maybe my mum’s there too,” Draco mused. “All sitting and watching us, and talking about what they hope we can do...”

The image held them all for a second. Then Harry began to unroll the other scroll he’d brought with him. “This one’s from back in the summer,” he said. “*The beast tries, as he said, to own, and half-succeeds—but not alone.*”

“Greyback threatened Moony once with taking Hermione and turning her,” Draco recalled. “And he tried to do it tonight.”

“But he ended up turning Ginny instead,” said Ron, scowling. “And it’s my fault.”

Draco punched him on the shoulder, harder than the Pride’s usual friendly greetings. “Would you stop that?”

“You saved them, Ron,” Harry said over this. “You couldn’t have known Ginny would get hurt from it. And Hermione took the curse from her anyway, so she’s going to be all right.”

“Ginny will be all right, yeah. What about Hermione?”

“She’s strong,” Draco said, looking sideways at Ron. “She’ll get through it. Why do you care?”

“Because she’s my friend too!” Ron leaned forward, his face flushing. “You don’t own her, just because you’re twins!”

“I never said I did!”

“Stop it!” Harry twisted his legs under, brought himself up on his knees, and got his hands between Ron and Draco, staving off the former’s grab at the latter. “Stop. Now.” A finger’s touch on Ron’s throat, another on Draco’s. “We have enough enemies out there as it is. We don’t need more in here.”

Ron’s shoulders slumped, and he nodded. Draco looked rebellious, but Harry lowered his head and Draco blanched. “Ack. Not the look over the glasses. I’ll be good. I’ll be good.”

Ron snickered. Harry turned to look at him, and he shrugged one shoulder. “Sounded funny,” he said. “Sorry, Drake.”

“Sorry, Ron.”

“Thank you.” Harry scooted backwards to his former place, resumed his cross-legged seat, and unrolled the prophecy scroll again. “Here’s the bit that sounded like it was talking to me.” He cleared his throat.

“Then flame shall rise to champion’s hand,

“Alighting fires to cleanse the land,

“For death and pain shall bring to light

“The hidden, unacknowledged might.

“He bows to fate, but not to yield;

“He’ll use it to make fair the field.

“And thus the path shall be begun

“Which leads unto The Man Who Won. ”

“Wow,” said Ron after a moment. “The Man Who Won—that you, Harry?”

“Sounds like.” Harry grinned. “I like it better than The Boy Who Lived, any road.”

“Course you do,” Draco said, leaning back on his hands. “You didn’t really have anything to do with being The Boy Who Lived. When you’re The Man Who Won, it’ll be all you.”

“Mostly me,” Harry corrected. “I don’t expect you’ll be sitting out.”

A shadow crossed Draco’s face. “You might be surprised.”

Harry looked sharply at him, but let it pass. *Not this time either. But soon.*

“Can I see that?” Ron asked, pointing at the scroll. Harry passed it over, and Ron ran his finger across one of the lines. “Hidden, unacknowledged might,” he read slowly. “Hidden, unacknowledged... why’s that sound familiar?”

Draco shrugged. “It doesn’t to me. Or maybe a little, but I could be making it up.”

Harry let his eyes drift half-shut. “It’s not something we’ve heard before,” he said slowly. “Not in those words. Maybe in other words.”

“Other words? Okay.” Draco started ticking them off on his fingers. “Hidden. Secret. Concealed. Buried. Veiled. Unknown.”

Harry sat up as pieces snapped together in his brain. “Unknown! That’s it!”

“It is? I mean, it is!” Draco plastered his biggest fake smile on his face. “Good for me!”

“Stop that.” Harry smacked his brother on the side of the head. “Ron, read it again. Just that bit.”

“Hidden, unacknowledged might,” Ron recited without looking at the scroll.

“Hidden is unknown,” Harry said, feeling excitement build in his chest as his waking mind found the answer his subconscious had picked out of Draco’s stream of words. “So is unacknowledged. They mean the same, or close enough. And might is another word for power. Unknown power. Sound familiar now?”

“The power he knows not,” Draco said, fake smile replaced with a true one. “Harry, you’re brilliant.”

Harry jerked a thumb at Ron. “He picked it out of there.”

“Yes, but I’m not saying he’s brilliant. I have this thing about lying.”

“Up yours,” Ron said, throwing the prophecy scroll at Draco.

“You first.” Draco retrieved the scroll and unrolled it again. “So this is you, then, Harry. You must be the champion—of course, who else can have fire come to his hand?”

“Moony,” Harry said absently. “Never mind. Keep going.”

“He bows to fate, but not to yield,” Draco read. “I like the sound of that.”

“I like the sound of the next one,” said Ron. “Something about making it more fair.”

Draco consulted the scroll. *“He’ll use it to make fair the field. Not bad, Weasley.”*

“Thanks, Black, you’re not so bad yourself.”

“You done?” Harry asked coolly.

“We’re done,” said Draco. “So you’re going to use ‘the power he knows not’ and make it fairer between you and Voldemort.”

“Wasn’t that supposed to be love?” Ron asked. “‘The power he knows not,’ I mean. Didn’t we decide it was probably love?”

Harry nodded. “We did. Let’s see, then. We’re looking for something to stick it to Voldemort, to tell him he can’t hurt my Pride and my friends and not expect me to hit back, and it has to involve fire and love...”

A loud crack heralded the arrival of Winky. “Master Ron and his friends is please to come down to the kitchen,” she piped. “There is being guests and Mistress is wanting you to come help them.”

“Guests?” Ron said in confusion. “Now?”

“It is being Master Fred and Master George’s friend Jordan and his lady and her family,” Winky informed them. “They is needing a safe place to stay for the night to be sure they is not being killed by Death Eaters.”

“Always a good thing,” said Draco, standing up. “We’re on our way, Winky.”

The house-elf smiled and vanished, and the boys made their way downstairs for introductions and congratulations once Lee revealed his and Maya’s new status. Harry noticed Ron watching them out the corner of his eye, and made a mental note to ask if his friend was all right.

But tomorrow. Too much going on tonight.

After the initial clamor had died down, Dobby showed Graham’s parents to one of the spare bedrooms on the first floor, and Harry led Lee, Maya, Graham, and his little sister (*Bernie, that’s cute, though we’ll have to watch out if she meets Meghan—there’s only so much ‘little sister’ one house can take*) up to the den-room on the second floor. Maya and Graham, he knew, understood the concept of a den, and from the way Lee hadn’t let go of Maya since they’d arrived, it was probably the best thing for them.

They smell so much in love right now. Not a big surprise, but it’s almost more than I can take...

Harry stopped dead as a wicked idea swept over him.

“Oy!” Lee protested behind him. “Clear the stairs, Potter!”

“Sorry.” Harry bounded up the last three steps and into the hallway, the idea taking better shape even as he thought about it.

Just have to get good samples from as many people as I can... can't tell them why, not until afterwards, it might get contaminated...

Once in the den, he asked Ron to go get some extra bedding and Draco to show Graham and Bernie where the bathroom was. Then he asked Lee and Maya for what he needed.

The first of many. Though I'll have to work fast if I want to get everyone before bed.

When he told them, after taking his sample, why he was doing it, Maya giggled uncontrollably for a second and Lee bared his teeth, laying gentle fingers over the bandage on her arm. “Serve him bloody right,” he said. “A little of his own back.”

Harry nodded, then changed the subject as Ron levitated an armful of blankets through the door.

Once the guests were settled, Harry tackled a few of the Order members who were still up and about, then Draco and Ron (both of whom agreed that the idea fit their interpretation of the prophecies perfectly), and finally Letha and Padfoot, who had Flooed in with several long scratches down his arms shortly after the arrival of Lee and the Pritchards.

“Good feelings?” Letha repeated when Harry had told her what he needed. “I think I can help you there. In more ways than one.”

“I like the way that sounds.” Harry sat down on the couch beside her and held out his pendants. “Tell me more.”

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Facing Danger

Chapter 34: Love Hurts (Arc 6)

Moony came awake to the sound of someone tapping on the door. A moment of disorientation ensued, worsened by Danger's similar state, but he backtraced his thoughts until they began to make sense.

It's still full moon. We're not at the Den anymore, we came back to Headquarters. With Neenie. He gave the small furred head resting on one of his paws a gentle lick. *Because... yes, well, no need to get into that.*

"Remus, please wake up," Aletha's voice called from the other side of the door. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I don't think this should wait."

Moony sighed, barked once quietly to tell her he was up, and began extracting his paw from under Neenie's head. Danger lifted hers from his flank. **Trouble?** she sent muzzily.

I don't know yet. Stay with her? I'll relay back to you.

Danger nodded and curled herself around Neenie, who mewed once in her sleep before snuggling close to her sister's furred side and relaxing again. Moony got to his paws, yawned once, shook his head until his ears vibrated, and crossed the room to the door, nosing the button they'd installed at wolf level during the renovations of number twelve.

It's not as if I can't turn a handle, but it's awkward, and there might come a day when I don't have the time to waste.

The door opened, and he padded out into the hall, whuffing a quiet greeting to Aletha and Harry, both waiting for him. The humans seated themselves, and Aletha pulled out her chain, passing part of it to Harry and tossing a loop over Moony's head.

Good aim.

"Thank you." Aletha paused as Harry changed into Wolf and came over to lie beside Moony, who growled soft amusement and nosed his cub's ear. "That should probably bother me much more than it does. Anyway. All teams are accounted for, and we managed to stop every attack we knew about—in some cases, we had help, and a few were closer than we'll probably ever admit to anyone else, but none of the girls we had prior warning about were successfully bitten."

That sounds ominous. Moony flicked open his channel to the now fully awake Danger. **I know there were two attacks we didn't have information about. One was obviously our girls, and we know how that came out. Who was the other?**

"Graham Pritchard's cousin Maya. And her friend Selena Moon, but that seems to have been mostly accidental, the product of their determinedness to have their slumber party on the full

moon.” Aletha looked blandly at Wolf, who cocked his head to one side and returned the look with innocence that fooled neither adult for a moment. “I wonder where they could have got that idea.”

Moony snorted a laugh, then shook it off in favor of business. **Which was bitten? Or was it both?**

“Only Maya—Selena’s parents seem to have taught her a few necessary skills a bit early, as she was able to Apparate home and get help while Maya fought the werewolf. And it’s a very good thing she did. Maya’s parents were... less than helpful.”

Moony snorted. **Purebloods, aren’t they? Wanted to “cleanse their name”?**

“Exactly.” Aletha’s smile was surprisingly predatory for someone with an equine Animagus. “At the moment, though, they’re a bit more worried about how to ‘cleanse their name’ from something else.” A few appropriate memory-images illustrated. “Maya’s here, with her cousins and her aunt and uncle—the adults are with Albus at the moment, so I think the Order will have two more members in the morning. But what I came to tell you about is what I learned from watching lycanthropy take effect on her.”

Some part of Moony wanted to protest. *Why didn’t you try to stop it, if you could see it happening? Why not try to help her, instead of just watching it destroy her? A fine Healer you are...*

Go on, was all he said ‘aloud’.

“Before I do, I should ask you a question. It is personal, so there’s no need to answer if you don’t want to, but I’m formulating a theory and the answer would help me a great deal.” Aletha looked into his eyes. “What happened the night you were bitten?”

Moony inhaled slowly, drawing back for a moment from the pendant link. *I was expecting something like that, but that doesn’t mean I was ready for it.*

I’ll leave if you want, Wolf volunteered, starting to get to his paws.

Moony shook his head. **No, you can stay. This is nothing you wouldn’t hear at a den night. Though I admit I’ve never brought it up...**

Danger’s wordless love licked at the back of his mind, Aletha’s steady regard held firm, Wolf twitched his tail in abortive wags, and Moony made up his mind.

I may not have much to tell you, he said, closing his eyes and lowering his head to the floorboards. **I was very young, and I’ve tried for a long time to forget that night.**

Anything will help, Aletha said, switching to the silent speech the pendant chains allowed. **What I mostly want to know is what happened afterwards. How you reacted, how your parents reacted, what you all said and did.**

That, I remember. Moony slid back in time, growing younger than Wolf or Neenie, younger than Meghan or Graham, younger even than the little girl he could smell vaguely on Wolf's fur and Aletha's robes, until some part of him was once again that confused and frightened four-year-old. **We all cried. Me from the pain and because Mummy and Daddy were upset, and my parents from the fear that I would become something they couldn't understand, something they... no, not that they couldn't love. I don't think that was possible.**

So you were sure of their love, Aletha said, the statement half a question.

Absolutely. Moony felt Wolf squirm a bit closer, sliding his nose along his Pack-father's paw. **They didn't let me go the entire night. When one of them wasn't holding me, the other one was. Telling me how much they loved me, how sorry they were that this had happened. I remember Mum yelling at Dad at one point, when he'd tried to blame himself for it—she said he couldn't have done any differently than he did, that she wouldn't have stayed with him if he had—but that was the only anger that was directed at any of us. They didn't scold me even once for going outside late at night. I think they knew that blaming each other would only make things worse.**

"How right they were," Aletha murmured aloud.

I beg your pardon? Moony opened his eyes.

"Well, it so happens that..." Aletha stopped as a rhythmic *thud, thud, thud* broke into her words. "You," she said, pointing at Wolf. "If you're going to steal my thunder, you can leave."

Wolf lowered his ears apologetically and stopped thumping his tail against the floor.

I like the sound of thunder, Moony said, indulging in a brief tail-wag himself. **Please, tell me more.**

"I will, but I have to know first if Hermione told you what Luna told us—about the two parts of lycanthropy, the curse and the disease?"

Moony nodded. **She gave us the gist of it, in explaining what she had agreed to. She has only the curse affecting her, not the disease, so she'll never change bodily the way I do, but her mind and soul will be altered by the full moon.**

And I would have done anything to keep this from happening to her, anything in the world...

"They will. But let me tell you what I saw while Maya's curse was taking hold." Aletha was beginning to smile. "Her parents' arrival frightened her; the curse spread more strongly over her soul when she heard they had come. But when her cousins came bursting in and climbed onto the bed with her, and her aunt and uncle told her she would always have a home with them, the curse receded some from that first strength, and the rest of its spread was thin and weak. And as far as I can tell, the strength it has when it finishes spreading is the strength it stays."

Moony went very still as the implications of this began to sink in. **Are you telling me...**

“That what your parents did for you, what Maya’s relatives have done for her, and what you’ve done for Hermione have made the curse of lycanthropy less potent on you all?” Aletha finished. “Yes. Maya and Hermione will still be affected by the curse, just as you are, but now they have a fighting chance. Whereas if they’d been in the situation of most of the newly bitten—alone and wounded and terrified, or surrounded by ignorant people who tried to kill them or lock them away—the curse would have manifested to its fullest extent.”

Making them into the traditional werewolf, Danger said, her voice echoing into the link through Moony’s mind. **Angry, bitter, jealous and cruel.**

“Exactly.” Aletha displayed the image she’d seen of Maya’s soul, golden glow covered here and there with thin gray strands like a spider’s web. “I would imagine the unaltered form of the curse covers the soul so completely that its victims have almost as little choice about their emotional changes as they do about their physical one. Which means, Remus, that by doing what I’m sure you did tonight—by holding Hermione, comforting her, telling her how much you love her and how proud you are of her for what she did—you saved her soul.”

There were no words, there could be no words, for a joy so deep and bright and strong. Moony shivered with the power of it, radiating from the center of his being to the link where Danger, her voice shaking even in his mind, whispered **Thank God, oh thank God** over and over, up and outward until he was amazed that his very skin was not shining with it. Wolf trembled beside him, and Aletha knelt on his other side now, her arms around him and tears falling freely into his fur. His love, his sister, his son, all felt and echoed back his joy, multiplying it until four minds did not seem enough to hold it all.

I love her, he said, looking through Danger’s eyes at the tiny precious life lying beside her. **That was why I did what I did. Because I love her, and I wanted her to know that would never change, no matter what had happened to her.**

We know, the other voices answered, a soft semi-chorus, overlapping and combining. **We know.**

Wolf pressed a paw against Moony’s, pushing through the fur to touch skin. **Thanks for your help**, he said privately.

Help? With what?

Tell you in the morning. Wolf winked one green eye, wiggled himself backwards out of the chain, and was down the hall and out of sight in a flash.

Moony looked up at Aletha, who shook her head. “Don’t ask me,” she said. “All I know is, he needed good feelings for something.”

Good feelings... A suspicion blossomed at the back of Moony’s mind, but he let it stay there. For tonight, he was content with what he’d just learned.

Hermione will suffer from this. She will be hurt. But she will still be herself. And we will love her and help her and teach her—I will teach her—how to keep the full moons from taking over her life.

She is still herself, and she is still mine. Nothing else matters tonight.

Tomorrow, he knew, would be another story. But tomorrow would take care of itself. It always did.

He laid his head against Aletha's knee and watched through the doorway as his Kitten slept.

Harry shut the door of the boys' bedroom behind himself, walked carefully over to his bed, and collapsed across it.

"That good?" Draco inquired, looking up from his book on the next bed over.

Harry rolled over to get an upside-down look at his brother. "That good," he confirmed. "Here, try it." A flick of his wrist sent his chain whizzing Draco's way.

Draco slid it over his head, and Harry summoned up the dazzling joy once more. A sharp intake of breath told him the link was working properly.

"Whoa," Draco breathed. "Yeah. That good."

"Let me try," Ron said, setting aside the watch he'd been tinkering with. "Toss it over, Harry, come on."

"It's not a new flavor of crisps," Harry said, flinging a loop of chain in the other direction from Draco. "Show a little respect."

Ron ducked inside the chain. "Tell me what it is and I will."

Harry tweaked the proper moment in his memory. Ron stiffened, then went limp all over, dropping his wand to the floor. "Never mind," he said, sounding rather shaken. "Think I can guess."

"This I have to hear," muttered Draco.

"Not now." Harry twitched the chain, summoning it home, and pulled around the locket that held his blood and Moony's, looking at it thoughtfully. "I need you both to help me with this. If we're going to make it work, we have to know exactly what we're all doing."

"Right." Ron retrieved his wand and flexed his wand hand. "My job's not too hard. Stun you if you do anything even a little bit weird before that locket's back on your chain."

"It might not be hard, but it's important." Harry arched his back, stretching. "If I get taken over

and you don't stop me, we're all dead."

"And dead is a bad thing."

"Yes, usually." Harry turned to look at Draco. "Ten seconds," he said. "I'll need it all, but no more. I don't want him to have time to shake it off, but I do want to finish."

"We were working on that, actually." Draco peered around Harry. "You got it yet, great mechanical genius?"

Ron twirled his wand against the back of the watch, which Harry, now that he was looking at it, recognized as Draco's. "Almost. Just one... more... second... there." He handed it to Harry, who passed it along to Draco. "Push the knob in to start it. If you want to set it, turn the knob back and forth, but I did that already this time. It'll make a noise when your time's up."

Draco strapped the watch to his wrist. "What kind of noise?"

Ron grinned. "It says, 'Hey stupid! Your time's up!'"

"Thanks a lot."

"Remind me," Harry said, twisting himself around until he was lying with his head on the pillow. "If we ever get a Den for the Pride, it has to be big. Big enough that you two can have separate wings."

Both boys instantly assumed looks of injured dignity and great innocence.

"Save it for your girlfriends." Harry closed his eyes and reached for Draco's hand, only to find it already around his. He could hear and smell Ron on the next bed, and the scent of Neville and the girls permeated the room.

This is for the girls. For all the people who were scared or hurt tonight. For the werewolves who don't care if you use them because they think they're no better than animals. And for Hagrid. Grief tried to take him over, but he touched the feelings he'd gathered and it retreated a little ways. It would be back, but he had time first enough to finish what he'd set himself to do.

This is for everyone.

Because you can't do things like this anymore.

I'm not going to let you.

"Ready," he said aloud. "Give me a three-count, then go."

"Right." Draco's hand came in, guided by Harry's own, to the locket at the side of his neck. "Ron, ready?"

“Ready.”

Draco closed his fingers around the locket. “One.” A nail hooked onto its catch. “Two.” The catch went back, and the locket came free from the chain. “Three.”

Harry’s scar came alive with pain. He closed his mouth over a gasp and instead laid his free hand over his pendants.

This is for everyone, he thought again, and dove into what he’d gleaned from Lee and Maya.

Lord Voldemort was just listening, with growing anger, to the report of another of his spies when he felt the unfamiliar tickle at the back of his mind.

What—ah, Potter. So he wants to play, does he? Take revenge for what I have done, or rather what I have tried to do?

He glared down at the prostrate spy. *Perhaps this night was not totally wasted after all. I will let him see the true extent of my anger, and what it means to humiliate me—*

This is for everyone, the boy’s voice whispered.

Heat flooded the link between them, and Voldemort stiffened in shock. It clung, it scalded his mind, it stank of something he could not explain—there was a whiff of desire, a trace of anger, but they were quickly drowned in the flood of *something else* —

Before he could even begin to fight through the pain and analyze the magic, to decide how best to counteract it, it changed, filling his head with a blinding light—and again, to a pounding rhythm like four sets of drums played just out of unison—again, to a floating sensation as though he had just fallen from a height—again, to a chill that made his heart speed up and his skin contract—again, to—

Voldemort screamed in pain as the sensations merged, flowing into an indescribable whole that seized him and shook him and would not release him. Potter felt this too, he realized from a distance, but Potter felt it not as pain but as—

Joy. Happiness. Love. Such defilement as that, he dares to use against me!

The anger gave him shield and sword, blocking out the blinding, burning love, clearing the way for him to strike back. He would show Potter what real power was—

But as Voldemort thrust his own magic towards the link, a flash of red light and a sudden darkness assailed him, and the wall which had blocked the link for the last several months dropped from nowhere, nearly crushing his spirit-self. He rolled clear of the russet stones just in time.

“Clever,” he whispered, staring at the impenetrable wall. “Very clever. But you will not try it

twice.”

Though his spirit ached from top to toe after such a horrible experience, nonetheless he spent several minutes setting traps on his own side of the wall. If Potter should attempt this trick again, his soul would be instantly netted and pulled away from his body, leaving it free for whatever the Dark Lord might care to do with it.

Which is as it should be.

At last, he returned to his body, dismissing his Death Eaters with a gesture so as not to worsen his headache. A wave of his wand dimmed the lights, another filled the air with soft hissing, and Lord Voldemort leaned back, his eyes closed as he sought to regain his equilibrium.

How can they do it? he wondered. How can they survive, how can they function, with such things constantly present in their minds? How can they continue to live and, apparently, thrive?

It was only an idle question. He had long ago accepted that he would never know, and that he did not wish to know. His lot in life was not to understand the light, but to destroy it.

I daresay that if they were not so blind, if they were not so steeped in their foolish culture, they would even thank me for my efforts.

But thanked or not, he would prevail. There was no other way.

Cradled in his throne, the soothing whispering of snakes all around him, Lord Voldemort slept.

Draco clutched at his forehead with both hands.

There's something distinctly ironic about getting two reaction headaches in one night, both from the same person's magic.

“Sorry about that,” Ron said from the next bed over, setting up a second set of pounding inside Draco’s head. “I would’ve waited, but...”

“It’s fine,” Draco croaked, wincing as his whole skull vibrated to his voice. “Just... don’t talk so loud?”

“Sorry.” Ron flicked his wand at the light switch and shut the door, plunging the room into blessed darkness. “Night.”

“Night.” One step, two, three, and Draco fell onto his bed, already forming the entrance to a dreamworld in his mind. The faster he could get to sleep, the faster his magic could start repairing the damage done by Stunner backlash.

It's not Ron's fault, it's mine. He did exactly what he had to do, and if I'd been quicker I wouldn't still have been touching Harry when the spell hit him. So my own stupid fault.

But it felt more satisfying to blame Ron for the headache than to blame himself.

Don't suppose it hurts anything, really. As long as I don't let myself take it too seriously. He's bugging me for some reason right now, so this'll let me get it out of my system.

The dreamworld doorway coalesced, and Draco stepped through it quickly, sighing in relief as the headache disappeared. He wouldn't stay too long here, just long enough to make sure his body was thoroughly asleep.

And maybe long enough to find one other person and do a few things we really shouldn't.

After all, who's going to know?

He grinned to himself and set off along the forest path, watching for white feathers.

Neenie came awake all at once, eyes and ears and nose wide open. It was just past sunrise, she was back at Headquarters, but there was trouble nearby, something to fear, something to run from—

Calm down, she ordered herself. There isn't anything like that here.

There is, there is, there is! Her thoughts tumbled over each other in their haste to be known. *There is, over there, look, look, run away, hide, run!*

Slowly, Neenie turned her head.

Moony slept on the floor beside her, back in his human form.

Run! her thoughts shrieked at her. *Bad, bad, danger, danger...*

Neenie latched her claws onto that word, halting her runaway thoughts. *Danger loves me, she told herself firmly, and she is here. She would never let anything hurt me.* One paw reached out to touch the larger one of the sleeping wolf beside her. *And Moony loves me just as much as Danger does. He made me better last night. I will not run from him.*

But the panic wasn't listening. The scent and sight of a man, a human male, crept past her defenses and made her shiver, sent her burrowing into Danger's side, their fur intermingling—she would scream any second, cat or human, it didn't matter, she wasn't going to be able to stop herself—

Neenie, what in the world? Danger asked sleepily.

I don't know, I don't know, I don't— Neenie cut herself off, burying her face in Danger's fur, trying to stay calm. **It's Moony, he scares me when he's human, I know he shouldn't but he does, I don't want him to, I know he wouldn't ever hurt me, but he does and I'm scared and I don't want to be scared—**

I understand, Danger broke in. And so will he. I'm here, hold onto me, I won't let anything hurt you.

I know. Neenie breathed deeply of her sister's scent, shaking with her fear and the shame it brought over her. **I know.**

A moment of silence, with the feeling of a conversation just out of earshot, then Danger's voice came back. **Look now. Is this better?**

Neenie turned her head and let out a low yowl in relief. The Moony now lifting his head to look at her was a lion, his mane in disarray but his eyes fixed on her with love and worry. **Yes. Yes. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I don't mean to be like this...**

We know. And we love you. Danger licked the back of Neenie's head once, then nudged her to her feet. **Go and see if you can be near him. You were fine with him last night when he was the wolf, so you may be all right with him in this form too.**

I think I am. Neenie nuzzled Danger in thanks and picked her way delicately across the floor to the lion's side. Blue eyes watched her come, and a great steady rumble filled the air.

Lions aren't supposed to be able to purr.

But then, cats aren't supposed to be able to talk, either.

Neenie reached her goal and reared up on her hind legs, balancing her front paws in the lion's mane. Deliberately, she leaned forward and licked the side of Moony's muzzle.

For what you did for me last night, she thought towards him. For the story, and the love, and the safety. For everything you always do for me. Even if I can't say it aloud right now, you know it. And you know that I love you too, and always will.

Moony turned his great head gently, depositing Neenie's front paws on the floor again. His velvet nose pressed against her face, and her purr awoke without her conscious effort.

She hadn't known lions could smile.

“Harry, might we have a word?”

Harry turned around slowly, attempting to appear as if he hadn't a clue what Professor Dumbledore might want 'a word' about.

Make that Professor Dumbledore, Danger with her eyes half-blue for Moony, Letha, and Padfoot. And none of them look the least bit amused.

I think I'm in trouble.

“Yes, sir. Here?”

“No, I think we shall repair to the War Room.” Dumbledore indicated the study on the other side of the front hallway, where Harry had been about to go upstairs. “As what we are discussing is related to that.”

Definitely trouble.

Inside the room, everyone found a seat, Harry trying not to cringe prematurely. *Time enough for that when they yell...*

“Mind telling us what you did last night?” Padfoot asked, flexing his fingers behind his head.

Oh, they’re not even yelling. I’m in BIG trouble. “I was stupid?”

The Pack-parents snickered, and Dumbledore smiled politely. “True enough,” Danger said. “But not what we want to hear and you know it.”

I hate it when they do this. “Why do I have to tell you when you already know?”

“To be sure we have the story straight from both sides,” Letha said calmly, “and that we’re not blaming you for something you didn’t do. Which you know perfectly well, you’re just trying to stall. Let’s have it.”

So much for that. Harry sighed and reached into his pocket for the small scrolls he’d copied the prophecies onto. Only one of them was there.

Huh. Ron or Draco must still have the other one. But let me see... He unrolled it slightly. *Good, this is the right one. I won’t need to find another copy.*

“It all started when Luna told us how she’d remembered a bit of prophecy that made it extra important for Ginny to get healed,” he said, coming down the table so he could hand Padfoot the scroll. “I decided maybe I should go look that prophecy up, and the other one that was for this year, and I found some lines that sounded as if they were meant for me...”

The adults craned their necks to get a better look at the scroll as Harry explained how he and Draco and Ron had worked out the relevant bits of prophecy, and how he’d realized what it might mean while he was near Lee and Maya. “It was almost too much for me, and I know about love... some,” he qualified at Letha’s raised eyebrow and Padfoot’s snigger. “Voldemort doesn’t know anything about it, he hates it, he thinks it’s poison. The more love and happiness I could find and hit him with, the more he’d be hurting, and the worse he’d think last night failed. Which might mean he wouldn’t try it again.”

“Or it might mean he will try harder,” Dumbledore said, “in order to crush your spirit and those of your friends. There are unintended consequences to every action, Harry. For instance, I have no doubt Lord Voldemort is now blocking the link between you with all his own power, to prevent a repetition of last night. Though this may be a good thing, it may also be bad.”

“How?” Padfoot turned to look at the Headmaster. “I thought it was generally bad to have that link there.”

“It is,” Dumbledore said. “However, Lord Voldemort now knows that the blockage at our end is not permanent but within our power to remove and replace. The more he learns about the block we have devised, the more likely it is he will find a way around it, making your mind vulnerable once again, Harry.”

Harry looked down at the table. “Sorry, sir.”

“Apology accepted.” The tone, gentle as it was, nonetheless brought Harry’s head up again. Dumbledore was smiling at him. “I doubt there has been permanent harm done by this incident, Harry, and I do admire your initiative. But could we ask to be informed before you next—if you will pardon the metaphor—beard the lion in his den?”

I’ve heard of killing people with kindness. I guess this is what it means. “I’ll try, sir.”

Dumbledore steepled his fingers and regarded Harry.

Not him, too. “Yes, sir,” Harry mumbled. “I will.”

Letha pressed his arm gently. “Thank you, love,” she said, then grinned. “I hope you gave him an awful headache.”

Harry grinned back. “I think I did. He was yelling a lot, at least.”

The adults around the table chuckled.

“Can I just ask, *why?*” Padfoot said, shaking his head. “Why this way? And why right then?”

Harry rubbed at a bump on the table’s surface. “Because I wanted to do something myself,” he said. “Something nobody else had thought to do, something nobody else could do. And I wanted to do it right away. To show him he can’t get away with hurting people. With killing people.” The grief he’d put off last night raised its head again, and this time he had no resolve to help him send it away. “To show him, no matter who he kills, he can’t kill us all.”

“But he could kill *you*,” Danger said softly. “And none of us want that.”

Harry cracked half a smile. “Don’t want it much myself.” Tears were rising up in his eyes now, his throat was closing, he’d put it off too long already and now it couldn’t be denied...

Letha’s arms were the first around him, but Padfoot was only a moment after her, pulling his chair up behind Harry so that he could hold them both at once. “It’s not fair, is it?” his godfather said thickly. “He was supposed to be safe, staying home with you lot, and instead he’s the only one who died...”

“We’ll miss him,” Letha whispered, kissing Harry on the side of the head. “We will all miss him,

so, so much.”

The words helped some to release the grief Harry’d held back all night and day. The embraces, the nearness, the Pack-scents helped more. His tears came, slowly and painfully, but they came.

An image lingered on the backs of his eyelids as he cried: an outdoor table at a little village pub, where two men and two women sat drinking and talking and playing cards. One of the women was blonde and delicate, the other red-haired and laughing, and one of the men towered over the other players while the other had messy black hair and wore wire-rimmed glasses like the ones pressing into Harry’s own face.

They all look so happy. I hope they are.

I hope they’re proud of me.

Then the grief swept back over him, and he had no thought for anything but tears.

Ron edged along the hall, avoiding the creaky boards, trying to dismiss the thoughts which said he was eavesdropping and he really shouldn’t be here.

It’s been three days since it all happened, and no one will tell me anything about how Hermione is.

I’ll just have to find out myself.

“Well, how is she?” Mrs. Danger’s voice asked within the room.

Mrs. Letha sighed. “The same as before. On edge, jumping at every shadow, and panicking if a man or a boy comes near. She’s rational enough—she’s the one asking us to keep testing her—but this is beyond reason, and that’s hard for her to comprehend.”

“She can take Remus, though, as long as he’s transformed,” Mrs. Danger said in a tone of trying to make the best of things. “And Draco was able to go in to see her, as Snow Fox.”

“Yes, but he couldn’t get near her. She was happy enough to see him, but if he started to come close, she tensed up.”

“Better than what she did when Harry tried it as Wolf.”

“Yes, that was rather spectacular.” Mrs. Letha laughed, a dry little chuckle. “I’m not sure my hearing’s fully recovered yet.”

“What’s that?”

“I said, I’m not sure... oh, very funny.”

“Thank you.” A long pause. “What are we going to do, Letha? She can’t go back to school if she

screams at the sight of half the professors or students. But she'll tear herself apart inside if she misses more than a few days of her O.W.L. year for something she sees as so trivial as fear. If there were just one person, one man, she could stand in human form, that would be something to build on, something to help her find her way out of this..."

"But there isn't." Mrs. Letha's chair scraped the floor, and footsteps began to pace around the door. Ron drew back a step or two, to make sure he wasn't seen. "We've tried everyone male in the house; she starts to shiver and cry before they even get into sight..."

"O Time, thou must untangle this, not I," Mrs. Danger murmured. "It is too hard a knot for me t'untie. She's asleep now?"

"Yes, sleeping soundly, with Remus watching the door, as if you didn't know that. I left the window open with a warmth spell on it, to give her some air. Maybe when she wakes up, if she's feeling any better, we can try again..."

Ron withdrew as silently as he'd come, resentment seething in his chest.

Tried everyone? No, they bloody well haven't—no one's said a word to me about it, not a thing except what I can pry out of Draco and Harry, and they've been more and more close-mouthed every day. It's like no one even remembers what I did for them, for her—like I'm invisible, like I don't matter—

No more. He unclenched his fists and started for the boys' bedroom. No more. They said she was asleep. If I'm careful how I transform, I can get in and out again without waking her. I can at least see her, and say what I want to say to her, even if she won't hear me.

I'm not going to be invisible anymore.

Hermione lay in the big double bed, breathing deeply and evenly, trying to find the sleep that was eluding her, trying to avoid the tears that were searching for her.

I don't want this. I don't want any of this. I don't want to be afraid, I don't want to be useless, I don't want to be a burden... I don't want Hagrid to have died for nothing...

But she was afraid, terribly afraid, and if she couldn't conquer that fear she would be useless and a burden to the Pack. Hagrid might not have died for nothing—Ginny was well again, all of Letha's scans showed her healthy, and Luna and Meghan had recovered—but it was still an insult to his memory that she should be like this.

I'm supposed to be strong. I'm supposed to be able to fight anything. Why can't I fight this?

"None of us can fight our fears alone, little love," Danger's voice whispered in her memories. "We all need help. We all need each other. Don't hate yourself for not being able to throw this off alone."

But I can't help it. I know it's stupid and irrational and I hate it, but I can't stop feeling like I should be able to do this myself, without any help from anyone.

Even though you couldn't fight the Death Eaters without help? pointed out her logical side. You needed someone to give you that first push, to break the spell that kept you from caring... you were perfectly able to finish the fight from there, but without that help, there wouldn't have been a fight at all...

I should know who that was. Hermione seized on the new topic gladly. That magic, that taste and touch and smell, I know I know it, I just can't put it with a face or a voice. All I know for sure is, whoever it was, he was angry. Angry at how I'd been treated, at what had happened to me, and that the spell kept me from being angry about it.

She smiled a little. I've made up for that since then. I've screamed and yelled and pounded the floor and sworn I'll find him and get revenge. As soon as I find out who he is.

She was careful not to look at the bit of memory that seemed to say she might already know.

But I wish I could tell him, the him who helped me, that I've done that. That I've been angry now, and upset and frightened and sad, and how grateful I am—as crazy as that sounds—but how grateful I am that he gave me the chance to do that. That he broke me free to let me fight back. That he saved my life, or at least the parts of it that matter.

I wish I could tell him.

Her eyes closed as she continued to breathe deeply. Sleep was starting to come, she could feel it, sliding its comforting mantle over her—

A whir of wings at the window, and sleep fled in an instant. Hermione lay very still, but her heart was pounding. It can't be an owl, they fly silently—it sounds too big to be a sparrow or a pigeon—

The quiet thump of a pair of feet hitting the floor, and a new scent eddied over Hermione's shoulder into her nose. She breathed it in and let it out again, analyzing it piece by piece.

Day-old robes, week-old socks, sweat. Ink and parchment and textbooks and dust. Ham and turkey sandwich with pumpkin juice—wait, pumpkin juice—

Quickly, she called up her memory of the mysterious magic which had freed her and laid it against the scent reaching her now. They fit together like a hand around a wand.

Of course. How could I forget?

But something was missing. Something she had expected, had come to expect over the last few days, was inexplicably absent.

Hermione lay quiescent under the covers, breathing the human scent of Ron Weasley, and was not afraid at all.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 35: Questions and Confessions (Arc 6)

“I just came to say I’m sorry,” Ron whispered, his voice husky.

He’s been crying. Hermione lay very still, hoping Ron couldn’t hear her heart speeding up. *Why has he been crying? For Hagrid? Or for me? Maybe both...*

“I never wanted this to happen to you. I wish I could have stopped it sooner. But I couldn’t.” A long breath, with a catch in its middle. “I wish I knew who did this to you. I’d go find him and drag him back here. Hold him down for whatever you wanted to do to him, then hex his bits to the moon and his head to Mars.” A shaky laugh. “That’s if you left anything alive to hex. I don’t think you would.”

No, I’d let him live. Just so I could see you do that for me.

“And it’s not bad enough that some Death Eater groped you and wanted to do worse than that. No, you had to go and take the curse off Ginny—the curse it’s my fault she was under in the first place!” A muffled thump, as though Ron had punched the wall. “I know all the arguments already. How I couldn’t’ve known it’d hurt her, how it would have been worse if I hadn’t done what I did. But I don’t care. The end result’s the same. You helped my sister, and now you’re under a curse, and it’s my fault. And I can’t even tell you I’m sorry, because you’re afraid of me. Or you would be, if you knew I was here.”

But I do know you’re here. You just don’t know I know. And I’m not afraid.

“I can say it at least, even if you won’t hear me. Neenie—” A brief, snorted laugh. “I always call you that when I’m not thinking about it. And you always yell at me for it. But it fits you. Not better than ‘Hermione,’ but different. Like it’s another side of you.” Another laugh, this one stronger. “And if you were awake, you’d be telling me to get on with it. Neenie, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t want you to get hurt. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt, but you least of all...”

Hermione caught her breath before she could stop herself.

“Uh-oh,” Ron muttered, and hasty footsteps started for the door.

“Ron, wait!” Hermione rolled over and sat up. “Please, don’t go!”

Ron froze with his hand on the doorknob. “I thought you were afraid,” he said without turning around.

“I was.” Hermione examined her feelings. “I still am, some. Just... not of you.”

“What’s wrong? I’m not good enough to be afraid of?”

“No!” Anger and amusement warred within her. Hermione doused them both with a mental bucket

of water and made her tone neutral. "Can you turn around, please? I hate talking to your back."

Ron turned slowly, glancing once at her before choosing a spot on the far wall to fix his eyes on. "How stupid did I sound?" he asked.

"Not stupid at all." Hermione sorted through all the words she knew, choosing carefully which ones to use. This might be one of the most important conversations she ever had. "Would you like to come sit down?"

"I'm fine here."

"Please?"

Ron looked at her again, his expression shading out of hostility into uncertainty. "You're really not afraid of me?"

Hermione slid down the bed and patted a spot on its bottom corner. "Come sit."

Ron watched her closely as she scooted back to her place. "I don't understand," he said, crossing to the bed and sitting down as she'd asked. "I thought you were afraid of everyone. Blokes, anyway. You won't even let Draco or Harry come near you."

Hermione nodded, swallowing against the memory of the stabbing fear through her heart at the sight and scent of her brothers.

"So why me?" Ron poked himself in the chest. "What's so special about me?"

"Two reasons." *Start with the easy one. He said it just a bit ago.* "One, you saved me. Your magic broke the spell on me. Without you, right now I'd be dead, or wishing I was." She looked up and smiled. "How can I be afraid of the person who saved my life?"

"It was an accident," Ron mumbled, looking away. "I didn't know what I was doing."

"Why did your magic find me?" Hermione countered. "Why not Ginny? She's your sister. She's the one you have the strongest bond with, the one you would have found if you'd just been flailing about blindly. You were looking for me, Ron. It wasn't any accident."

Ron's ears were starting to glow. "My breaking the spell was," he said, still staring at the floor beside the bed. "I got angry..."

"Because you saw what had happened to me. And because you saw that I didn't care. Because you..." Hermione stopped, her face heating up. "You do care," she finished, aware the words sounded stilted.

"Why don't you say what you mean?" Ron turned away from her and crossed his arms. "Or what I mean. Since you know everything about me already."

“I’d rather you say it.” Hermione knew Ron was trying to get her angry, knew that if she’d been her usual self it would have worked, but hearing what she thought he was saying to her was acting like a Cheering Charm on her.

I don’t think I could get angry right now if I wanted to.

“Say what?” Ron challenged, still looking at the door.

“More of what you were saying before. When you thought I was asleep.” Hermione sighed. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I wasn’t, but I didn’t want to frighten you.”

Ron looked over his shoulder at her, frowning. “Wasn’t that supposed to be the other way around?”

“Maybe.” Hermione shrugged. “Are you going to finish what you were saying, or should I tell you the other reason I’m not afraid of you?”

“You go on.” Ron hitched himself back around to face her again. “I can wait.”

“All right.”

You arse, Ron Weasley. Now I have to say it first.

“I never knew how to tell you this,” Hermione said after a few moments’ thought. “I suppose I was hoping you’d work it out on your own if I gave you enough hints. But you never did—and that’s my fault,” she added quickly, forestalling the imminent explosion from Ron. “I thought I was making it obvious, but now I understand we don’t see ‘obvious’ the same way.”

“Who? You and me?”

“Well, yes, but also boys and girls in general. A girl can think she’s being perfectly plain...”

“And we don’t see it at all,” Ron finished. “Sounds normal to me.” He grinned. “Come on, Hermione, you’ve studied with me. You know how long it takes me to catch onto things. What didn’t I get this time?”

His face ought to be worth remembering, even if this goes completely wrong every other way.

Hermione steeled herself up and looked directly at Ron. “I think I’m in love with you.”

Then she had to close her teeth around her lips to keep from laughing—Ron’s eyes appeared to be trying to get free of their sockets, and his mouth was halfway open as if he’d started to say something and choked before anything other than a strangled-sounding “Erk” could break loose.

I was right.

“Me?” Ron finally managed to say, after opening and closing his mouth several times. His eyes

were still very wide, but he'd lost his momentary resemblance to Luna. "Why me?"

"I don't know." Hermione looked down at her blanket-covered knees. "Maybe because you can always distract me from one of my bad moods by being silly, or by bringing up something I want to argue about. By the time I'm done arguing with you, or laughing with you, I'm not angry anymore."

"That's just being a friend," Ron objected. "Being Pride. We all do that."

"Then maybe it's because you like to flatter me about how smart I am—"

"It's not flattering you if it's true."

Hermione sighed. "Fine, you like to tell me how smart you *think* I am. But that doesn't mean you let me make your decisions or pick how you feel about things. And if you think I'm wrong or I'm being stupid, you tell me so. Not to hurt me, but because you think I'm worth your honest opinion."

"That's being a friend too. You do it for me all the time."

"And how else do you think love starts?" Hermione could feel her patience wearing thin. "Real love, not just being attracted to someone because they bat their eyelashes at you and they'll snog you anytime you want—"

"So you're saying I don't care about Lavender?"

"I am not saying that, and don't put words in my mouth!" *I should have known I could get angry if I tried. This is Ron I'm talking to, after all. But it won't help.* "This isn't getting us anywhere. Let's try something else."

Ron gave a curt nod.

"It's your turn to talk." Hermione fought to sound encouraging. "To go on with what you were saying before. I promise I won't laugh."

Ron looked away. "I don't even remember it anymore."

"Something about not wanting me to get hurt," Hermione prompted. "Or you could always go back to what you wanted to do to the person who..." She stalled on the words. "You know. Touched me."

"I want to kill him," Ron said in a monotone. "Except that might be over too fast. I want to beat his face in and break every bone in his hands, because he took advantage of you!" He looked up at her again, his eyes seething with anger. "He waited until you couldn't fight him, until you didn't know you *should* fight him. And he didn't care if he hurt you, only that he got what he wanted. No one who would do that to any girl should be running around free, but *you* ..." His hands clenched shut on the blankets of Hermione's bed.

Her heart pounding, Hermione slid slowly down the bed towards Ron.

“I want to hurt him,” Ron said, staring at the floor. “Make him apologize to you on bended knee, and make him mean it. And then I want to curse him so hard he’ll never even think about doing that to another girl, ever again.”

I like that. I like it a lot. Hermione reached out slowly, amazed at her own daring. *Now for the next part...*

Her hand touched Ron’s, sliding over it. Ron jerked his head around at the touch and nearly fell off the bed as he took in where she was sitting.

“I need to ask you a question, Ron,” Hermione said. “And I need an honest answer.”

Ron nodded slowly, blue eyes fixed on her face.

“Do you think I’m pretty?”

“Pretty?” Ron repeated, sounding confused. “Why?”

“Just answer. Please.”

“Well, you’re not ugly...”

“Oh, *thank* you.”

“Give me a chance, will you?” Ron glared at her. “Or is it another one of those questions like ‘do these robes make me look fat’ that there’s no right answer to?”

Hermione shook her head, chagrined with herself. “I’m sorry. Go on.”

“You probably won’t win any beauty contests,” Ron said frankly. “But I like to look at you. I like to watch your face change while you’re reading, and try to guess what you’re thinking about. I like how you come alive when you learn something new, when you do it faster and better than anyone else. I like how you play with your hair when you’re working on an essay, and how you smile when you’re thinking up a prank. Actually I like how you smile anytime. I wish you’d do it more.”

“If you keep saying things like that, I won’t be able to help it,” Hermione said weakly, amazed her hair hadn’t caught fire from the heat radiating off her face. “Ron, I never knew...”

Ron ducked his head. “I thought you’d think it was stupid,” he said to his knees. “You deserve a lot better than me.”

Hermione swatted him across the shoulder with her free hand. “I do not. Stop running yourself down.”

“I’m not. You said you wanted me to be honest.”

“About me. And you were.” Hermione squeezed his hand. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. It’s still true.”

“No, it is *not* !”

“Prove it,” Ron muttered, still staring at his legs.

“Gladly. Look at me.”

Ron turned and looked. “You’re Hermione,” he said after a few moments.

“Yes, I am. The same Hermione who’s been deathly afraid of every man who comes near her for the past three days. Except one.” Hermione let her gaze drop to their two hands, hers still covering Ron’s. “Except you.”

“That’s just because I was lucky enough to help you out—”

“Because you were looking for me,” Hermione cut him off. “Because you were scared for me, and angry for me when you saw what had happened. Angry enough to break what must have been a very powerful spell.”

“I’d’ve been just as angry if it’d happened to Ginny—”

“But you didn’t look for Ginny. You looked for me.”

Ron swallowed. “It’d never work,” he said feebly. “I can’t keep up with you. You’re better than I am at everything.”

“Not at chess, or solving a Rubik’s Cube, or fixing a watch,” Hermione reminded him. “Not at Quidditch. And not at planning a rescue mission.”

“What if I hurt you?” Ron met her eyes for an instant, then looked down at their hands. “What if I say something, or do something, stupid, and hurt you with it? You can’t tell me I won’t. We both know I will.”

“Then I’ll tell you you’re being stupid, and we’ll work together to fix it,” Hermione said calmly, belying the aggravation she was beginning to have to actively restrain. “Just like we will if I hurt you.”

“You—” Ron’s head came up fast. “You, hurt me?”

“It’s happened before. When I’m angry, when I’m looking for someone to take it out on. And we both know I’ll do it again, because it’s part of who I am.” Hermione sighed. “We wouldn’t be perfect together, Ron. Nobody is. But we can’t know if we’d be good or not unless we try.”

Ron looked back down at his hand, covered by hers. Slowly, he turned it over, until their palms

rested against each other. “I s’pose I can try,” he said. “I’ve tried lots of things.” He met her eyes and smiled. “I’m rubbish at most of them, but sometimes I find one I can do.”

Hermione answered the smile with one of her own. “I’ll help,” she promised, closing her fingers gently around his. “Just like always.”

Ron frowned. “Does that mean you’re going to draw up a timetable for snogging?”

“A *what?* ”

“It’s what you always do when you’re helping me study for exams...”

Hermione reached behind her with her free hand, snagged a pillow, and threw it at Ron. He caught it with his free hand, laughing, and tossed it back to the head of the bed. “Kidding, Hermione, I’m kidding, I swear...”

“You called me Neenie before.”

“I did?” Ron colored. “I did. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’re allowed now.”

Ron swallowed again. “You’re sure about this.”

“I am, yes...” Hermione’s heart sank as what this might mean occurred to her. “Ron, I understand if you’re not interested,” she said, starting to pull her hand away. “You can tell me, I won’t be upset. If you want to stay with Lavender—”

“Lavender?” Ron stared at her, not letting go of her hand. “You think this is about Lavender?”

“I don’t know what else it could be about! You’re acting as if you don’t want this—”

“Like hell I am!”

“That’s how it looks from here!”

“Then maybe you should try seeing it from where I am!” Ron pointed at the window. “I came in there ten minutes ago because no one would tell me anything about how you were. I was expecting to see you were alive, say a few things I wasn’t sure I was ready for you to hear, then leave again before you woke up and I scared you. Except you did wake up, and you heard me, and now you’re saying things to me I haven’t even dared to dream about...” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“I still remember kissing you in third year,” Hermione said softly. “After you said you’d take the curse off Draco.”

“I thought we agreed that never happened.”

“Fine, then I don’t remember it. But I just wanted you to know that I always have remembered the thing I don’t remember.”

“That wouldn’t even make sense if Luna said it.”

“Thank you. I think.”

They sat for a long moment in silence.

“If you really don’t want this, Ron, all you have to do is say so,” Hermione said finally.

“Hermione,” Ron began, then stopped. “I’m allowed to use the other? You won’t hit me?”

Hermione held back a giggle but couldn’t completely repress the smile. “I won’t hit you.”

“Thanks.” Ron smiled back, hesitantly. “I always liked calling you that. So I guess what I’m trying to say is…” He gulped. “Swear you won’t hit me?”

“Here.” Hermione offered him her other hand. “Hold onto this. Then I can’t.”

“Thanks.” Ron lifted their already joined hands to Hermione’s free one and closed both his around both hers. “Here goes nothing,” he said under his breath, then looked up and into her eyes, his hands’ grasp tightening. “I *do* want you, Neenie. More than anything. I just never dared admit it before. Because I was sure you’d never think about me as anything except the boy you had to rescue from Fred and George in the orchard.”

Hermione’s heart gave a terrific double thump, and heat spread out from her hands to engulf her entire body. “How long?” she asked faintly. “How long have you known?”

Ron grinned ruefully at her. “Since the day you rescued me from Fred and George in the orchard.”

“Really?”

Ron nodded. “Some part of me always knew. Or hoped. Or wished. Even before I understood about girls—not that I do now—but I always knew you were something special.” He squeezed her hands again. “What about you?”

Hermione smiled, finally able to let her true feelings show in her eyes. “What do you think?”

“Since the day…” Ron began.

“I rescued you…” Hermione continued.

“From Fred and George in the orchard!” they finished together, and broke down laughing.

Remus checked his watch. Forty minutes since Danger had told him Ron had overheard her and

Aletha's carefully planned conversation. Half an hour since he'd made a tactful withdrawal at the thump of feet on the bedroom floor.

I'd have been able to hear her from here if she called out or screamed, but I haven't. I've heard a few other things, most of which are only half-encouraging to a father's ears...

For the last fifteen minutes, though, he had heard nothing but silence.

I think it may be time for a bedroom check, Danger said.

Remus glanced down the hall at the closed door. **I don't know.**

Oh, go on. What's the worst that could happen?

I completely terrify her, undo any good that's been done, and set her even further back?

...pessimist.

You asked. Remus laid his hand on the doorknob and turned it. **In three, two, one...**

He swung the door open.

Ron lay sprawled on the bed, asleep. Neenie the calico cat, curled into a loose ball, slept on his chest. Her head was pillowed on his hand, and her tail draped across his wrist.

That, said Danger, **is the second cutest thing I have ever seen.**

Second?

Danger shot him a glimpse of a young man, sleeping on a couch with a small girl lying across him. It took Remus a few seconds to recognize his twenty-three-year-old self and the toddler Hermione. **You're trying to embarrass me, Mrs. Lupin, aren't you?**

Since your cure for embarrassment involves making sure no one can see how red your face is getting by hiding it with mine... absolutely.

Remus shut the door quietly, so as not to disturb the sleepers. **For that, you get a spanking.**

But I haven't even lit the Grail-shaped beacon!

You deserve it anyway.

Fine. And after the spankings—

Don't finish that sentence.

Oh, so you don't like it anymore?

Remus' reply to this was graphic, specific, and would have given the cubs nightmares for months.

Ginny looked up from her book.

It's quiet. She let her eyes roam the room. *Too quiet.* A quick sniff. *But something sure smells good...*

"Boo," said a voice in her ear, as arms draped over her shoulders to hug her.

"Harry!" She would have jumped off the couch had he not been holding her on it. "Don't scare me like that!"

Harry laughed, leaning down over her shoulder. "Don't let me," he challenged.

"Meh." Ginny stuck out her tongue at him.

"Temptress." Harry gave her cheek a quick peck, then straightened up. "But what's this?"

"What's what?" Ginny tried to turn her head to see what Harry was looking at, but he seemed to be holding her ear between his fingers. "Harry..."

"When did you last wash behind your ears?" Harry said in a scolding tone. A tweak at her ear made her yip, and his hand came into her field of vision holding a Sickle. "Look what's been stuck there and you never even noticed." He handed it to her. "Go buy yourself a washcloth."

Ginny accepted the Sickle and flipped it in her palm. "How did you do that?"

"Just putting my Christmas presents to good use." Harry came around the end of the little couch Ginny was sitting on and plopped down beside her. "Padfoot and Moony got me a book on Muggle magic. Sleight of hand, misdirection, illusion. Like when I was talking about your ear, you were so focused on what I was saying that you never even noticed..." He took the Sickle back from her and tucked it under his last two fingers. "What I had in my hand."

"I couldn't see what you had in your hand," Ginny pointed out. "I couldn't even see your hand."

"That's called forcing. Making your audience do something that they think is their free choice, but that you've determined already."

"What have you determined about me?" Ginny asked lazily.

"Hmm." Harry leaned back, rubbing his bottom lip thoughtfully with the Sickle. "You're a very bad girl who likes to do things with me that would make our mothers all scream?"

"You've mistaken me for my evil sock-stealing boy-snogging house-elf twin Virginia again."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Let me try one more time." Harry picked up the Sickle between thumb and

forefinger, closed his other hand around it, and made it disappear, then reappear. “You’re a perfect little angel who would never do anything her mummy didn’t like.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Ginny swung her legs up onto the couch and across Harry’s lap. “So this Muggle magic stuff. Don’t you sometimes need an assistant? Or a partner?”

“I’d rather have a partner, if you’re offering.”

“I’m offering.”

“All right, we can start with the coin tricks. They’re the easiest. Then we can try some cards, and then maybe some stuff with ropes.” Harry took Ginny’s hand in his and laid the Sickle in her palm. “Curve your hand just a little, until you can feel its edges and it won’t fall out, but not so much that someone would be able to tell you’re holding something in there if all they saw was the back of your hand. That’s called palming. Some people can do it with cards too, but I think your hands are probably too small...”

They were still practicing nearly an hour later when Meghan stuck her head in the room. “Have you seen Ron?” she asked. “Your mum’s looking for him, Ginny; she wants to know if he’s done with his homework for the holidays.”

“Knowing him, he’s not,” said Ginny. “But no, I haven’t seen him. Harry?”

“Not for a while. He was going upstairs, the last I saw.”

“All right, I’ll try up there. Thanks.” Meghan skipped out.

Ginny flipped the Sickle into the air, caught it, and made it disappear. “What would Ron be doing upstairs at this hour?” she wondered aloud. “He doesn’t do homework unless Mum or Hermione nag him about it, but Mum’s been too busy, and Hermione...” She trailed off, rubbing the scar on her arm. “Why did she do it, Harry?” she asked, a few seconds of pain and terror replaying themselves in her mind. “It isn’t fair. She shouldn’t be punished for what happened to me.”

“I actually wanted to talk to you about that.” Harry’s carefully casual tone, and the sudden eddy of uncertainty and outright fear in his scent, made Ginny look up. He was studying a frayed place on one of the couch’s cushions between them, his fingers working at the hole.

“Here.” Ginny offered him the Sickle. “Stop destroying the furniture.”

“But it’s an ugly couch. It has to die.”

“We’ll kill it later.” Ginny removed Harry’s fingers from the cushion and closed them around the coin. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Meghan climbed the stairs towards the third floor, frowning. Ron hadn’t been in any of the rooms

on the first or second floors where he might possibly have a reason to be, and though it was barely possible that he might have needed something from his own parents' bedroom, it was far more likely that he was in or near a different room altogether...

Which would be very, very bad.

Her head came above the floor level, and she waved at Mama Letha, who was sitting outside the door of what had been Moony and Danger's room with a book. Mama waved back and beckoned her closer, tapping her lips with a finger. Meghan nodded and approached on tiptoe. *What is it?* she asked with her hands.

Did I tell you Danger and I had a plan to help Hermione? Mama Letha asked in return, setting her book on the floor beside her chair.

Meghan shook her head. *Did you? Did you try it? Did it work?*

Mama Letha smiled. *See for yourself.* She reached around and opened the door of the bedroom.

Meghan peered in, and her eyes widened. *But... I thought...* She couldn't articulate what she'd thought with her hands, or even with words, and finally settled for a silent, arms-flung-wide *Huzzah!*

Yes, indeed. Mama Letha shut the door gently, smiling wider than before. *Now, I want you to go and do what you do best.*

Tell everybody? Meghan bounced on her toes, grinning. *Tell everybody Hermione's going to be all right?*

Tell them that she's on her way. Yes. Mama Letha hugged her close once. *You may want to start with Ron's parents. I think they deserve to see this.*

Meghan nodded eagerly and skipped down the hall, dancing a few steps to the jubilant chant in her thoughts. *Hermione's getting better, Hermione's getting better...*

And she finally figured out about Ron. Took her long enough.

She shrugged. Not everyone could be like her and Neville.

I think I'll tell him second—no, third. Draco and Luna should know right after Ron's parents, Moony and Danger will already know if Danger was in on the plan, and I don't think Harry and Ginny will want me bothering them again so soon, not even for this...

Harry slid the Sickle back and forth across his palm, still not meeting Ginny's eyes. "I think you know why Hermione took the curse off you," he said. "You just don't want to think about it."

Ginny shook her head. "I remember Luna telling me something about it, but not what. I was too

busy taking in that I'd been bitten by a werewolf but I wasn't going to *be* a werewolf to listen to much of anything else." She laughed once. "Except that Ron gave me the headache that stopped me transforming. That, I heard just fine."

"And you slapped him for it when you saw him." Harry chuckled. "Draco told me."

"It felt good. But to get back to what we started talking about, no, I don't know why Hermione took the curse off me. Other than to stop me being a werewolf, which is nice of her but not worth her being what amounts to half of one. I'm the alpha now. I'm supposed to take the worst of what comes at us. So if you know, would you please tell—Harry, why are you blushing?"

"I'm not."

"Your face is turning red. What else would you call that?"

"Er." Harry closed his hand around the Sickle. "Ginny, I don't know if I should be the one telling you this."

Ginny put her hand over his, meeting his eyes as he looked up at her. "I won't laugh. Tell me."

"It's not laughing I'm worried about." Harry's smile was strained, and Ginny sensed he was holding himself in place on the couch with willpower alone, that left to his own devices he'd have been bolting away from here as fast as possible. "It's—there's a question I have to ask you at some point, and I don't think either of us is really ready for it, but with the war getting worse and the way the prophecies make it sound, I might have to ask it soon, and I hate having things not be settled, so I may as well just ask now and let you say no..."

"How do you know I'm going to say no?" Ginny asked, amazed that her words could come out so calmly and her hands stay still on Harry's while her insides were quivering in two directions at once with anticipation.

"Because it's too much to ask you. Too much for you to give."

"Why don't you let me decide that." Ginny stroked a small circle on the back of Harry's wrist. "Ask me."

"All right." Harry freed his hand from Ginny's and turned it over, opening it to reveal the Sickle. "Watch." His fingers closed over the Sickle again, and his other hand swooped in and plucked out —

Ginny inhaled sharply. The object in Harry's hand was still round and still silver, but its similarity to a Sickle ended there. Sickles were solid disks, not an intricately twisted rim of metal around empty space. And Sickles didn't usually cause the person holding them to look at one with a mix of hope, terror, and anger on his face.

Only one of those had better be because of me...

“I went and looked,” Harry said, lowering his hands back into his lap. Ginny had a feeling it was to keep her from seeing how hard he was trembling. “Did you know Danger keeps a copy of all her prophecies?”

“I didn’t.”

“Now you do. So I looked them up. Two of them say something about the ‘lion’s line’. Another one calls it the ‘founder’s line’. But they all say the same thing about it. It has to continue.” Harry was getting redder by the second. “And that needs, well, it needs...”

“Two people. A man and a woman.” Ginny shut her lips tightly over a laugh at the thought of Harry having to explain the facts of life to her. “I do have six brothers, Harry. Mum told me how it works before I was eight years old.”

“Lucky you.” Harry grinned shakily. “Draco and I were totally innocent until we were thirteen.”

“Totally innocent? You?”

Harry laughed. “Well, maybe not totally.”

“Maybe?” Ginny teased. “Don’t forget how long I’ve known you, Harry Potter. You were never innocent.”

“About that, I was. For a while.” Harry frowned. “How did we start talking about this?”

“You brought up the prophecies. How they say that a line has to continue.”

“Oh, right. Except it’s not just ‘a line,’ Ginny. It’s the lion’s line. Gryffindor. And there’s only one person—well, two, now, but Moony can’t. So that only leaves one.” He looked straight at her. “It leaves me.”

Ginny nodded slowly, twisting her own hands to keep them from shaking and giving her away.

“I didn’t want to do this now.” Harry scrubbed the palm of his free hand against his jeans. “It’s too soon, for both of us. Even in the wizarding world, we’re still kids. We shouldn’t have to think about this yet.”

“But war makes everyone grow up too fast,” Ginny murmured. “War makes us do things sooner, because we might not get another chance.”

“Yeah.” Harry reached for her hand. Ginny met him halfway. “If we weren’t in a war, I still think I would have done this someday. But we are, and you nearly died a couple days ago, and I don’t know what I would have done if you had. I want to think I’d still fight, I’d find some other way to fulfill the prophecies and beat Voldemort, but I honestly don’t know.”

“I do.” Ginny pressed his hand. “And you would. You’d still have the Pack and the Pride to help you, and you’re a warrior, Harry, a champion. With or without me, you’d keep fighting.”

“But I fight much better with you...” Harry stopped. “That came out wrong.”

“I know what you meant.”

“Good. Explain it to me.”

They both laughed.

“What I’m trying to say is, the only thing I’m sorry about is how soon this is,” Harry said when they’d got their breaths back. “It’s going to seem like I’m rushing things, or like I’m only doing it because of the prophecies, and that isn’t it at all. And I don’t want you to feel like you have to answer a certain way, either. If you don’t want this, really and truly want it, then tell me so. I don’t ever want to push you into anything you’re not ready for, anything that would hurt you.” He caressed her fingers. “Because that would be losing the war just as much as if Voldemort killed me tomorrow.”

“Which had better not happen.” Ginny heard the quaver in her voice and swallowed to clear it before she went on. “Go ahead and ask, Harry. I’m ready.”

“You’re sure?” Harry gave her a searching gaze, his nostrils slightly flared. Ginny knew he was analyzing her scent and her posture as much as her words, just as she was his.

And he means what he’s said. He wants the answer that he wants, both for himself and for what it would mean for ending the war, but even more he wants me to be happy.

Maybe I can make it all happen at once.

“I’m sure.”

“All right, then.” Harry slid off the couch and went to one knee at her feet. “Ginny, if we both feel the same when we’re of age, and if your parents say you can...”

Ginny couldn’t quite stifle a giggle. *If my parents say I can—how romantic...*

“If you don’t mind?” Harry glared. “This isn’t easy, you know.”

“Sorry.” Ginny got herself under control. “Carry on.”

Harry scowled. “I lost my place.”

“If my parents say I can,” Ginny prompted.

“Right.” Harry took a deep breath. “Because I want this war to be over, and because I can’t imagine anyone else I’d rather ask this question...” He held up the intricate silver ring he’d made appear a few minutes before. “Ginevra Weasley, when we’re both ready for it, will you marry me?”

For the first time in her life, Ginny appreciated the true meaning of the word ‘torn’.

It really feels like my heart’s being ripped apart. I want this, or I think I do, but Harry said it himself—we’re still kids, he’s a year and a half from being seventeen and I have even longer! Besides, most people date for more than six months before they decide to get married, and most people don’t have the fate of the wizarding world hanging on what they say...

But most people don’t have a partner this worried about what asking this will do to them, either. Ginny looked at Harry, made herself truly look at him, truly listen to what he’d said to her. He’s angry at himself for having to ask this of me. He almost wishes I’d say no, because he knows how wrong things could go for both of us if I say yes because I’m a silly romantic girl or because I feel I have to, for the sake of the war. But at the same time, he wants me to say yes, because...

Her cheeks flamed as she recognized the musky, dark overtone in Harry’s scent.

Nice to know he appreciates me.

But I’ve always known that. And he appreciates all of me, not just my looks. We’re friends—we’ve been friends for much longer than we’ve been going together—and we complement each other well, make up for one another’s weaknesses. Plus we like to spend time together, to laugh and talk and work side by side. I can’t imagine that will change as we grow older.

So I might as well say what I want to. Say what he wants me to.

This may be about saving the world, but it’s about us first.

“When it’s time,” Ginny said softly, looking into Harry’s eyes. “When we both agree—and our parents, too—that it’s time... yes, Harry. Yes. I’ll marry you.”

Incredulous joy filled Harry’s face and scent, and Ginny felt her own rising to meet it.

I’m crazy. I am out of my mind. I’m fourteen years old and I’ve just agreed to get married.

Gently, Harry lifted her left hand and slid the ring onto her finger.

But we can’t let a little thing like insanity stop us from winning the war, now can we?

Besides, Mum and Dad won’t let me do anything too crazy.

I hope.

Then Harry was standing up, and pulling her to her feet and into his arms, and Ginny abandoned thought in favor of kissing her fiancé as though she’d never get another chance.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 36: Secrets, Songs, and Silly Duels (Arc 6)

“...have to tell them *sometime* !”

Meghan paused in the act of tapping on the door. She couldn't recall ever seeing Luna truly angry, but the voice coming from inside the room was certainly Luna's, and equally certainly it was angry.

What are they talking about?

“There just hasn't been a really good time, you know?” Draco snapped back, his angry tones far more familiar to Meghan's ears. She'd been on the receiving end of them many times. “And this isn't so hot either! Hagrid's just died, Hermione still can't look at a boy without screaming, and you want me to tell them—*that* ? Talk about trying to grab all the attention for myself!”

“That isn't what you'd be doing and we both know it, Draco—”

Meghan took advantage of Luna's pause for breath to knock on the door. “Anyone in there?” she called, breathing hard to make it sound as if she'd just run up and hadn't had time to listen to anything. “It's good news! Open up!”

Draco pulled the door open. “Good news?” he said. “Moldywarts dropped dead of a heart attack?”

“I wish. No, but it's just about as good.” Meghan bounced on her toes. “Hermione's starting to get better!”

“That is good news,” Luna said, standing up behind Draco, who seemed caught between hope and skepticism. “How do you know?”

Meghan giggled. “Come upstairs and see. It's cute.”

“Never have a little sister,” Draco remarked over his shoulder to Luna. “They're more trouble than they're worth.”

“I wasn't planning to.” Luna slid past Draco into the hallway. “Yours is enough for me.” She hugged Meghan briefly, then set off down the hall for the stairs.

“So what's happening up there?” Draco asked Meghan, falling in behind Luna.

“I told you, you have to see it!”

“Typical,” Draco muttered, but he didn't really sound angry this time.

He did earlier, though. And there's something he hasn't told us.

Meghan made a mental note to tell Harry what she'd heard. It wasn't tattling, she rationalized, because Harry was the alpha and he needed to know these things.

Besides, I'll be surprised if he hasn't noticed it already.

Her world restored to equilibrium, Meghan danced down the hall to Luna and back again to Draco, humming a tune of her own making.

Hermione's getting better, Hermione's getting better...

Neenie awakened slowly, stretching her limbs and tail, yawning in one of those glorious gapes which served both to cow any other upstart felines in the vicinity and to gather the scents about her. Bedroom, human self, cat self, and—

Her hackles half-raised, then lowered again, and she began to purr.

Yes, she soothed her indignant side, yes, it's a boy. But it's not just any boy. It's a boy who cares about me. One who would never, ever hurt me.

She worked her paws back and forth in a tread pattern on her sleeping platform, purring louder. *He came to find me when I was in trouble. And then he came again when I was unhappy. He knows how to make me feel better and he always will.*

“Ow,” mumbled the platform, shifting under her. “Gerroff.”

Of course, he's still himself.

I don't think I'd like him so much if he weren't.

Neenie stood up and picked her way up Ron's chest to his face. Lying down with her paws tucked under her, she leaned forward and nuzzled just behind his ear.

“Gah!” Ron's eyes popped open. “Imup—huh?” He blinked at his unfamiliar surroundings.

Hi. Neenie added a little trill to her purr. Remember me?

“Oh.” Ron focused sleepily on her. “Right. Came up to see you. You don't hate me.” One of his big hands came up and stroked clumsily down her back, once, twice, three times. Neenie rose to meet it, thrilling in her total lack of fear, and in the quiet and hesitant feelings which were waking in her instead.

“C'n I—” A huge yawn interrupted Ron. “—sleep a bit more?” he finished when he could speak again. “Haven't been, much, last few nights. And we're back to school on Monday.”

Neenie nodded and curled back down into a loose ball, finding the curve of Ron's collarbone and snuggling against it.

Back to school. The thought no longer inspired the absolute terror it had a few hours before, but it was far from the joyous hymn Neenie's mind usually trumpeted. *What will people have heard? What will they know? What will they think, when they see how I've changed?*

"Night," Ron muttered, his eyes already shut.

And I'm borrowing trouble again. Neenie replied with a pulsing purr and closed her own eyes. *I'll find out what people think when I see them. Not sooner. And I haven't been sleeping well either.*

I need this.

The rise and fall of Ron's chest, and her own soft purring in time with it, lulled her to sleep.

Draco sighed, turning away from the door. "I suppose this means we can't kill him," he said to Harry.

Harry shook his head. "Not even torture," he said. "Pity. Moony's been sharpening up some of Danger's knitting needles for when Hermione finally got a boyfriend."

"Yeah. And Padfoot was going to read him some of those sappy stories from that Bowdlerized Beedle the Bard Letha got him for a joke that one Christmas."

Harry winced. "That's a little harsh, don't you think?"

"You're right. Maybe only half of one. But the point's moot now anyway." Draco looked over his shoulder at boy and cat. "If that was anybody else, it'd be too sappy for words."

"But as it is..." Harry came to look as well. "Admit it," he said softly. "If it had to be someone, you're glad it was him."

"Well. Yeah."

"Ha." Harry grinned. "After all these years, I've finally got you to admit Ron isn't so bad."

"I wasn't finished." Draco held up a hand. "As I was saying, I'm glad it was him. Because him, I know I can intimidate."

Harry slumped against the doorframe. "Why do I even bother?" he asked the ceiling.

"The next time one of our children does something in a normal fashion, remind me to make certain they're not ill," Molly said to Arthur downstairs.

"Do you disapprove, love?" Arthur was watching Ginny, who had most of the female membership of the Order gathered around her and admiring her ring.

“No, of course not. Not at this point, anyway.”

“At this point?”

Danger coughed discreetly beside them. “I think what she means,” she said when the Weasleys both turned to face her, “is that unless we’re misinterpreting these prophecies entirely, it will have to go much farther than a promise. And soon.”

“As soon as we want the war ended, that is.” Arthur nodded. “I’ve suspected as much for some time.”

“You have?” said both women in chorus.

Arthur chuckled. “It’s simple common sense. You-Know-Who is dedicated to death, hatred, all that Dark foolishness. How else can we oppose him except with life and love? Even before I’d seen your prophecies, Danger, I could see what was happening between Ginny and Harry, and personally I’m delighted. I hadn’t thought to see her married before most of her brothers, but if any of our children will be mature enough at such a young age to handle it well, she will.”

“Not before she’s sixteen,” Molly said, pointing a finger at Danger firmly. “That, I won’t budge on. And if she changes her mind, decides it isn’t for her...”

“Harry would never let her be pushed into anything.” Danger glanced at her Pack-son, currently enduring the congratulations of the Order’s wizard contingent, several of whom had their mostly red heads together over a scroll that looked suspiciously like a plan for a stag night of epic proportions. “He’s still not quite sure that she’s saying yes because she wants to, and not because it will help to end the war.”

“To end the war,” Molly repeated, her eyes on her daughter. “She’s never known war, you realize. Not until last year. Neither had Ron, nor Fred and George. Percy was just old enough towards the end of the first war to know that he should be afraid. But Bill and Charlie understood what war means. What it does to people, to families like ours.”

She closed her eyes tightly, but one tear still escaped. “That’s why I knew I’d never keep them away from the fighting in this war. Why I knew I had to fight it myself. Because I remember the pictures in the newspaper, pictures of children no older than mine, tortured and murdered for the crime of having no magic. So when I consider that all which is being asked of me in return for a chance to end this evil is to see my daughter married younger than I had expected, to a fine young man who puts her wishes ahead of his own... it seems a smaller price to pay than it otherwise might.”

She pressed her fingers against the bridge of her nose, then opened her eyes and focused on Danger. “Still. Not before she’s sixteen.”

“I doubt we could get Harry to agree to a date sooner than that in any case.” Danger smiled knowingly. “He remembers the way Meghan used to howl in the night, and he’s hardly eager to be

the person who's expected to get up and take care of the reason for the howling."

"Will he be?" Arthur asked. "Winky's elflets are due at the end of the month, and they mature faster than human children. They'd be ready to go out to service in a year and a half to two years. Normally, one belongs to the father's owners and one to the mother's, but with Dobby being his own master..."

Danger snickered. "You haven't seen him around Draco lately, have you?"

"Technically his own master," Arthur amended. "In any case, he'll have the choice of where to send one of his children, and I'm sure he'd be only too happy to make sure Harry and Ginny have the help they'll need. And house-elves do wonders with babies."

"Things to know for next time," Danger muttered, pretending to write a note on her hand and making the Weasleys laugh.

"Will there be a next time for you?" asked Molly. "I know how deeply Aletha was hurt by losing Marcus."

"True, but she's not one to let pain stop her forever." Danger looked over at her friend, who was telling the group of witches around Ginny something that made them all laugh and Ginny blush. "Besides, she and Sirius are both young for magical folk. If we all survive the war... yes. I think there will be a next time."

"Then..." Arthur plucked three flutes of champagne off a platter as Winky carried it past and handed two of them to the women. "Here's to next time."

"To next time," chorused Molly and Danger, as the three glasses clinked together.

The conversation in the witches' group had somehow migrated to the topic of the full moon just past, and the escapes wide and narrow the various sets of Order members had had from the werewolves they'd gone out to battle. Tonks was telling her and Charlie's story yet again.

"This girl came out of nowhere, I swear. Jumped onto the second one's back and started strangling it with what looked like a necklace. It howled something awful—of course, when we got a decent look later, we realized the necklace was silver. Heavy, too, with all those coins strung on it. She must have been to a fancy dress ball lately. In any case, she kept the second one busy until we could get the first one caged, but it got its claws into her leg near the end. She is going to be all right, Letha?" Tonks looked up at the older witch. "I know you saw her."

"She'll be fine," Aletha assured the lime-haired Auror, and the group in general. "The wound was still fresh, and we were able to clean it and heal it as well as werewolf-inflicted wounds ever do heal. She and her parents have been warned about possible side effects, but overall she's doing very well. But the necklace you mentioned... she had it with her when you brought her in, and something about it caught my attention. It wasn't just a fancy dress piece." She turned to look at

Ginny. “Was it?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Healer,” said Ginny coolly.

“I’m talking about a jinxed necklace.” Aletha folded her arms. “Not a lethal jinx, or even a particularly bad one, but this piece of metal had definitely had magic laid on it. More than that, it was magic done by a person I know. Still have no idea?”

“Why would you think I would?” Ginny asked, putting an arm around Meghan, whose shoulders were starting to shake suspiciously. “I have no reason to jinx Cho Chang’s necklace.”

Aletha raised an eyebrow. “Interesting that you know her name. I never mentioned it.”

“It came to me when Tonks mentioned the necklace was made of coins,” Ginny said without a pause. “Harry bought Cho a necklace like that for Christmas. I helped him pick it out.”

Several of the women snickered. Aletha’s other eyebrow joined its companion. “And you expect me to believe this.”

“It’s true.”

Two sets of brown eyes met for a long moment. Finally, Aletha gave a little nod, and Ginny smiled. They both looked away at the same time.

“That’s enough of that,” said Hestia Jones, pulling a little book from her pocket. “We need to tell the bride-to-be’s fortune, to be sure we have warning to keep any bad luck away from her!”

The witches all exclaimed and crowded around, and Ginny’s quick signs to Luna and Meghan—*keep quiet, tell you later*—went unnoticed by anyone else in the crush.

“It’s nice of you to shield Hermione like that,” said Luna later when the girls were alone.

“It’s not Hermione I’m worried about.” Ginny plopped onto her own bed with a sigh of relief. “It’s Cho.”

“Cho?” Meghan wrinkled up her face as if the name tasted bad. “Why? After what she did—”

“That’s just it.” Ginny rolled over to face her Pridemates. “What she did. Think about it. If she hadn’t betrayed us, Harry would never have been at the Ministry, and neither would anyone else. And a lot of things never would have happened the way they did.”

Meghan’s eyes went wide. “Marcus,” she half-whispered.

Ginny nodded grimly. “If your mum found out about that…”

Meghan drew a finger across her lips, sealing them. Luna did the same. “Healer Letha will get

better faster if she thinks everyone who was responsible for Marcus dying has been punished," she said. "And they have. But I don't know if she'd think what we did to Cho was enough."

"Which is why she's not going to find out." Ginny poked her finger through a hole in her duvet. "She got the necklace off awfully fast, didn't she? Cho, I mean."

"Hermione made the jinx very specific," Meghan said. "As soon as Cho learned how to care for other people more than herself, she could get it off."

"She probably knew it already, then." Ginny's ring snagged on the edge of the hole, and she pulled it free. "She just needed a reminder." She glanced up at Luna. "Do you know anything about her? I mean, have you..."

"Seen anything?" Luna shook her head. "She was never in any of my visions. Not even when she gave us away to Umbridge. Either she eats a lot of shroudberryes—they make you invisible to scrying and Seers—or she isn't very important to the future."

"I like the second one better." Ginny twisted her ring on her finger. "For all I care, she can stay home and be invisible the rest of the war. We'll win it without her."

And she can never give us away, and get my father nearly killed and Meghan's little brother actually killed, again.

Not to mention, she can stay away from Harry.

Ginny licked her lips, letting her best Lynx smile grow on her face.

From my Harry.

Mine for good, soon enough.

"Two declarations of love in one day... it's something in the water," Remus said, closing the door of his and Danger's temporary bedroom behind him. "Has to be."

Danger drew her wand, conjured a glass, and filled it. "Have a drink?" she suggested, holding it out to him.

Remus laughed. "Do I really need it?"

"You tell me." Danger set the glass on the bureau, planted her hands on the small of her back, and stretched luxuriously. "Do you?"

"No." Remus crossed the room in two strides and slid his arm inside the curve of her spine. "I don't believe I do."

A few moments later, a tentative knock sounded on their door.

Go away, Remus grumbled mentally, his mouth being occupied. **We're busy.**

Don't be rude. Danger freed her lips. "Just a moment," she called.

"We can come back," answered Ron's voice.

We, is it? "No, it's all right," Remus seconded, getting his arms loose. **You're thinking what I'm thinking.**

You know perfectly well I am. Get under the bed. You need an excuse to look that flushed.

What about you? Remus objected, even as he went to hands and knees and scooted to the bedside.

Let me deal with me. Danger picked up the glass of water on her way to the door and doused herself with its contents. **There. Dealt.**

Remus stuck his head under the bed to be sure his snickering was inaudible as the door opened.

"Hello, Ron—" Danger's voice broke off abruptly, and her mind slammed shut in surprise. "And company," she finished. "You're feeling better, I see."

A moment's pause, then a set of quiet thumps and a pattering sound. Remus occupied himself pairing up the shoes which had been kicked under the bed in the last few days. *Don't get your hopes up*, he reminded himself. *This may not be what it sounds like.*

Gentle pressure against his side, as though some small creature were nuzzling him, coincided with a quizzical trill. A scent as of parchment and sweet spice intruded through the overwhelming smell of dust.

Trust paws before eyes, eyes before ears, and nose before all. It had been a saying in one of the books Sirius had studied his Animagus form from, and Remus had always remembered it when he thought about the foggy memories of his full moon nights. Now, half-crouched under a dusty bed in Sirius' old home, its truth came back stronger than ever.

I know this scent. And I know what it means.

I have been granted one more miracle, in a life which was already full of them.

He crawled backward two paces, sat up, and brushed the dust out of his hair. The cat crouched by his side blinked rapidly and sneezed.

"Sorry," Remus said, swallowing against his own urge to sneeze.

Neenie inclined her head in acceptance of the apology.

Tentatively, Remus extended a hand, his fingers curled loosely so that the knuckles were presented to Neenie. She sniffed at them, then rubbed her cheek against them, and Remus felt the

beginnings of a purr through her jawbone before she moved away.

She can stand to be near me, even touch me. A day ago, a few hours, this would not have been possible.

Neenie's form blurred, and then the human Hermione crouched before him in her nightdress. Her breath caught, and Remus scented sudden fear on her. "Don't rush," he said, though inwardly he longed to be able to hold her and comfort her. "Don't rush, Kitten, don't push too far too soon, you'll only set yourself back—"

"No," Hermione breathed. "Not now."

"What do you mean?" Remus asked, his heart speeding up—she can talk to me, even sit next to me, this is a miracle—

"Now that I can fight the fear, I have to." Hermione glanced over her shoulder at Ron, who stood near the door watching her with all his worry and hope for her clearly visible on his face. "I have to teach myself to trust again. And I don't have a lot of time, if I'm going back to school with everyone else on Monday."

"You don't have to go back," Danger said, moving into Hermione's line of sight. "If anyone could stand to lose a few days, my love, it's you. And you won't go, if Letha thinks you're not ready."

Hermione nodded meekly. "But I have to start being strong somewhere," she said. "And..." She looked back at Remus, and the fear scent billowed from her again, then receded, replaced by the same love and longing Remus felt on his own part. "I think this is a good place."

One of her hands lifted slowly from the floor and reached towards Remus.

Hardly daring to breathe, Remus mirrored his Kitten's movements.

Their fingers brushed, then interlaced, then clasped. Hermione shuddered, but her eyes were bright. "I can," she whispered. "I can again. I'm still afraid, but it won't stop me now. I won't let it."

The clasp of her fingers, the conflicts in her scent, and above all his knowledge of his daughter told Remus that she wanted nothing more than to throw herself into his arms and cling to him, to let him shield her from the world and its hurts.

But she's smart. She knows that would still be too much, too soon.

She's strong enough for this—I wonder—

He shifted his weight from his knees back to his feet and untwined his fingers from Hermione's, though he kept his palm against hers. A moment later, he stood as Moony the lion, his paw dwarfing Hermione's hand.

“Oh!” Hermione gave a breathless little laugh, then scrambled forward and threw her arms around his neck, burying her face in his mane. Moony lifted one paw and pressed it awkwardly around her, rumbling in her ear in a lion’s purr.

This will do. Until she is completely well again.

He pulled back enough to press his nose to the top of her head.

“Now you are a lioness...”

Across the room, Danger pulled a tissue from her pocket. “It’s dusty in here,” she said, holding it out to Ron without looking at him. “Don’t let it get to you too much.”

“Thanks,” Ron said a trifle croakily, taking the tissue. “I won’t.”

Monday dawned early, with cheerful shouts and the banging shut of trunks. The Ministry, having decided Harry Potter’s safety and that of his friends was a legitimate priority after all, was sending cars to take them all to the station, so the only necessary logistical task was that of getting everyone and everyone’s belongings out of the house in time.

“Only.” Ha. Sirius glared a bickering Meghan and Harry into silence. *I’d rather organize a raid any day. At least then I’d get to curse something when I was done.*

“Ron!” called Ginny from the top of the stairs. “Catch!”

Ron intercepted the item she’d tossed to him as neatly as Sirius had expected for the Gryffindor Keeper (unseasoned in the post as he might be), then looked at it curiously. “What do I need this for?” he asked, unlatching the top of the cloth-lined, wicker cat carrier.

“Make way,” called Fred from somewhere upstairs, though precisely where was beyond Sirius’ sight. “Make way for Her Royal Catness, the Princess Neenie!”

“That means commoners shove off!” George seconded.

Amid laughter and raspberries, the Princess made her entrance, balancing delicately on the twins’ uplifted Beaters’ bats. She sized up the scene in the hall for a moment, then leapt.

Neville, tying his shoe three-quarters of the way up the stairs, was her first stop. Next was Draco, leaning across the railing halfway down to say something to Luna in the hall below. Harry turned away from a last sniping comment to Meghan just in time to receive a full-grown cat to the chest, and Neenie springboarded across the front hall to land in the cat carrier Ron was still holding open.

Those who were not massaging bruised stomachs or claw-pierced backs burst into applause.

“Showoff,” Draco grumbled.

Neenie hissed briefly at him, then returned to trampling the lining of the carrier into a shape she liked better.

Sirius grinned and went across to Ron. “Take care with that cat you’ve got,” he said. “You know she’s one-of-a-kind.”

“Yes, sir.” Ron set the carrier down to shake Sirius’ hand. “I will.”

Sirius bent to rub Neenie’s ears goodbye and let her sniff his fingers in return, then turned to find Harry. He had something special to give his godson.

Now that he’s finally stopped baiting his sister, that is. Wish I were keeping one of these—I might be able to watch him at school and make sure he’s not doing it there too...

The Great Hall was draped in black that night, and Professor Dumbledore rose before the meal began with his glass in his hand. “In memory of a good and gentle man who gave his life to help friends,” he said. “Hogwarts’ second casualty of this Second War. Rubeus Hagrid.”

“Rubeus Hagrid,” repeated the school, raising their glasses in response.

Harry and the Pride, Hermione riding Ron’s shoulder as Neenie, had no sooner reached the Gryffindor common room than they were besieged with questions.

“How’d it happen?”

“When was it?”

“Who’s going to teach Care of Magical Creatures?”

“Were you there?”

“Did you see?”

“Can you tell us about it? The *Prophet* barely had anything!”

Neenie mewed anxiously, treading her claws through Ron’s robes. He winced and lifted her down into his arms.

“*Shut up!*” Harry bellowed in the voice he used for Quidditch practice, silencing the room.

“There’s not a lot I can tell you,” he went on in a more normal tone. “But I can tell you about the funeral.” Ginny squeezed his arm from behind, and he brushed a finger against her hand before continuing. “That was yesterday.”

The Hagrids had lived in a little village called Wagons Cottage, and it was there, beside his father, that Rubeus Hagrid was laid to rest on this cloudy Sunday in January. Madame Maxime, her veil-draped hat putting Harry in mind of a mourning barge, stood silently beside Fleur, as though she had shed her tears already and now could only wonder at the pain that love had brought her.

Harry thought, on the whole, that Hagrid would have been proud of the turnout. The half-giant's warm heart had won him friends in many places. What with the Order, the staff of Hogwarts, the former students whom he had helped through detentions or tight spots, and the other rare animal specialists who had respected his knowledge of the creatures in his care on the castle's grounds (if not always his methods of teaching his students about them), there was quite a crush around the gravesite, even accounting for its unusual size.

Dumbledore had given the eulogy, making a point that Hagrid had saved several young women from falling prey to the Death Eaters but managing to escape all mention of how. Harry was glad. Hagrid himself would have appreciated the irony inherent in his death being the warning that saved the female Warriors of the Pride, but Harry doubted many other people would.

When the coffin had been lowered into the ground and covered, Dumbledore looked up towards Ginny and nodded to her. She nodded back, and, together with Luna, Neville, and Ron, came forward a pace. Ron hummed a note, and Ginny took it up, then began to sing.

*Dona nobis pacem, pacem,
Dona nobis pacem...*

Luna took the second repetition of the words as Ginny sang high harmony. The boys sang the third melody as the girls both harmonized against it, and on the fourth and last repetition they all sang in harmony.

Harry swallowed against the lump in his throat as he listened. Hagrid had always loved to listen to the Pride singing together, and had often encouraged them to keep trying when a difficult harmony line or rhythmic challenge threatened to turn them away from a piece of music.

I wish I could sing too, but I don't think I could get anything out through this. Ginny's doing well enough for both of us anyway.

The song finished, everyone bowed their heads for a time. Then, few by few, people began to walk away, until finally only Madame Maxime, Fleur and Bill, Dumbledore, and the Pack and Pride were left at the grave.

"It is time I was going 'ome," said Madame Maxime finally. "My students, my school, zey will need me."

"You will be all right?" Dumbledore asked her.

"Pfeh—" Madame Maxime brushed the question away. "Zis dying for love, it is all very well for

children. To live for love, zat is more difficult. But it is what ‘Agrid would ‘ave wished for me. To live, and to fight, in ‘is name.” She squared her shoulders. “My students, zey will now train for battle. Ze best will be ready whenever zere is need for zem. Fleur knows ze ways we of Beauxbatons send swift messages. She will call, and we will come. For ‘Agrid.” One tear threatened to spill from her right eye, but she dabbed it away with a white handkerchief the size of a bedsheet. “For ze sake of ‘is sacrifice.”

Dumbledore bowed his head in acceptance of her offer.

“So Beauxbatons is going to send people to fight with us?” said Lee when the story was over. “Good to know. More friends we have, the better.”

Harry nodded. “Speaking of which. DA members, hands up!”

Hands rocketed up all around the room.

“For anyone who doesn’t know what I’m talking about, ask someone with their hand raised,” Harry said. “For those of you who do, first meeting tomorrow night at seven in the usual place. As I mentioned before holidays, we’re an official club now, and Professor Longbottom’s coming to evaluate us, so make sure you’re warmed up and ready to fight.” He grinned. “Of course, that doesn’t mean we won’t have some fun too.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” said Maya darkly.

“You don’t have to take part if you don’t want to.”

“Take part in what?”

“You’ll see,” said Harry with an even bigger grin, one so big he had to share it with Ginny. This had been one of their ideas for how to cheer up the DA, many of whom they knew had been fond of Hagrid.

Plus, it lets us show off what we can already do...

“It’s called a Silly Duel,” Harry announced the next evening from his place on the dais. The DA’s original members had been busy—the Room of Requirement was packed, and he barely knew half the faces. “The point is to show off how many spells you know that wouldn’t be part of a regular duel. Obviously you don’t want to try to counter a Killing Curse with a Nose-Hair-Ringlets Jinx, but a silly spell you know backwards and forwards will have more power than a serious one you barely know at all, and power counts. One strong spell, especially one your opponent isn’t expecting, could be is all you need to win.” He pointed to the chart on the wall. “So... everybody come on up and put your name in a slot, and we’ll get dueling!”

Watching the resultant stampede, Harry felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned and stared for a

second at the person standing behind him.

“Hello, Harry,” said Cho, looking at the floor. In her hands she held the necklace of coins he’d sent her, with Hermione’s jinx on it. “I came to return this.”

Harry turned away again. “It was a gift,” he said over his shoulder. “Keep it.”

“You still don’t trust me.”

“Would you?”

He sensed, rather than felt, Cho’s wince. “I didn’t know what she’d do,” she said after a moment. “I never would have—”

“Would have, could have, and should have all add up to the same thing,” Harry interrupted. “Didn’t. You didn’t know, and you didn’t stop to think about it. You just went ahead and gave us all away. Gave me away. Let her do what she wanted to me, and got a baby killed who never hurt anyone.”

Cho drew a shuddering breath. “I never meant to,” she whispered.

“Well, you did. And you can’t take it back now.” Harry kept his eyes resolutely forward, towards the crush at the chart which was starting to sort itself out into some semblance of order.

“No... but can’t I make up for it? Please?”

Harry wavered a moment, then, swayed by the contrition in Cho’s voice, made up his mind.

“You can try,” he said. “But keep the necklace.”

“I will.” A slight jingle as Cho fastened it around her neck. “And I’ll fight hard. As hard as I possibly can.” A moment’s pause. “You seem to like giving girls silver jewelry.”

“It means different things, depending on the girl,” Harry said, stifling an inappropriate snicker. “And the jewelry.”

“So I guessed.” Cho turned to leave, then stopped. “Congratulations,” she said in a muffled tone. “I wish you both very happy.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. “Same to you, when you get around to it.”

And maybe someday I’ll be able to mean it.

The DA Silly Duel Tournament was down to its final two competitors—Katie Chi, a sharp-tongued Ravenclaw, facing off with Ryan Premeles, a fast-shooting Hufflepuff. Their erstwhile opponents, nursing (among other things) boat-shaped bruises, electrical burns from being struck

with small bolts of lightning, and goat horns, watched from the sidelines, shouting encouragement to their duelist of choice.

“Wands at the ready,” said Professor Longbottom, standing on the sidelines. “And—begin!”

“*Pressere !*” shouted Ryan immediately. An enormous pair of arms shot from his wand and wrapped Katie in a humongous hug, throwing off her aim and sending her spell into the ceiling. Ryan’s backers cheered uproariously.

Katie Vanished the arms and pointed her wand at Ryan. “*Combatus !*”

A dozen tiny bats appeared around Ryan and began smacking him with their wings. “Ow!” Ryan yelped. “Ow! Ow ow ow ow ow!”

Katie’s backers hooted with laughter.

Ryan managed to send the bats back at Katie, and while she was busy getting rid of them, shouted “*Obtundo partialis!*”

Katie stamped her foot. Then stamped the other one. Up and down, up and down, went her feet, hammering with loud thumps against the floor—

They stopped. Katie took advantage of the pause to launch a spell of her own. “*Balneo conflare!*”

A toilet appeared behind Ryan and shot forward, knocking him down onto its seat. Ryan braced himself, a wise move as the toilet exploded a second after he’d landed on it, shooting him high into the air. As he soared, though, he aimed his wand at Katie, who was removing the Part-Time Thumping Spell from her feet. “*Reticeo erae!*”

Katie swooped her own wand up, but was hampered by the long, trailing gown which had suddenly appeared on her. A tall conical hat with a veil floating down from its tip popped onto her head to match, and she seemed to grow three inches as high-heeled shoes sprouted on her feet. Nevertheless, she aimed her wand at Ryan, who had landed a few feet from her, and shouted a spell.

Silently. No sound came from her mouth.

Ryan’s backers cheered and started to swarm forward.

Katie’s eyes narrowed, and her wand swung down with a short hard motion as though she were throwing something.

With a wet splat, Ryan was drenched in a sticky, fruit-smelling substance. He yelled in shock. “It’s hot!”

Katie grinned and flicked her wand down again. More of the goop shot from it, further coating Ryan, who was floundering in the puddle, unable to get to his feet or get his wand unstuck from

his hand. “What *is* this stuff?” he whined, trying to shake it off his hands.

Professor Longbottom leaned over and sniffed at it. “Apricot,” she said. “Apricot preserves. It’s often used to glaze pastries, since it melts so well and crystallizes so clear.”

Katie nodded, grinning widely, and waved her wand in a wide arc. Cold air blasted from it.

The preserves around Ryan solidified, freezing him in place. He looked as if he’d been encased in ice.

“I give up,” he mumbled from inside the coating. “You win.”

Katie pointed at her throat and scowled.

“I can’t move.” Ryan made little thrashing motions to bear this out. “Or breathe.”

Professor Longbottom rectified this by Vanishing the apricot preserves and reversing the Ladylike Silence spell affecting Katie. “Ladies and gentlemen of the DA, your winner of the Silly Duel Tournament!” she called, lifting Katie’s arm high. “Katie Chi!”

The DA obligingly raised the roof.

I could get used to this, Harry thought from the back of the crowd, clapping with everyone else (he and the Pride had decided to referee rather than duel, to make sure the tournament could get done before midnight). *Everyone has fun, everyone gets a workout, and we all go home afterwards.*

Maybe we can have a few peaceful months.

If that word has any meaning, in the middle of a war.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 37: Stories and Straight Talk (Arc 6)

“Oy, Will, wait up!” Charlie Weasley hurried across the rustic-built room towards one of his coworkers, who turned at his call, revealing a bearded, scarred face with a permanent red glow to his cheeks. “You remember how you were looking for some way to improve those fireproof robes last month?”

“Sure. Can’t have the Minister of Magic getting his arse singed off, right mess that would cause.” Will chuckled. “You found something?”

“You could say that.” Charlie pointed at the woman by the fireplace who was just shaking the last of the ashes out of her brown hair. “A neighbor of ours does a spectacular fire-protection charm. Seen her pick up salamanders bare-handed.”

Will nodded, looking impressed. “Sounds like just the thing. Introduce me?”

“Of course.” Charlie led the way back across the room. “Will, this is Gertrude Granger-Lupin, but she always goes by Danger. Danger, Will Robinson.”

“Remind me again why we were happy to get rid of Binns?” Draco commented as the elder members of the Pride filed into the History of Magic classroom.

Neenie the cat jumped down from Ron’s shoulders onto a desk at the front corner of the room, from there onto the chair, and transformed. “Because now you four might learn something from this class without having to copy my notes all the time,” Hermione answered.

Draco scowled at his twin. “I wasn’t asking you.”

“You didn’t say any names.” Hermione’s smile was a bit shaky, but real, and she met Draco’s eyes without any sign of fear.

“Because we were tired of having an hour and a half every couple days where we were bored out of our skulls,” said Ron, dropping his bag and Hermione’s onto a desk between her and the rest of the room. “We didn’t stop to think that a new Professor would mean we’d actually have to work in this class.”

“Let’s be fair, she’s starting us off easy,” said Harry, sitting down beside Ron. “All that stuff about history and legend and myth, and how they can get mixed up and change each other.”

Draco took the seat behind Ron, and Neville set down his books on the next desk over. “What were you looking so surprised about last class?” he asked his friend. “All she was saying was that there was some people in the middle of the fourteenth century who wanted to be sure stories only got passed on in their proper forms.”

“It was just—Luna asked her about that when we first met her. Some Suppression or other.”

“The Similarity Suppression of 1348,” Hermione recited quickly. “And Professor Jones said there was never really any ‘suppression’ as such, that it was more a matter of these people wanting to be sure that the stories they told their children didn’t give them unrealistic expectations about the world. Which, if you look at some Muggle fairy tales, might be a good idea. I mean, if you think hard about stories like Snow White and Cinderella, what little girls are learning from it is that they’re supposed to grow up and marry the prince...”

“Cinderella?” Ron repeated, Neville frowning from the row behind. “Sounds like an illness.”

“Not quite,” said Harry, laughing. “She’s a witch named Ella, and her wicked stepmother takes her wand away and makes her sleep on the hearth, so she gets covered in ashes and cinders.”

“Ella’s stepsisters had to put Shrinking Charms on their feet to fit into her magical dancing shoes,” Hermione added, “so they could dance like her at the masked ball and fool the prince. But even with the magic in the shoes, they were still clumsy, and that’s how he knew they weren’t really Ella.”

“Oh.”

“You two don’t know that one?” Draco said, pulling his battered Bagshot out of his schoolbag. “I used to hear it all the time when I was little.”

“You had a subversive house-elf,” Hermione pointed out.

“True enough.”

“I think she’s doing stories with every year,” said Ginny in the common room that night.

“Probably because we haven’t ever had a proper professor and she doesn’t want to overload us to start with.”

“She’s split us into small groups and given us each a story to research,” Luna added. “We have to present it to the class next week and explain what events in it could be historical and which are obviously invented, and what true events could have inspired the invented portions.”

Draco looked a bit alarmed. “Are you two in the same group?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Ginny, giving him a flat look. “Along with two Hufflepuffs. She let us do some picking, but she made sure none of the groups had only one House in them.”

“Good.” Meghan was curled up in an armchair with her Potions text. “What story are you researching?”

“It’s not one we know,” Luna said, rummaging in her bag until she found the scroll she was

looking for. "It's called 'The Gift of the Phoenix.' Do you want to hear it?"

"Yes, please," said Harry, setting aside his Charms homework with alacrity. Neville capped his ink, Meghan marked her page, and Neenie, nestled in Ron's lap and pointing out the important passages in *Intermediate Transfiguration* with a paw, sighed but nodded. Ron closed the book, put it on the table, and sat back in his chair, and Luna began to read aloud from her scroll.

Long ago and far away there was a kingdom, where ruled a well-meaning but foolish king. If he had ruled alone, his reign would have foundered, but his queen sat by his side, and she was both wise and good. Though she wore a veil over her face, and thus by the custom of the country she was not truly present, petitioners knew that she was listening and judging them well. She would counsel the king as to whether he should extend the scepter of justice towards them, to smite them with its magical fire, or the orb of mercy, to bathe them in its healing glow.

What they did not know, what only the king and the queen knew, was that the veil over the queen's face served another purpose than hiding her features. It was a gift from her mother and an artifact of ancient magic, for when she looked through its weave, she saw those who told the truth haloed in the blue of the sea and those who lied surrounded by the dirty red of dried blood. Thus she knew which parts of each story she heard were true and which invented, and she whispered her findings into the king's ear to help him make his decisions.

But though the people of the country loved their king and their queen, one man did not. He was the king's vizier, and he hated the queen, because he knew that without her presence at the king's side, he could long ago have become the power behind the throne, ruling the land in all but name. He hated the queen's wisdom and goodness, he hated her sweet voice and her strong magic, but most of all he hated her companion, for the queen was one of those rare human beings who had befriended a phoenix.

The phoenix drove the vizier to distraction. It watched him whenever he came near, as though it knew what was in his heart. More than this, its presence meant that no plan to kill the queen could be successful, for no poison was swifter than phoenix tears and no assassin could defeat the strength and valor of the fire's bird. But the vizier was cunning, and he knew that the phoenix had its own cycle of life. For ten long years he waited and watched, until at last he saw the phoenix beginning to grow old, and then he acted. He hired an assassin, he taught him the plan of the palace, and he gave the killer deadly poison to smear along the blade of his dagger.

And thus it was that the king sat on the floor of his throne room, weeping over his dead queen. The assassin's body lay cooling nearby, but his death would not redeem the life he had taken, and the king's grief was past bearing. The queen's phoenix, too, mourned, but through song only, not through tears. The creature seemed to know that this wound was beyond its healing.

But then the phoenix, its feathers gray and drooping, took wing and flew to the king's throne, from which it lifted two objects: one was the scepter of justice, the other the orb of mercy. "What are you saying, valiant bird?" the king asked hoarsely. "That there was neither justice nor mercy in

this killing? With that I believe I can agree.”

The phoenix landed on the other side of the queen’s body with its burdens and tugged gently at the veil the queen still wore. “Yes, there is no more need for this,” said the king, and unhooked the veil and lifted it away, so that he might gaze upon the face he loved once more. “What good did the truth do you, my dear?” he murmured. “What good has the truth done either of us?”

A single phrase of phoenix song filled the air. From within it, the king thought he heard a gentle voice speaking: *The truth has not deserted you yet, it breathed. If you are willing to make a sacrifice, it may yet survive.*

“What must I give?” the king asked in a whisper. “What is required?”

First, the three treasures of your kingdom. The veil, the scepter, and the orb.

“Done,” said the king instantly. “What more?”

Your own body to endure the pain undergone by the one who has left you.

“Done. What more?”

The knowledge of three things: that this life will be torn away from you again in as many weeks as it might have lived years without this happening, that the feathered singer shall burn to ashes at that same time, and that from those ashes no new chick will ever arise. For this is the greatest gift of the phoenix, to give up its own immortality to reclaim for a short while the life of one mortal companion, and such is the only way a phoenix may ever truly die.

The king stared at the phoenix. “You must not do this thing,” he said. “I loved my queen most truly, I had hoped she would live to grow old beside me, but not even the full term of her life is worth the sacrifice of your endless years! Take my life instead, if it may restore hers, but do not let yourself be destroyed for such a small gain!”

The phoenix trilled as if it were laughing, and burst into flame even as it made the sound, the fires reaching out to touch the veil and the scepter and orb. The king cried out in pain and clutched his chest, where it seemed a ghostly dagger had stabbed him. And from within the fire and the pain, the voice spoke once more.

Had you spoken any other way than you did, you would not have gained what you sought, o king. But you did not snatch at the prize but spoke with a thought to another, even in the midst of your heartbreak. More, you offered your own life in place of that other’s. For this, you and your queen both shall live until her companion’s next burning day, whenever that may befall.

And when the king could see again, the phoenix lay a wrinkled chick in its nest of ashes; of the three treasures of the kingdom, there was no trace; but neither of these interested him, for his queen was stirring, and the bloody wound in her breast had closed as though it had never been.

The king had the faithless vizier imprisoned for his treachery, and together he and his queen ruled

in wisdom and justice for years. But when the phoenix which accompanied the queen began to lose its feathers and sing more softly than it had in years gone by, the two set the affairs of the kingdom in order and went hand in hand to the highest balcony of the palace, one which looked out over the sea. There they stood side by side, and the phoenix perched between them and sang its death-song, and when the music had ceased the ashes of the three wafted out to the ocean on the breeze.

For a few seconds, no one moved. Ron could feel Neenie purring in awe. Finally, Draco whistled long and low. “Impressive,” he said.

“And hard to sort out,” said Ginny. “I mean, not the bit about the queen coming back to life, I don’t think even a phoenix could do that, but what *did* happen?”

“I’d guess she nearly died and the phoenix saved her,” said Neville. “But it’s only a guess, mind you,” he added hastily as Ginny threatened him with Ron’s Transfiguration book. “I could be wrong.”

“What I’d wonder is, if that’s all that happened, why did the story start?” Harry said. “To explain where the kingdom’s treasures went? And where did they go, really?”

“Maybe the assassination was a cover-up for a burglary?” Ron suggested.

Neenie made a skeptical noise, and Draco frowned. “Isn’t that usually the other way around? Seems like the people would be more important than the things...”

“What if the phoenix needed extra magic to help the queen, because she was so badly hurt and it was so close to its burning time?” asked Meghan. “The way I used Hogwarts’ magic to heal you, Harry, when you fell at the Quidditch match your second year. That could be why it burned the treasures, and even why the king hurt, because the phoenix took some magic from him too.”

“I like that,” said Luna, unrolling the scroll to a blank portion. “Say it again, slower, please?”

“Won-Won!” squealed a voice from behind Ron’s chair as Meghan started to repeat what she’d said.

Ron jumped. Neenie yowled and dug her claws into his robes. “Er, hi, Lavender,” he said, looking around.

“I missed you over the holidays!” Lavender was leaning over the back of his chair, beaming at him. “And then it’s like you’ve been hiding from me ever since we got back! Did you get my necklace? Did you like it?”

“Er,” Ron repeated. The necklace, a gold chain from which dangled large letters spelling out “My Sweetheart,” had entertained the Pride greatly for most of a day, until he’d threatened to provide Fred and George with the recipe for Harry’s mum’s liquefied slugs potion. “Look, Lavender, can

we go somewhere private for a minute?”

“Of course.” Lavender smiled sweetly at the rest of the Pride. “You don’t mind if I steal my Won-Won for a while, do you?”

“Not at all,” said Harry, entirely deadpan.

“Though I think I may ralph-ralph if she calls him that again,” Draco muttered just loud enough to be heard.

Neenie hissed at him mildly, then leapt onto Ron’s shoulder and disposed herself around his neck.

Ron blinked at her. “Who said you were coming?”

A paw hooked under his pendant chain and pulled it out, and a point-eared head ducked under it. **I did**, Neenie informed him. **Unless you’d really prefer to do this all by yourself. She’s probably going to cry, you know.**

Ron glanced over at Lavender, who seemed puzzled by the behavior of the cat. **Good point**, he said. **And thanks.**

Neenie rubbed the top of her head against his jaw. **Anytime.**

“I didn’t know you had a cat,” said Lavender as they climbed out the portrait hole. “Did you just get her over Christmas?”

“No, she’s been around for a while. And she’s not my cat, exactly.” Ron surrendered to a small, wicked impulse. “She’s the cat who walks by herself. But not all places are alike to her.”

Lavender gave him an odd look as they turned into an unoccupied classroom. “What does that mean?”

Neenie sighed. **It means—don’t say this aloud—but it means she’s a little like Cho.** A flicker of memory washed across Ron’s mind, of Harry and Hermione in the kitchen of the Hogwarts Den. **Cho cared about Harry, but she didn’t bother to find out about the people Harry cared about. You may not be Pack, but you are Pride, and maybe Lavender should have noticed that.**

Ron shrugged, feeling the slight prickle through his robes as Neenie hung on against the shift in her perch. “It’s just a thing I read someplace,” he said in answer to Lavender’s question. “Listen, Lavender, about that necklace—”

“I’ve seen that cat before somewhere,” Lavender interrupted, leaning forward to look more closely at Neenie. “Her eyes are a funny color, aren’t they? I mean, if she were human, it’d be perfectly normal for her to have eyes that color, but for a cat...”

She broke off and clapped her hands over her mouth. “She’s not a cat, is she?” she said around the

interlaced fingers. “I remember at the DA meetings—and I’ve barely seen Hermione except in class, she isn’t even sleeping in her bed—”

Gold star for her. Neenie nodded deliberately towards Lavender.

“Hermione! It is you!” Lavender stared at Neenie. “Did you have an accident? Are you stuck like that?”

“No, she’s not stuck,” Ron said. “It’s just... easier for her this way.”

“Easier? Easier how?” Lavender frowned. “Wait, I thought I heard... just before holidays ended, there were girls who got attacked or kidnapped or hurt, but they were rescued...”

“It’s left her a bit spooky around people,” Ron said, Neenie’s quiet purr never faltering in his ear. “She can handle them better like this. Boys especially.”

“Except you.” Lavender looked from Ron to Neenie and back again, her lower lip beginning to quiver. “Because you... did you...”

“Help her?” Ron finished. “Yeah. Mostly by accident.”

Neenie smacked his ear with a paw.

“Oi!”

Next time, I’ll use claws, Neenie said tartly. **Don’t run yourself down.** A raspy tongue washed the place her paw had impacted. **Let me do it for you.**

Oh, you’re a big help, Ron grumbled silently, watching Lavender, who was watching Neenie. “Look,” he said awkwardly. “Lavender, I’m sorry about this—”

“Don’t be.” Lavender stood up, pushing her chair back. “I can see how things are. She’s special, she needs you, and I—” She sniffed once. “I’d better just go.”

Ron started to get up. “Lavender, wait, I—”

Lavender ran out of the room, the sound of quiet sobbing lingering behind her for a moment.

Ron dropped back into his chair. “Buggered up again, didn’t I?” he said.

Neenie flowed down into his lap and changed into human form. “Not really,” Hermione said, laying her head against his shoulder. “You were polite and truthful and you did apologize. But it still hurts her.”

“Why?” Ron shut the door with his wand, putting his other arm around Hermione. “I didn’t say there was anything wrong with her.”

“No, but you said, or as good as said, you want me instead. Which is the truthful thing to say and she’ll be glad you were honest with her someday, but tonight the only thing she knows is that she’s been rejected.” Hermione straightened Ron’s collar absently. “And that hurts.”

Ron sighed. “I’m just glad it’s over with.” He looked down, caught Hermione’s gaze, and grinned at her. “I like snogging you better anyway.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Why am I glad you didn’t say that in front of her?”

“Because it’s Meghan who likes doing Healing spells, not you?”

“That could be it.” Hermione produced a sound like a human purr as Ron twined a curl around his fingers. “So though I realize I may regret asking this question... why do you like snogging me better than snogging Lavender?”

Ron considered his options and decided he hadn’t been smacked enough lately. “Same reason I hate it when Mum buys stuff at the secondhand shops,” he said airily. “Never know where it’s been.”

They were somewhat late getting back to Gryffindor Tower.

“I can’t believe I’m encouraging my sister to sleep in the same bed as her boyfriend every night,” Draco muttered under his breath as he buttoned his pajama top.

“We all have to believe weird things sometimes,” Harry said, tossing his robes into the laundry hamper. “Like Luna getting angry with you over something you haven’t told us.”

Draco jerked around to face his brother. “How did you—”

“Meghan heard you yelling at each other back at Headquarters. She thought it was weird enough that she ought to tell me about it. And I realized I’ve been thinking you were acting strange for months, but I’d always forget or something else would come up before I could ask you about it.”

“But this time you didn’t forget.” Draco stared at the floor between his bare feet.

“No. This time I didn’t forget.”

“I don’t suppose I could ask you to forget again for another month or two?”

“Why?”

Draco jerked his head towards Ron’s drawn bedcurtains. “She’s been through enough for one winter, don’t you think?”

“So it’s bad.”

“No, I’ve been hiding from you that I can end the war by pulling a secret weapon out my arse. Yes, it’s bad! Why the hell do you think I’ve been keeping my mouth shut about it?”

Harry took a step back and bumped into his bed. “I didn’t know,” he said, pulling his pajamas out from under his pillow. “That’s why I asked.” He shot a glance of his own towards Ron’s bed. “If you just wanted to tell me...”

“No.” Draco flipped back the covers and got into bed. “Everybody or nobody.”

“Luna knows.”

“Luna’s the one who told *me* .”

“Something she Saw?”

“Yeah.”

“Something about you?”

“Yeah.”

Harry paused in the act of pulling off his uniform shirt. “Just remember,” he said after a moment. “Seers can be wrong sometimes.”

Draco turned onto his side. “Not this time,” he said indistinctly.

Harry didn’t pursue the matter further.

“Let us get a few things perfectly clear, ladies and gentlemen!”

It was the first regular meeting of the DA in the new term, and Professor Longbottom was walking up and down the room, pausing every so often to look at them sharply. Harry had the impression she’d given this speech many times before.

Probably she has. Neville said she used to do some of the first-year classes for Auror apprentices, the ones they have at St. Adomnán’s College. He covered a smile. Have to ask Padfoot if she has her speech memorized like Snape does...

“Standing up to your opponent and shouting a challenge sounds very good in stories! Engaging in a duel, wand to wand and face to face, makes for excellent photographs! But you will not be fighting in stories or photographs, ladies and gentlemen! You will be fighting in a war, against wizards who do not care that you are young and who do not care about fair play! They care only that you are fighting back, and they will hurt you and kill you if they get the chance! Therefore, your primary job is to not give them that chance! Boot!”

Terry Boot jumped at being so suddenly addressed. “Professor?”

“What is your greatest ally in a fight?” Professor Longbottom threw the words at him, as if watching to see if he’d dodge.

Terry brightened, obviously sure he knew this one. “The element of surprise, Professor!”

“And what does that mean, Boot?”

“It means...” Terry paused, frowning his brow. “It means a lot of things, Professor. It means if they don’t know you’re there, they can’t fight back. It means if they don’t know what you have, they won’t know how to stop you. It even means we’re kids and they won’t think we can fight.”

“Ravenclaws,” Professor Longbottom said, shaking her head, but Harry could see the smile working to stay hidden. “Right on all counts. But surprise only lasts so long. Usually until your first contact with the enemy. Who knows the other thing that lasts that long?”

Ron put up his hand. “Your plans,” he said when Professor Longbottom pointed at him.

“Good, Weasley. Why?”

“Because the other bloke’s got plans too, and they run into each other and get all...” Ron stopped short and looked down at his lap. “Er, scrambled up,” he finished a bit weakly, before adding in a whisper, “No need for *claws*, was there?”

Neenie rumbled a brief, smug purr at him.

“Very good.” Professor Longbottom turned and looked at one of the walls, and it developed a large blackboard. “Here, then, are the rules to keep in mind when your battle plans go out the window. Which, as Weasley’s just reminded us, they will, as soon as the battle gets started.”

She waved her wand at the board, and the chalk in the tray rose up and scribbled a short list on it.

1. *Keep your friends alive.*

2. *Get your objective.*

3. *Don’t die.*

“Any questions?”

The DA looked at the list in silence for a moment. Then Blaise raised his hand.

“Yes, Zabini?”

“Why isn’t number three number one?” Blaise had his arms tucked across his chest, not quite defiant but well on the way. “We can’t do anything for our friends or our objective if we’re dead.”

“A fair question. Let me answer it with one of my own. Why are you fighting at all?”

Blaise frowned at this, as did most of the rest of the room. Near one wall, though, Susan Bones let out a soft “Ahhh.”

“Something to add, Bones?” Professor Longbottom said briskly, turning to face the girl.

“I think so, Professor.” Susan flipped the end of her plait over her shoulder. “If we didn’t think what we’re fighting for was important enough to risk our lives over it, we wouldn’t be fighting for it, would we?” she asked Blaise, letting the end of the question widen out to the rest of the DA. “We’d let it go, or we’d run away. But we’re not, we’re fighting back, and that must mean we think what we’re after is worth more than our lives.”

“And fighting to save your friends is just good sense,” Selena added from her seat beside Roger. “Because the more people you have on your side, the more people can help fight and protect you. Besides, if you’re not willing to fight to help your friends, or…” She glanced at Roger. “Or whatever, then you’re not much of a friend.”

“Or whatever?” Roger muttered.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Selena whispered back.

“Excellent.” Professor Longbottom beamed at the DA. “Good answers, all of them. However.” Her smile lost its joviality. “In a real battle, if you have to think, you are already dead and you just don’t know it yet. If you want to keep your friends alive, get your objective, and not die, fighting has to become instinctive to you. In order for it to become instinctive, you have to practice until you drop, and then get back up and keep practicing.” The smile was now shading towards terrifying. “And any set of exercises I help Potter develop for you will have that attitude attached.”

Harry stifled a nervous swallow. He knew what Padfoot and Moony were capable of setting up for practice, and he’d been through their idea of “you’re done when I say you are”—he’d copied it for several of the games he’d had the DA run in the first term—but Professor Longbottom was not only older and sneakier than his Pack-fathers, she’d actually taught Padfoot as an Auror apprentice.

That’s what she’s treating us like, is apprentices. And she wouldn’t if she didn’t think we could handle it.

It was a compliment, but one Harry thought he’d just as soon not have received.

But I haven’t got much choice. Whether we want to be or not, we’re in a war. The better we fight, the sooner it’s over.

And the fewer people die.

Professor Longbottom glanced at him, and he nodded and stood up. “From now on, everyone gets some type of special training, along with general fighting skills,” he announced. “The listings are

on the wall up here behind me.” A thumb jerked over his shoulder indicated the four scrolls of parchment tacked to the wall, under Hermione’s respelled parchment with the DA membership list on it. “If you really can’t stand the category you’re in, see me privately and we’ll talk about swapping you out, but let’s try and keep that down. We’ll still have full meetings for everyone, but the smaller groups will have their own meetings as well.” He grinned, letting a bit of Wolf show through. “And some of them will be right after Quidditch practices.”

Groans filled the room. Harry only grinned wider. “Nothing says the Death Eaters can’t attack when we’re tired,” he pointed out. “So get your homework done before Quidditch, because you might not have time after. Slytherins, come on up and check your categories. Hufflepuffs, you’ll be next...”

Alice Longbottom walked wearily into her quarters and sat down. “Yes, please,” she said, not bothering to look behind her.

“That bad?” Frank asked, as he began to massage her shoulders.

“Not exactly.” Alice leaned into the movements. “They’re eager, most of them. Hungry for fighting, for glory. That sort scare me.”

“As they should.” Frank dug his thumbs into a knot of muscle. “They’re the most likely to run out and get killed.”

“But there’s a little core who aren’t that way.” Alice hissed, half in pain, half in relief. “Neville and Harry and the rest of their Pride, and a few of the others like the Pritchard girl and her boy. They know what they’re in for, they know it’s not a game. They’re not eager, but they are *ready*. And that scares me even more.”

Frank sighed deeply. “Wars are fought by the young, love,” he reminded her. “We oldsters stand by and do what we can, but this is their time.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Alice whispered. “Not this soon. Not our boy, not his friends... oh, Frank, why us? Why now?”

“If we knew that, we’d be wiser than we are.” Frank kissed the back of her head. “All we can do is prepare them as best we can.”

“And know it won’t be good enough.” Alice swallowed against the lump in her throat, remembering the endless string of funerals she’d attended during the last war for young Aurors she’d mentored. “It never is.”

“It’s better than doing nothing at all, which is the only other option.” Frank resumed kneading the tightness from her back. “Try to think in terms of the lives you’ve saved, rather than the ones you didn’t.”

“Harder to count those,” Alice murmured. “But I’ll try.” She heaved a sigh of her own. “In any case, Harry barely needs my help running the DA. He had his four specialist classes all planned out before he came to see me, he’d portioned out most of the students to them, and he’d even approached the house-elves about working with them in some capacity...”

“Medics to the left, please,” Harry called out. “Flying Squad to the right.”

The chattering crowd of students parted down the center, most of the younger ones moving to Harry’s right, their left. He took a moment to breath a silent sigh of relief at having come up with something that would keep them mostly out of harm’s way without making them feel as though he’d made up a job for them.

We’d try and get them out of the castle if we could, but it might not be possible, and at least the way I’ve got it planned they’ll have help.

“Say hello,” he said when the noise had died down a bit, “to your new partners.”

A wave of cracks heralded the arrival of nearly half the Hogwarts house-elf contingent, most of whom were beaming. Squeaky cries of “Good evening sir!” and “Hello miss!” filled the air, along with surprised exclamations by the students.

“Everybody calm down,” Ginny said from her place sitting on the dais beside Harry. “You’ve all seen house-elves before.”

“Yeah, but this looks like the kitchens exploded,” quipped Michael Corner, making most of his friends snigger.

Ginny sighed with barely contained patience. “Some of the Hogwarts house-elves have graciously agreed to help us in the event there is fighting here in the castle,” she said. “If you don’t want to work with house-elves, that’s fine. Come up to the front here and cross your name off the list, and we’ll reassign you to either skirmishers or artillery.”

A few of the Flying Squad members shuffled their feet, but no one actually moved.

“Great,” said Harry, bringing his hands together. “So as soon as I’m done talking, you’re going to get to know each other, and when you think you’ve found someone you can work with, students come up and write your partner’s name beside yours so we know who’s with who. Then we’ll get to some preliminary training.”

“As you saw just a minute ago,” Ginny took over seamlessly, “house-elves, unlike wizards, can Apparate at Hogwarts. Like wizards, they can take passengers Side-Along. They happen to be just the right size to hide under a wizard’s robes.” She grinned. “And Death Eaters are a little short on imagination. So when they see us appearing and disappearing, they’ll think we’ve found some way around the Anti-Apparition wards on our own.”

“Medical squad, your job is just what it sounds like,” Harry took the conversation back. “Your partners will be taking you in and out of the active fighting areas, to help treat the wounded and get them to safety. You’re responsible for them, and for yourselves and the people you’re treating. Don’t let them down.”

Matt Smythe, who’d been muttering darkly a few moments earlier about being “shunted off,” looked surprised and hopeful at this description, and Elayne Kreger smiled timidly. Graham pressed Natalie’s hand, Tessa Mallory bounced on her toes, and Dennis Creevey grinned from ear to ear.

Of course, he always does that.

“Flying Squad, you’re the ones who’ll be most responsible for our deception holding up,” Ginny said to the other side of the room. “You may notice you’re all either old enough to Apparate or you look like you could be. That’s for a reason. You’re meant to be seen.”

“Why, so they can take our heads off?” said George.

“Wouldn’t be much of a loss with you,” Ginny shot back, making everyone laugh. “Like I said earlier, we want the Death Eaters to think we’re doing this ourselves, because the instant they know we’re using house-elves they’ll start working out how to fight against elf magic, or they’ll go home and order their own house-elves to help them this way. We’ll have a general spell over the medics to make them harder to spot, but you lot will be popping in and out of battles in full view.”

“You’ll be the ones everybody expects to save the day,” Harry added. “So try and be up to it, all right? Now go on and start getting to know your future partners. It’s nice to be friendly with the people who’ll be saving your life.”

We’re mad if we think any of this is really going to work, he mused as the students in front of him started sitting or kneeling down and smiling awkwardly at tea-towel-clad house-elves. All we’ll probably do is slow the Death Eaters down a little. Confuse them a bit, keep them from killing us all at once. String it out longer. Make it last.

“The harder we are to kill, the less they’ll think we’re worth it,” Ginny murmured over her shoulder. “If we can confuse them enough, we might be able to make them give up and go home.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“No, but I had to say something.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“I’ll tell you what I do believe.” Ginny swung her feet up onto the dais and turned to face Harry. “I believe that we can do this. That we can defend ourselves and our school and our friends. Maybe that we can even win. But I know, for a fact, that we won’t win if our leader doesn’t believe it’s

possible.”

“Great.” Harry sighed. “How did I get elected leader again?”

“The way I heard it, it was that or stay out in the snow and freeze.”

“Not what I was thinking of.”

In his office, Albus Dumbledore looked up from the scroll he was studying, half-covered with short lines in a familiar semi-tidy handwriting. “Intriguing,” he remarked to Fawkes, who was preening a wing. “I believe I may have another little job for Harry and his Pride. But not yet, no, not quite yet.” He waved a hand at the calendar on his wall, which flipped over three pages. “They need time to recover and train, to build their confidence, and I should continue my research to be sure I know what I am asking of them.”

His free hand rested on the lines which read:

*A curse once on your best-loved gift
Should start your thoughts in proper drift...*

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Facing Danger

Chapter 38: Tricksters and Truths (Arc 6)

“All right, skirmishers,” Harry said, pulling the attention of the quarter of the DA who’d been designated for that role. “I want you to watch closely. Your job is going to be a lot like this.”

He held up a Sickle.

“Our job is like money?” said Seamus. “Wicked!”

Harry laughed with everyone else, including Ron and Neenie, watching from a chair to one side, and Ginny, standing behind the line of skirmishers. “No, your job isn’t like money,” he said when the noise had died down a bit. “Your job is like what I’m going to do with the money. Watch.”

Closing one hand over the Sickle, he wagged the fingers of the other hand over it. “Hocus-pocus, alakazam, alakazoo! Sickle disappear!”

Several of the skirmishers started to snicker as Harry opened his hand and sighed in exaggerated disappointment at the Sickle still sitting on his palm. “Let me try that again,” he said, picking it up. “Hocus-pocus...” He made a deliberately clumsy job of palming the coin and let it drop to the floor, where it disappeared into the deep pile of the carpet the Room of Requirement had generated today. “Oops.” People were laughing openly now. “Let me just... get that...”

Harry snatched a glance behind the highly amused skirmishers as he fished around for the Sickle. *Perfect. Just one more moment.*

“Finally!” He stood up, grinning triumphantly, and flourished the Sickle. “Hocus-pocus, alakazam, Sickle disappear!” This time, when he opened his hands, both were empty. He thrust them out in front of him to demonstrate their emptiness.

The Sickle dropped out of his left sleeve.

The skirmishers lost all control and staggered about howling in laughter at the crestfallen expression on Harry’s face. “Where’s the trick, Potter?” Artemis Moon, who’d joined the DA at her sister’s instigation, managed to ask through her multiplying giggles.

Harry smiled innocently at her. “Trick? I wasn’t doing any trick.”

He flicked his right wrist. The Auror’s holster which had been one of his Christmas presents did its job, and his wand was in his hand and pointed at Artemis before she could blink.

She gaped for an instant, then fumbled in her pocket for her own wand. So did the rest of the skirmishers.

Every hand came up empty.

“I wasn’t doing any trick,” Harry repeated, saluting the group with his wand and letting it go, which would return it to the holster. “But my lovely partner was.” He flicked a hand at the back of the room.

The skirmishers turned as one.

Ginny beamed at them and held up two handfuls of wands. “You might want to consider some security,” she said. “I understand Fred and George do a very good line in alarm charms.”

“And probably paid you to say that,” Ron muttered.

“So?”

“The *point* is,” Harry said loudly, “that’s what you’re for, is making the Death Eaters look at you and see a bunch of incompetent kids. And no, I didn’t pick you for the job because I think you’re no good,” he added as he saw the looks of horror beginning. “I picked you because I think you *are* good. You’ve got probably the hardest job of any of the groups.”

“Since when is it hard to look bad?” said Hannah Abbott with a trace of bitterness in her voice.

“Since it’s got to be looking bad while actually being good,” Harry returned.

Some of the skirmishers stared at him. Others shook their heads in confusion.

“It’s a difficult concept,” said Ron patiently, Neenie giving the little series of snorts that were her laughter in cat form. “Called *act-ing*. You’re going to have to *act* like you don’t know one end of your wand from the other.”

“Unlike certain brothers of mine who really don’t,” Ginny murmured.

“Yeah, unlike—oi!”

Neenie raised one paw in Ron’s direction and hissed. Harry caught Ginny’s eye and let his lips part just a fraction to show his teeth. “Sibling rivalries aside, the Weasleys have it,” he said when he’d acknowledged her exasperated nod. “As they so often do. Two of the other groups don’t require a lot of fast wandwork, so that’s where I put all the people who’re not ready to duel. If you’re here, I think you’re good enough to make the Death Eaters think you’re bad.”

“And then what do we do?” asked Kevin Entwhistle. “Let them beat us?”

“No, you fight just hard enough to make them think they can,” said Ginny. “And then you let them *chase* you, which is why Ron is here, because he’s the expert on planning routes that don’t look planned. As far as the Death Eaters will know, they’re about to catch scared students who’re running aimlessly through the school hallways...”

“Until you get to where you’re running to.” Harry gave the skirmishers his best human imitation of Wolf’s ‘oh boy, dinner’ grin. “At which point, there will not be any more Death Eaters. At

least, not any who're awake. You'll be working very closely with our fourth group..."

"What's artillery?" was the question Neville was hearing the most as he made his way unnoticed through the last division of the DA, and he wasn't unhappy with it.

If they don't know what it is, they're more likely to believe what I tell them.

Now as long as I can keep the Muggleborns from laughing at me when I show them what they'll be fighting with.

As long as I can keep them from laughing at me, period.

Neville knew the official reasons Harry wanted him leading this division rather than Ron or Draco—Ron's talents would serve better as an overall strategist and Draco's extensive experience with sneak attacks made him a natural for training the Flying Squad—but he had a suspicion there was more to it than that.

But honestly, it doesn't matter. He glanced to one side of the room, where Meghan was sitting on a cloth-covered heap of mysterious items. She caught him looking and grinned, and he had to smile back. *They need to learn to fight, and I can teach them. The better they learn, the sooner I can go back to being just part of the Pride.*

Besides, this was going to be fun.

He made a little beckoning motion with his hand. Meghan nodded, slid off her perch, and extracted the one item they'd prefilled. Her movement drew eyes, and whispering started almost immediately.

"What is that thing?"

"I know what it looks like."

"I've seen those before."

"But why would we have..."

Meghan held the sloshing thing against her chest like a Quaffle, then flung it towards Neville. For one heartstopping second, he thought he was going to bobble the catch, but then his fingers closed around it and he could take an instant to get it into its proper position before dropping the magic he'd been holding around himself.

"A good opening is crucial," said Draco's voice between his ears, as all eyes in the room focused on him. *"Bore them first thing and they'll never listen to you. You have to get their attention."*

Neville thought he'd done that rather well.

“This,” he said, exhibiting the item to the students in front of him, “is the reason you’re here. You’re going to learn to use these.”

“But that’s just a water gun!” protested a third year in the front row. “What good is it going to do in a fight?”

Neville pivoted to face the speaker and squeezed the trigger. *Squirt.*

“Oi!” the boy protested, pulling out his wand and waving it ineffectively at the large wet patch on the front of his robes.

“Could you have got your wand out in time to stop me doing that?” Neville asked.

“No, but why should I care? It’s only water.”

“It’s only water,” Neville repeated. “But what if it wasn’t?” He gestured with the water gun to the group at large. “Look around you. See if you know any of the people you’re standing with.”

“We *are* all DA,” said Selena in a patient tone. “We’re going to know each other.”

“But if you weren’t DA, would you still know each other?” Neville wondered in the back of his mind if Harry ever felt like this, trying to get people to open their eyes and see what was right in front of them. “Is there anything a lot of you do well? A class you’re all good in?”

He took advantage of the resultant murmuring and looking around to tuck the water gun into the crook of his arm and sign to Meghan. *Not very bright, are they?*

You’re asking them to think new thoughts, she answered. The wizarding world is more about old thoughts, about doing things the way things have always been done. It’s going to take them some time to get the hang of it.

Neville nodded, thinking of his gran and her friends, the ones who thought ink and clothing in more colors than black were dangerously newfangled. *I just hope they don’t take forever about it, he signed back. I don’t think I’m cut out for this leading thing.*

Meghan giggled and signaled him to turn around, which he did. “Got something?” he asked Selena, who seemed to have been elected speaker for the group.

“Well, a lot of us do well in Potions,” Selena said uncertainly. “But I don’t see how...”

Neville shook the water gun, making it slosh. “What if it wasn’t water in here?” he said again. “What if it was something else?”

“Oh,” Selena said. And then, “Oh!”

Suddenly everyone was talking at once. Neville let them work off the first flush of their excitement and glanced over at Meghan again. She had a smug smile on her face, and her hands

were up, all fingers extended, in the traditional referee's sign for a successful shot on goal in Quidditch.

That's right, score one for me. Or I should say for us, for the whole DA. If we can make this work—if we can come up with enough tricks the Death Eaters haven't seen before, enough traps that will either drive them away or catch them and hold them—

He shooed the thought away. The time for big plans like that would come. Right now, his job was to start this part of the DA on their training and get them as ready as possible for the call.

Because the call will come. We're going to have to fight.

The only question is when.

Neville squirted a little water into his hand and drank it. *Here's hoping "when" stays "not now" for as long as possible.*

January became February, February turned into March, and Neville's hope was sustained. Life at Hogwarts went on as ever, DA practice falling into the round of classes, Quidditch, and clubs as though it had always been there. Professor Longbottom attended random practices, and usually proclaimed herself impressed by the time they were over.

Hermione continued to improve, though there was a severe setback on her first full moon that neither she nor Ron would talk about. "We took care of it," Ron said, with a set to his lips that discouraged even Ginny from asking more questions. Whatever "it" had been, though, the human Hermione was missing from classes for nearly a week, and Snape smirked at the cat on Ron's lap as he marked her absent. Harry kept a firm grip on Ron's arm during these episodes, and Neville held his foot ready to step on Draco's, but both Hermione's twin and her prospective mate contented themselves with glaring at their Potions professor in public and swearing at him in private.

Care of Magical Creatures classes resumed in the second week of February with a new professor, since Professor Grubbly-Plank apparently hadn't cared to take on the position full-time. Professor Sylvanus Kettleburn II was a slender, nervous young man, as unlike Hagrid as could have been imagined except for their shared love of animals. At their February Den, the Pride agreed that given the missing two and a half limbs of the former Professor Kettleburn, who had held the position before Hagrid, the current Professor Kettleburn had plenty to be nervous about.

On discovering that Professor Kettleburn had quarters in the castle, Harry made a request of Professor McGonagall. Three days later, the DA met for the first time in what was officially called the Rubeus Hagrid Memorial Training Center, but was always referred to by the people who used it as Hagrid's Place. Fang snapped at endless streams of water from the artillery's guns, allowed medics to bandage his limbs over and over, forced fleeing skirmishers to dodge him as they would any other harmless obstacle, and barked his loudest to teach the Flying Squad to ignore distractions in their fighting zone.

The second Gryffindor Quidditch match, against Hufflepuff, would have gone much better if it had not happened to fall the day after one of Hermione's bad nights. As it was, Angelina called a time-out after the third goal Ron let slip past him and conjured ropes tying him to his broom. "At least this way you won't fall off and get yourself killed," she said acidly in response to his half-awake protest. "Even if you might block the Quaffle on the way down."

Harry caught the Snitch as quickly as he could manage, but the Hufflepuff Chasers had already taken full advantage of Ron's tiredness and, as current slang would have it, "pulled an Ireland" on the Gryffindors. The term led Harry to wonder if, in catching the Snitch and bringing his team to within ten points of winning, he'd "pulled a Krum," but he refrained from asking anyone that question in favor of finding ways to cheer up Hermione and Ron, who were both convinced it was their fault the team had lost (pushing them, fully clothed, into the Den's bathtub at its "pool" size was eventually what did the trick).

The official Defense classes grew steadily harder, both in practice and in theory. After a particular essay assignment in mid-March, Professor Longbottom went to see Professor McGonagall with a particular scroll. Shortly thereafter, Professor Dumbledore received visitors, and spent a great deal of their time in his office nodding.

A few weeks later, on the night of the first Friday in April, the Headmaster prepared himself for another set of visitors, then summoned Kady the house-elf and sent her to fetch them.

"Tell the Pride," he said, "that it is time for their next task in the winning of the war."

The panel beside his fireplace grated aside barely three minutes later.

"It's part of one of Danger's prophecies, sir," said Harry, looking up from the scroll Dumbledore had given him. "The newest one she's had, over the Christmas holidays."

"So it is, Harry. Will you read the lines aloud so that everyone may hear them?"

Harry cleared his throat and began to read.

*Your task is now to other ways,
To end a spell of ancient days.
A curse once on your best-loved gift
Should start your thoughts in proper drift,
For why had hawk to take it on?
What stopped the wolf in days ago?
But ere your thoughts can reach their peak,
The far-off Seeker must you seek.*

"Can you make anything of it?" said Dumbledore, sitting back in his chair.

"We have a hawk and a wolf here," said Ginny, pointing at Ron and Harry. "Is this about them?"

“In part, yes.”

“Something Ron took because Harry couldn’t,” said Neville. “Or no, took *on* . That sounds more like doing something, like a task or a job.”

“Who puts a curse on a gift, though?” said Ron. “And why would anyone love it if there was a curse on it?”

Hermione dry-washed her hands for a moment. “It’s Danger’s prophecy,” she said, staring at her fingers. “That means it’s her ‘best-loved gift.’ But Danger doesn’t love things, except her books, and I don’t think she could pick just one she loves best. That means the gift probably isn’t a thing at all. It could be a person’s name, like ‘pearl’ means Meghan or ‘warrior’ Harry.”

“But whose name means ‘gift’?” Meghan asked. “I don’t think any of ours do, and not Dadfoot’s or Mama Letha’s or Moony’s either, and those are all the people Danger really loves. Except her parents, but I don’t think this is about them.”

“It isn’t,” said Luna. “But it is about a person Mrs. Danger loves very, very much. A person who was not stolen, or inherited, or born, but given to her.”

All eyes turned to Draco, who went a shade of pink normally only seen in the bedrooms of young girls. Luna twined her hand around his and smiled at him, and he squeezed it gratefully. “All right, so it’s me,” he said, rubbing at his cheeks with his free hand. “And that means the curse is probably the globe back in third year—you had to take that, Ron, because it was meant for a pureblood.”

“Harry could do it if it happened again now,” Meghan chimed in. “You’re half-blood ever since you and Neenie were twins.”

“Well, let’s hope it doesn’t happen again now,” Draco said, reaching over to tweak one of Meghan’s braids. “Waking up under that curse ranks as the single scariest moment of my life.”

Harry looked at the scroll in his hand again. “So that curse, and Ron taking it instead of me, is supposed to tell us what ‘spell of ancient days’ we have to undo,” he said, looking up at Dumbledore, the statement half a question.

Dumbledore nodded. “Meghan has also touched on the important factor,” he said. “The curse was specifically set to a pureblood male teen, was it not?”

“Best’s I remember,” said Draco.

“‘Male’ and ‘teenaged’ are simple enough to determine from the body of the individual.” Dumbledore looked from Draco to Ron with a smile. “But how did the curse know that its victim was pureblooded?”

Hermione shut her eyes. “Blood status in magic is like color on a house or a piece of furniture,” she said distantly, as though she were recalling something she had heard or read a long time ago.

“You can tell what it is, but it doesn’t make any difference to strength or weakness.” Her eyes opened. “That’s what Letha said when it happened, anyway. I’ve never read anything that said she was wrong.”

“She was not wrong. Blood status is, indeed, magically discernible.” Dumbledore looked intently at the Pride. “What I am asking you is, why?”

“Why?” Neville repeated blankly.

“Yes. Why.” Dumbledore inspected his fingernails as he spoke. “Such an arbitrary human construction as blood status, which makes no difference to either the quality or the quantity of magic controlled by any particular individual—why should it be as easy to determine, if one knows the proper spell, as the color of that same individual’s eyes or hair?”

“It... shouldn’t,” said Hermione. “Should it?”

“It should not,” Dumbledore confirmed. “But most wizards who know that such a spell exists have a personal stake in its existence. Without it, how could they know with whom they can safely fraternize and whom they must shun? So they dismiss any thought that it should not exist, because in their world, not only should it exist, it must.”

“But it shouldn’t.” Draco chewed his lip for a moment before going on. “Which means someone must have created it.”

“Precisely.” Dumbledore smiled. “I do enjoy working with young people who can think.”

“And the prophecy says we have to end it,” said Meghan, indulging in a brief wriggle of excitement. “Because if Voldemort knows how to use it—”

The Pride shuddered collectively at the thought.

“He could just round people up and test them,” said Ron. “And toss anyone who didn’t pass into Azkaban.”

“If he let them live at all,” Ginny added. “Why should he? They’re useless to him.”

Harry coughed, drawing the Pride’s attention, and looked back at Dumbledore. “What do we need to do, sir?” he asked, placing his hand for a moment against his hip where his dagger rested, sure that Dumbledore would catch the allusion.

We’ve sworn ourselves to you, hands and wands—and lives, if it comes to that. If you think we’re the best people for the job, then we’ll do it the best we know how.

“To start with, you must listen.” Dumbledore stood up, came around his desk, and flicked his wand at the front of it. A blackboard materialized, already covered in writing. “I beg your pardon for inflicting something very like a class on you at the end of the week, but I believe this is one lesson you will want to learn.”

Hermione dug into Ron's bag, sitting at her feet, and came up with parchment and quill. Ron retrieved his Charms text and laid it on her lap, and Draco uncapped a bottle of ink Luna handed him from her pocket and stuck it to the corner of the book with his wand. "Ready when you are, sir," he said, sitting back.

His eyes twinkling, Dumbledore gestured to the board. "This," he said, "is what I have been able to find out about the spell which governs the determination of blood status..."

Harry turned on the special sense in his brain which let him strip out the long words in his professors' lectures and repeat them to himself in language which made sense to him. The spell was actually two spells, one very old and very complex which existed continuously like the wards around Hogwarts, and one simple and quick like an incantation in Charms class. It was the first spell which actually determined a person's blood status, Dumbledore explained; the second spell just took a reading from the first one. If they could make the first spell stop working, then the second spell would be useless.

Like a braking charm on a broom that can't fly.

The problem was finding a way to break the first spell. So many people believed it was important that it was very powerful. The only way to decrease its power was to do the opposite of what gave it the power in the first place.

"What, just get a load of people together and have them all say they don't think blood matters?" said Ron.

Dumbledore smiled. "Almost, Mr. Weasley. Almost."

A wave of his wand, and the blackboard cleared and filled with writing again. Hermione was scribbling furiously.

Ron's idea was closer than he could have known. Dumbledore's plan to break the spell involved between twenty and fifty people, of all three blood statuses, all swearing to be friendly towards one another and keeping their vow for—

"A year?" Harry said aloud in disbelief.

"Not so impossible a task as you seem to think, Harry," Dumbledore said calmly. "They need not promise never to quarrel, only never to quarrel to the point of hatred. Teasing and rivalries are acceptable. Actively seeking to hurt someone else or publicly humiliate them are not."

"That's an awfully fine line, sir," said Ginny, looking worried. "You could argue a lot of things either way."

"A simple test may help." Dumbledore seemed happy to have his ideas challenged; his voice was clear and his eyes brighter than usual. "If you could truly laugh, however grudgingly, at the action you are considering were it done to you yourself, then it is likely acceptable to do to another. I

would suggest erring on the side of caution, of course, since different people can take different amounts of public scorn, but I find the rule a useful one.”

Hermione looked up from her scroll. “What else would they have to do, sir?” she asked. “Or be? Do they need to be young, like us?”

“Perhaps not young,” said Dumbledore. “But I would certainly prefer if it were Hogwarts students who undertook this task.”

“Why?” asked Luna. “Is the spell something to do with Hogwarts?”

“It is.” Dumbledore Vanished the blackboard. “As far as I can discern, the spell was cast from Hogwarts, and is anchored here. Those who have a valid tie to the school are therefore more likely to be able to destroy it.”

“And you’d like it best if the group had all four Houses involved,” said Harry as a piece fell into place in his mind. “Especially Slytherins. Right?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Why, yes, Harry. However did you guess?”

“Sheer dumb luck, sir.”

Draco coughed a word into his hand. Luna patted him gently on the back.

“We could do it with the DA,” said Neville, who’d been counting on his fingers for a few moments. “If we pick people who can keep their mouths shut—that’s if this is supposed to be secret, sir?” Dumbledore nodded. “I thought so. We can have a look through the members and take the ones we think we can trust to stay polite to each other for a year.”

“A year,” Draco repeated musingly, removing Luna’s hand from his back but not releasing it. “Sir, does this year have to start and end at any particular time?”

“I do not believe so, Draco. Why do you ask?” Dumbledore sat down behind his desk again.

“There are times of the year which are related to good and bad magic,” said Luna before Draco could speak. “Voldemort attacked Harry’s family on Halloween because it’s a traditional time for bad magic, didn’t he?”

“He did.” Dumbledore’s eyes were grave. “One of the darkest nights of the year. Another is the thirtieth of April, Walpurgis Night—but I interrupted you, Miss Lovegood, do go on.”

“It’s quite all right, Professor. What I was going to say is, if we start and end our year on a day of light magic, won’t that give us extra strength for it?”

“Or make people think we have extra strength,” Draco added. “Which is almost as good.”

“It might well. What day did you have in mind?”

“I didn’t yet,” said Luna, turning to look at the Pride. “Does anyone have a suggestion?”

“If we’re going for light, I’d say Midsummer’s Day,” said Ginny. “The longest day of the year must be symbolic of something.”

“Getting no sleep?” Ron said, grinning. “Midsummer sounds good to me. We’re still here then, so we can start off the year and then have a couple months when we don’t see nearly anybody so we’re not tempted to fight with them.”

Draco seemed to be counting on his fingers now, Harry noticed, and the sum he came to made him look worried, even frightened.

He’s had enough free passes. The second we get out of here, he is telling us what’s going on.

“Why don’t we use May Day instead?” Luna suggested, pressing Draco’s hand gently. “That will give us two months to settle into the vows before we get to the holidays. If we have to keep them constantly for a whole year, we’re more likely to break them.”

She knows whatever this is too. If he won’t talk, we can probably get it out of her. Harry smiled to himself. *She’s ticklish under her arms, isn’t she?*

“Or how about this,” said Draco with a smile that made him look as though he’d never worried in his life. “We won’t be able to keep this totally secret, not with more than twenty people involved in it. Why don’t we put about some version of what we’re doing, not necessarily the true one but admit that we’re doing big magic that lasts a year and needs all these people, and say we’re starting it at Midsummer, but *actually* start it on May Day? If someone—if something bad happens during the year, well, that’s two months’ grace we wouldn’t have otherwise.”

Harry felt his inner Wolf prick up his ears. *That narrows it down a bit. Between May Day and Midsummer of next year...*

“The way your mind works never fails to delight me, Draco,” said Dumbledore. “As it happens, I planned to suggest that you celebrate the ancient festivals of light as well as our common modern holidays with your friends throughout the year. The more markers you have for the passing of time, the more fellowship you demonstrate towards one another, the less power the spell will have when it comes time to dismantle it completely. However, in order to truly counter the spell, we must strike against all its points. It was designed to make pureblood, half-blood, and Muggleborn witches and wizards uneasy around one another, uncomfortable spending time together, and unwilling to work side by side for a common cause.”

“What will we be working on, sir?” asked Hermione.

“On this.” Dumbledore unrolled a scroll and held it up. “Suggested, I believe, by one of your own classmates.”

Harry squinted at the feminine handwriting. “I think the most important thing we can do to help

keep the war from being too bad..." he read aloud. "That's the essay we did last month for Professor Longbottom."

"It is." Dumbledore passed the scroll to Harry, his long forefinger indicating a place about halfway down the exposed portion. "Can you read from there, Harry?"

Harry found his place. "If Death Eaters start acting on their beliefs, no Muggleborn witch or wizard will be safe," he read. "Some of them are old enough and strong enough to fight back, but many are not. Also, most wizards and witches have Muggle friends or relatives that Death Eaters will attack to hurt them. I think there should be a place where people who are in danger and can't fight can come to be safe, a hidden place and secret, a sanctuary."

"Are we going to build that?" said Neville. "That sanctuary?"

"You and your yearmates, if I may so use the term." Dumbledore sketched a few lines in the air with his wand, leaving behind glowing trails which formed a picture like a child's drawing of a house. "You will, of course, have help, but the main force behind the project will be yours. If you accept it."

"Of course we'll accept it," said Draco. "It's the best idea I've heard in ages. Who wrote that essay, Harry?"

Harry unrolled the top of the scroll, which had loosely rerolled itself as scrolls did, and looked at the name.

Oh no. It would have to be her.

"I can't make it out," he fibbed. "Looks like they scribble when they sign their name, whoever they are."

"Let me see, maybe I can read it." Draco held out his hand.

"Does it really matter who thought it up?" Harry released the top of the scroll, letting it roll back up, and returned it quickly to Dumbledore. "What matters is that we're doing it."

And that you not have any more reasons to flirt with Amanda Smythe like you were doing all through the first half of term. She seems a perfectly nice girl, but she's not Pride, and there's something weird about her.

"You don't have to get all upset about it. I was just asking..." Draco's affronted look was suddenly replaced with the wickedest smile Harry had ever seen on his brother. Harry growled under his breath, a swearword in wolf language.

"Professor," Draco said, turning to Dumbledore. "Would it be a good idea to have some really big reason to celebrate at the start and the end of the year?"

"Yes," said Dumbledore, looking closely at Draco as though wondering what he was getting at. "I

had assumed that the beginning and ending of the work on the Sanctuary would suffice.”

“But we can’t be sure we’ll be done in exactly a year, sir.” Butter, if placed in Draco’s mouth at the moment, would have turned into ice cream. “We could get delayed and go overtime, or we could finish early. Wouldn’t it be better to have something else good scheduled for next May Day, so that we’ll be sure?”

Dumbledore tapped his fingertips together. “What did you have in mind?”

Draco’s smile widened until it could only be called a grin. “I think Harry and Ginny should get married.”

“*What?*”

The shout came simultaneously from at least three people, including, Harry realized, himself.

“Are you mad?” Ginny demanded. “That’s more than three months before I turn sixteen! Mum’d never stand for it!”

“She might if there were some other reason,” Draco said. “Something like finishing the year.”

“She’ll probably say we just came up with the year to get married sooner!” Harry half-shouted, then remembered where he was and fought some calm back into his voice. “I can see what you’re getting at, Fox, but it isn’t worth the fight we’d have over it. We can come up with something else to finish the year. How about it?”

Draco looked away. “The year isn’t the only reason,” he said very quietly.

All right, that does it. “Sir, may we be excused?” Harry said to Dumbledore. “I think there are some things we need to straighten out.”

“Of course, Harry.” Dumbledore straightened some papers on his desk. “The particular celebration to commemorate the ending of the year can be determined at a later date. May I take it as agreed, though, that you will contact the people you wish involved and be ready to begin the year on this May Day?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry after a quick glance around the Pride. “We’ll be ready.” *To the Den*, he signed over these words. *We’ll talk there.*

“Hermione, stay a moment?” Dumbledore requested as the Pride started towards the still-open tunnel to the Den. “I could use your help with one final detail.”

“Of course, sir.” Hermione pressed Ron’s hand. “You go on,” she whispered. “I’ll be all right.”

Draco, by the tunnel’s entrance, glanced over his shoulder at his twin with a look of such intense and mingled pride and sadness that Harry stepped back, missing Ginny’s toes by a fraction of an inch.

“Hey!”

“Sorry.” Harry moved out of the way, still watching his brother watch their sister. *He’s glad that she’s getting better, but there’s more to it than that... is it related to whatever’s between next 1 May and 24 June?*

He didn’t know, but he was going to find out.

No more excuses. No more “maybe later”s. This ends here and now.

Luna opened the door of the green bedroom and looked around. She’d seen it closing from the bathroom, so Draco had to be in here, but where?

If he’d thought, he could have run to the Quidditch pitch and got out onto the grounds. We’d have a much harder time finding him if he hid in the Forest as Snow Fox.

She sighed. *Maybe he secretly wants to be found. He wants it to be over with. All the hiding, the sneaking, the lying...*

The two months letting Amanda have her turn with Draco had been harder than Luna had expected. She hadn’t known she had so many possessive urges. It had been worrying to her at first—what if she’d been infested with Minie Mites?

But Daddy says it’s healthy of me to want Draco all to myself that way. It means I care a lot.

She glanced up at Alex’s portrait as a discreet cough sounded. A hand was poking around the edge of the otherwise empty frame, pointing towards the room’s large wardrobe. Luna coughed in return and started edging towards the wardrobe.

I don’t quite understand what I See when I Look at him together with her, though. It’s as if his being with her fits a pattern. A very old pattern, one that hasn’t been used in a long time, but a pattern. He feels it too, or he wouldn’t be so attracted to her.

But he loves me. He always has. She smiled a little. *Too bad that doesn’t change that she loves him. And neither of us would be willing to share for good.*

Sometimes, even for a Seer, the right way was hard to see.

Luna pulled open the wardrobe door. Draco glared at her and reached for its edge to shut it again.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Luna held onto it. “You need to come out of there.”

“Why?” His voice was hoarse, his face blotchy. He’d obviously been crying. “So I can tell them all—you know?”

“Yes.” She infused her voice with all the certainty she had on this topic, which was quite a lot.

“It’s time they knew. They may be able to see a way around it we can’t. And even if not, you can’t keep going on like this alone.”

“What about you? You aren’t complaining.”

“I’ve told Daddy,” Luna said, thinking about that conversation. Her father had been intrigued, rather than scandalized, at the possibility of his daughter’s going off with a Death Eater, and had come up with several theories as to what could have been happening in that moment. “He had some interesting ideas. And I told Mrs. Danger when I first had the vision, and she told the rest of your parents, didn’t she?”

Draco sagged back against the wall of the wardrobe, his eyes shut. “I can’t do this, Starwing,” he said quietly. “I can’t go out there and throw this pain on all of them. They deserve better than that.”

“All of us deserve better than what we have.” Luna tucked a strand of hair tenderly behind Draco’s ear. “We’re good people. We shouldn’t have to fight a war. But we still do. And we’re crazier even than I am if we try to fight the worst of it alone.”

Draco opened one eye a slit to glare at her. “Do you know how much I hate it when you make sense?”

Luna smiled. “Yes.”

A deep, grumbling sigh, and Draco swung his legs out of the wardrobe and stood up. “All right,” he said, holding out his hand to her. “Let’s go tell them. Together.”

“Together.” Luna took the hand in hers and squeezed it.

Six pairs of eyes were immediately fixed on them as they stepped out of the green bedroom. Draco sank into a tailor’s seat on the padded floor, Luna dropping down beside him to sit on her hip. “You might remember Luna had a vision over the summer that scared her a lot,” he began.

“It was the one where I scratched Draco’s arm and flew out the window,” Luna added, to several nodding heads from the rest of the Pride.

“That vision is the reason I suggested we change over to May Day from Midsummer, and that you two get married to mark the ending of the year,” Draco said to Harry and Ginny. Luna could feel him gathering his courage, and willed her own into him. “Because I’d like to be there.”

“What does a vision have to do with you being there?” Harry asked in his most controlled voice.

“The vision…” Draco swallowed once. “The vision showed my grave. With the date I’m going to die. 5 June, 1997.”

Hermione’s gasp resounded in the silence of the Den like the smashing of a holy relic.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 39: Claiming Sanctuary (Arc 6)

“Next June?” Ron said in disbelief. “You won’t even be seventeen!”

“Last time I looked, that wasn’t a requirement.” Draco tried a smile. It never reached his eyes. “Maybe we should try to get it made one. Put up signs like they have on kiddie rides. *You must be this old to die.*”

Hermione made a little mewling sound and launched herself forward. Draco opened his arms just in time as she impacted with his chest, and Luna quickly caught him against her shoulder, stopping him from going over backwards.

Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it. *She’s barely touched us in months—she was getting to where we could sit next to her, go skin to skin for a moment like with a scent-touch, but she wasn’t ready to hug us again or even hold our hands—*

Judging by the look on Draco’s face, what could be seen of it over Hermione’s shoulder, he was going through the same process of astonishment, though with an added layer of guilt about being the reason Hermione had broken her solitude sooner than she was ready. Harry caught his eye and gave him an alpha’s *Snap out of it* glare, though he managed to hold back what he was really feeling, which could be best put into words as *You’ve known about this for nine months and you haven’t told anyone? Did you want to be more screwed up in the head than you already are?*

Of course, knowing Draco, the answer was probably yes.

Luna had her wand out and was drawing a circle in the air above Draco and Hermione’s heads. A wall of gray smoke surrounded them as she finished, and she scooted forward so that she could see the rest of the Pride around the Privacy Spell. “There was more to the vision,” she said quietly. “I don’t like it, but I think you should hear it all now that you know part of it.”

She told it simply, in few words, but Harry had no trouble picturing the place she was describing, though he’d only been there in the wintertime and the vision had been set in the summer. It made sense, in a dark and awful way, that the Pack would bury the second of their cubs to die in the same ground as the first. For a moment, he wondered if his parents would come for Draco the way they had for Marcus, or if it would be Draco’s own mother who would be waiting...

Only it won’t be either, because it isn’t going to happen like that. It can’t. Draco’s got the whole Pack and Pride looking out for him, even more now that we know about this—how could he die?

But the words rang hollow against the inside of Harry’s ears. Having people who loved you and wanted to protect you, he knew from more experience than he wanted to think about, was no guarantee that you wouldn’t die.

Especially in a war.

“Luna, I can’t believe you’re so upset about this,” Ginny was saying as Harry came back to awareness of his surroundings. “Yes, what you said to Malfoy makes it sound like you were turning to his side, but all that means is that you were lying! You have to have been!”

“I wasn’t lying,” Luna said quietly, her eyes on the padded floor. “Neither of us said anything that wasn’t true at all.”

“How do you know?” Ron asked.

“I can See it when people lie. Or maybe Hear is a better word.” Luna tapped her right ear with a finger. “It’s something in their voice, like an echo of the way their words should go, the same way I can See an aura around an Animagus or a person who’s disguised with Polyjuice. Sometimes, if the truth is very strong, I can even Hear it within the lie. But I didn’t See or Hear any lies in that vision. Every word we said was true.”

Before anyone could respond to this, a loud knock sounded on the kitchen door. Neville, who was closest, started to stand up, but Harry waved for him to stay put, so as not to dislodge a shivering Meghan.

I’ll bet I know who this is...

“Come in!” Harry called.

The door opened, admitting Padfoot and Moony in a two-way tie and winning Harry his mental bet. Letha was just behind them, and Meghan let go of Neville to latch onto her mother and begin crying for real. Danger waved Neville over and said a few words to him, and he nodded and went into the kitchen, shutting the door behind him.

Maybe his mum wants to see him.

Moony had disappeared inside the Privacy Spell masking Draco and Hermione, and Padfoot was helping Letha to sit down without letting go of Meghan. Danger made her way across the floor towards the green bedroom where Luna stood waiting, though she stopped halfway there beside Harry to bend down and kiss the top of his head. “Surprised?” she murmured.

“Not really,” Harry admitted. “Your pendants?”

“Here, feel.” Danger guided his hand to the side of her neck. The metal was noticeably warmer than her skin. “And this is cooler than it was. I’d guess none of yours went off because you’re already all here, where the trouble is.”

“Makes sense.” Harry got to his feet, so as to continue this conversation more on a level, though these days he was looking down where he’d once looked up. Ginny, he saw in passing, was talking quietly to Ron, who was still shaking his head as though denying what he’d heard could make it stop being true.

Like I’m doing any different?

He put that thought aside and looked at Danger again. “You knew,” he said, making it a statement and not a question.

“Luna told me the day it happened.” Danger scent-touched him, smiling lopsidedly as she reached up to his cheek. “I’ll need to have a word with the house-elves, they’re obviously feeding you far too much, you keep getting taller. Yes, Harry, we four knew about this. Do you think we ought to have told you?”

Yes, was Harry’s immediate response, which he sat on. “I don’t know,” he said aloud. “I wish we’d found out sooner, but it wasn’t yours to tell. And it isn’t like knowing will change anything—or will it?” Something from one of Professor Jones’ classes last month had just occurred to him. “Aren’t there two types of visions, one that you can’t change and one that you can, and you never know which type you’ve had until after the time comes that the thing you Saw happens or doesn’t happen?”

“It’s a good thing I’m your mother, no one else would have understood that,” said Danger, laughing a bit under the words. “That is one of the theories of foreknowledge, yes, that visions may be either preventable or predestined. I understand there are very spirited arguments over whether or not the Seer can tell which sort she, or he, is having. But does it really make a great deal of difference at this point, love?”

Harry stared at his Pack-mother for a second, torn between asking her at the top of his lungs if she’d lost her mind and simply Stunning her on the assumption that she had. His voice, all by itself, came up with the compromise of “Yes?”

“Are you sure?” Sadness tinged Danger’s smile, but it was real for all that. “We know we’re in a war, Harry. People will die. Other people may turn their coats, go over to the other side. Those groups might or might not include Draco and Luna. We can’t know for sure until we get there.”

“Yes, we could,” Harry pointed out. “If it was a vision that will happen no matter what.”

“And if it was?” Danger’s brown eyes, with only the occasional flicker of blue betraying her connection to Moony, held Harry’s green in a steady gaze. “If you knew without a doubt that this vision were true—that in a little over a year’s time, Draco will die and Luna change sides—what would you do about it today, here and now?”

Harry started to answer, then stopped as his brain caught up with his voice. “I don’t know,” he said at last. “I wish I did.”

“So do we, Harry-kins.” Danger hugged him tight, rubbing her head against his as she did when they were both in wolf form. “So do we.”

I liked it better when I thought parents knew all the answers. Harry watched as Danger finished her interrupted trip across the Den and followed Luna inside the green bedroom. I probably ought to be happy that they trust us enough to let us know they’re not perfect.

But somewhere inside him still lived a little boy who knew, with the certainty of a prophet who has seen his god face to face, that the four grownups in his life could fix every problem and solve every mystery. Hurts and scary things came sometimes, but then they went away, because the Pack was stronger than they were.

And you know what? We still are. Dropping to the floor, Harry squirmed into Wolf's shape and bounded over to Padfoot, who was curled up in dog form beside Letha and Meghan. *We're going to get hurt. Badly hurt, if the vision is true. But we knew that would happen—they knew it would happen, when they took me out of that cupboard. They knew any family of mine were going to be hip-deep in this war, and they accepted that.*

He lay down beside his godfather, fitting his belly against the older canine's back. *I've accepted it for myself, and the rest of the Pride must have, or they wouldn't be here. We're going to fight this war, and damn the consequences, because the consequences of not fighting would be a whole lot worse.*

Padfoot whuffed a greeting to Wolf as they settled into place together. Meghan lifted her head and smiled tearfully at him, and Letha reached over to scratch between his shoulder blades. Wolf whined in pleasure and twisted so that her fingers reached the itchiest places.

If Draco is really going to die, he vowed to himself, this is what we're going to do for him. Make the rest of his life the best it can be—and then get whoever kills him, and do it with style.

As for Luna... He shrugged, which coincidentally brought Letha's nails into contact with another itchy spot. *Talk to Hermione about some variation on the Tongue-Tying Jinx we're using for the DA, to make sure Luna can't tell what she knows even if she does decide to change sides. Maybe even an Unbreakable Vow, though that's a little drastic...*

But then again, so was one of his Pride becoming a Death Eater.

Worry later, was Wolf's contribution to Harry's cogitations. Get scratched now.

It was the best advice Harry'd heard all night. He took it.

No matter if the vision's true or false, we have a year.

Let's make it a good one.

Within the Privacy Spell, Moony the lion lay in a tight curl. Snow Fox had burrowed up under one of his front paws, and Neenie the cat had positioned herself between him and the rest of the world. From the way their ears were twitching, Moony knew they were having one of their silent conversations, but he had no way of listening in.

Not that I think I'd want to. She's probably still berating him for not telling her this before, and he's trying to justify himself, not realizing that shouting at him is her way of trying to keep it from

ever happening. If he's available for scolding, in her mind, he can't be dead or in serious danger of dying. So as long as she can scold him for something...

He wished he could believe as much himself, but he knew painfully well that the world inside a person's mind and the world outside didn't always, or even usually, match up. Just because you hadn't made your peace with someone was no reason they couldn't die.

But right now, if it brings her comfort, let her believe it. She needs all the comfort she can get.

A flutter of movement near his paw, and Hermione was sitting up, pushing her hair out of her face. "You can turn back," she said, her eyes moving from Snow Fox to Moony as she spoke. "I don't mind."

Moony rumbled dubiously. *Are you sure, Kitten? We've been working towards it for a while now, but this is quite a time to take that step...*

"Please," Hermione added. "I need you."

Curse the girl, she's been talking to her big sister again.

I beg your pardon? said a distracted voice in the back of his mind.

Nothing, nothing. Moony provided the mental equivalent of a shoing hand as he rearranged himself into a position which would be physically possible for a human to assume. **Just thinking about you, no need to stop what you're doing.**

Understood. Love you. A fluttering feeling like a kiss, and the link closed again.

"Why now?" Draco asked Hermione as Remus slid back into his human form. They were holding hands, so Remus assumed the vocal speech was for his benefit. "Not that I'm not glad for it, but why now?"

Hermione scooted around the interior of the Privacy Spell until she was next to Remus. Cautiously, he extended an arm, and she leaned into it, pulling Draco into her embrace and allowing Remus to hold them both. "Because you need me now," she answered. "And your need is greater than mine."

As if the words had been a prechosen signal, Draco took one shaky breath and started to cry, by the sound of it letting go of every tear he'd been hiding since he'd first seen the name and date on the gravestone in the vision. Hermione cradled him against her shoulder and stroked his hair, humming deep in her throat in the closest approximation of a purr her human form could produce. Remus drew them close, breathing their mingled scent, and fought his own tears. He had them now, warm and alive in his arms, and no future was certain until it happened.

Fine words, but no words ever stopped pain from coming yet.

"I don't want to die," Draco sobbed, turning his head to press his face against Remus' robes.

“Why me? I’m not done living yet—I barely even started! It isn’t fair!”

Life isn’t fair, Fox. Remus bent his head to lay his cheek on the top of his Pack-son’s head. You just have to take what comes and do your best with it. But you know that already, and it wouldn’t help you now to hear it again.

One tear escaped the corner of his eye and fell into Draco’s hair, lingering for a moment on the fine strands before soaking in. *I wish I could take this from you. I’m not done living either, but I’ve come farther than you have, and I’ve always known my life would be shorter than some. If I could find some way to undo the binding on Danger, to leave her alive and take your place in this...*

But no. You’d never forgive me if I did that, nor would she. And I think Sirius and Letha might have a few things to say about it as well, not to mention Harry and Meghan and your twin here. He lifted a hand to Hermione’s face to wipe away the tears that had started to spill from her eyes, and felt almost guilty at his rush of joy when she neither flinched nor shivered away from his touch.

This is the dark side of our Pack, the trouble with our lives being so intertwined—when one of us goes away, nothing ever seems quite right. And from this going away, there will be no return.

We’ll rebuild, once the shock is over. We’ll find new patterns, new paths through our days. The wound of your loss will, eventually, heal.

His fingers slid across the raised line on Hermione’s cheek.

But it will leave our souls scarred forever.

By unspoken consent, the night after the adults left became an impromptu Den, so it was to a pajama-clad Pride that Hermione explained why Dumbledore had asked her to stay behind.

“He thinks the ‘far-off Seeker’ might be Viktor,” she said, rubbing Snow Fox’s ears where he lay in her lap. “He’s studied the spell we’re supposed to be breaking with our year, and it was done with very old, very Dark magic. The Hogwarts library won’t have the books that would tell him what he needs to know about it.”

“But Durmstrang’s will,” said Ginny. “They’ve always been more interested in Dark Arts there.”

“Why doesn’t he just ask whoever’s Head there now?” Harry said, reheating his hot chocolate, which had started to get tepid.

“He doesn’t want it to get about what we’re doing, at least not before we start.” Hermione held a bit of shortbread where Snow Fox could nibble at it. “It’ll be harder to stop us with pure magic once we start the year than it would be before we begin.”

“With pure magic?” Ron repeated. “What else is there?”

“Once the year starts, lots of things,” said Neville, who had returned from his conversation with his mother around the same time the house-elves had delivered the evening’s snacks. “Getting someone who’s part of it to betray the others, or two people to have a bad fight. We’ll have to pick out who we want to do this really carefully—there’re some people in the DA I barely trust behind me with a wand or a potion piece.” This, after two months of experimentation, had become the accepted name for what the DA artillery carried. “And a year’s a long time.”

“Too long some ways,” said Meghan a bit hoarsely. “Not long enough for others.”

Everyone avoided each other’s eyes for a moment.

“Well, we know what we have to do next,” Harry said when he thought he could trust his voice again.

“What?” said several people at once.

“Neenie, Luna, Neville, and Meghan.” Harry pointed at his Pridemates as he named them. “You four are going to pick out who’ll be in our year. Get good, steady people, the kind who’ll understand the difference between a disagreement and a fight. Remember, you don’t have to love them, you just have to be able to put up with them.”

“Right,” said Neville as Meghan nodded.

“Do you want me to watch them and see if I think they’ll make trouble?” Luna asked, her usual serenity back and unruffled as ever. “It would be easier if someone asked them questions about it. Then I’ll be able to Hear if they’re lying when they answer.”

“Got that?” Harry said, looking from Hermione to Neville. “Questions. Don’t be insulting, but try and cover as much ground as you can. We’ll only get one shot at this.”

“What about us?” said Ginny. “What’ll we be doing while they’re picking out people?”

“We four,” Harry indicated himself, Ginny, Ron, and Draco, “are going exploring. We’re taking the Map, my Cloak, and a lunch, and I hope none of you needed this weekend for homework, because we’re going to find a place to build a Sanctuary, and we’re not coming back until we do.”

He’d better have been kidding about the not coming back thing. I have two feet due for Professor Flitwick on Monday, another foot and a half for Professor Sinistra on Tuesday, and Professor Jones keeps dropping hints about another project...

Ginny tucked an extra pair of socks into her pocket, just in case.

The explorers met in the entrance hall, skirting Filch and Mrs. Norris, who gave them matching nasty looks but said nothing, probably because not even Filch’s interpretation of the rules could make being in a public area of the school at nine o’clock in the morning on a Saturday look bad.

Though I'm sure he'd love to try.

“So where are we starting?” Draco asked, fastening his outdoor cloak.

“Out by the lake.” Harry led the way out the big oak doors. “Near that big boulder, you know the one.”

“You mean where the...” Ron coughed into his hand. “...the you-know-what lets out?”

“That’s the one.”

As they approached the boulder, Ginny noticed a shimmering in the air above it. She was just about to mention it when it shot down to ground level and turned into decidedly more than a shimmering.

“What do you want here?” demanded the Bloody Baron, glaring at them all in turn.

Harry stepped half a pace forward and gave the Baron a respectful bow. “We’re searching for a safe place, sir,” he said. “Somewhere to hide our friends from people who want to hurt them.”

“Hmph.” The Baron turned away. “Search somewhere else,” he said, seemingly to the lake. “This spot belongs to me today. Go back to your beginnings, and leave me to mine.”

He vanished again, leaving only the vague disturbance in the air Ginny had seen at first.

“Go back to your beginnings?” Draco repeated as the half-Pride retreated from the boulder. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Remind me why we were going there again?” Ron asked Harry over this.

Harry shrugged. “The Den’s underground, as far as we’ve ever been able to tell. The Chamber of Secrets is too. I thought we might be able to find something else underground, a room or a cave no one else knew about. A tunnel seemed like a good place to start.”

Their wanderings had brought them within sight of Hagrid’s Place. Ginny smiled at the sight of two or three girls of the DA, taking it in turns to scratch Fang with one hand while they practiced their quick-draw technique with the other.

“Go back to your beginnings,” Draco said again, following Ginny’s line of sight. “I don’t think he meant for us to go home...”

“Beginning as students,” Ginny picked up the thought. “We all began as students here the same way. Hagrid met us at the train.”

“Took us down that path to the lake,” recalled Ron. “All those little boats we came across in.”

“No more’n four to a boat,” Harry quoted. “I remember we got split up from you, Fox, we had to

wait for you when we got to the other side...”

Ginny stiffened, and heard Harry’s simultaneous intake of breath. Draco’s eyes lit up and Ron brightened only a second later.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” said Harry.

“I think we are,” said Ron. “But how do we get there from here?”

“There were steps that led right up to the front door.” Draco pivoted, peering towards Hogwarts. “They shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“Come on, then!” Ginny took off running, hearing her Pridemates’ heavier steps behind her.

The tunnel to the Hogwarts Den might be closed to them today, but the harbor where the first years’ boats moored was always open.

The cave was just as quiet and cool as Ginny remembered it, the little boats bobbing against their lines as the waves on the lake rose and fell. The four Pridemates spread out, running their hands along the walls, searching for any sign of a secret. Harry had the Map open, and was frowning over it.

“What’s wrong?” Ginny asked, coming to stand beside him.

“This.” Harry jabbed a finger down. “It keeps coming and going—look, there it is again.”

Ginny looked, and saw a thin section of green lines appear for an instant before fading away again. “Is it only there when we do something?” she said. “Like the doors that have to be tickled, or the one staircase that goes from up to down if you sneeze while you’re climbing it?”

“I don’t know. At first I thought it was triggered by talking, but it showed up when we were all quiet—there it is! Everyone, freeze!”

Ron stopped in the middle of leaning out over the water to take a lantern from one of the boats. Draco was standing near the edge of the dock, both hands on the rock wall. Ginny held her breath, watching the lines on the Map blur for an instant, then stay solid.

“Ron,” Harry said under his breath. “Stand up and back away.”

Ron took a careful step backwards from the water’s edge and went still again.

“All right, you can move. It’s not you. Draco? Come towards me, one step.”

Draco sidled to his right. Immediately, the lines faded.

“Ah-ha.” Harry waved his brother back to his former place. “I don’t know if it’s specifically you

or just someone standing there, but—hold it—when you're there, the Map says there's a passage —" He stopped two paces away from Draco. "Here."

"How'll you know if it's really there?" Ron asked.

"Like this." Harry thrust out his hand towards the rock.

It went through as though nothing more solid than smoke barred its way. Ron whistled in amazement, and Ginny held back a shiver at the sight of Harry's arm apparently entombed to the elbow in solid rock.

"Can I move yet?" Draco asked.

"No!" Harry snatched his arm back. "All right, now you can. Let's see if it stays now that it knows we've found it."

Draco stepped away from the spot which had triggered the passage's opening, looking up and down at his surroundings as though memorizing the spot. Harry felt at the wall. "It doesn't seem to—wait, I lied, here it is." His arm disappeared again, and the rest of him followed. "It's all right!" his voice echoed back from within the wall. "There's room for everyone, you can come in!"

"Someone does know where we are, right?" Ron asked.

Draco shook his head. "Not a soul."

"Maybe the Bloody Baron," Ginny added. "But I don't think he'll care if we disappear."

"Thanks, that makes me feel so much better about this."

"I'm your sister. It's my job."

Draco in the lead, Ron bringing up the rear, they entered the hidden passage Harry had vanished into.

This might have started as a natural tunnel in the rock, Ginny noticed as they walked, but someone had improved it. Her wandlight picked out several places where weak spots had been braced or low openings cut larger. Ron still had to duck through several of them, but no one had to crawl, and they caught up with Harry in only two minutes of walking, mostly downhill. He was standing in a cave about the size of Ginny's bedroom at the Burrow, peering around with the aid of a ball of fire which he'd set to hover over his head.

Just when I'm about to forget how weird we all are even for wizards and witches, someone finds a way to remind me...

"Three ways to go from here," Harry said, pointing them out. "That one sounds like it leads down to the lake, listen." The slap of water did indeed come from the passage on the left, to which he

was pointing. “So that leaves these other two. Which one first, do you think?”

Draco’s head turned, as though he were listening to something. “First,” he repeated, his voice dreamy. “We aren’t the first to be here.”

“How do you know?” Harry asked.

“Someone had to hide that entrance,” said Ron. “Why bother, unless they’d left something down here?”

“And someone cleaned up that tunnel we came in by,” Ginny said. “It was probably a lot harder to get through before they fixed it.”

“The first to come here is still here, see.” Draco moved between Ron and Ginny, his steps unusually gliding. His voice sounded different, too, Ginny realized—it had picked up a lilting quality she hadn’t heard from him before. “We will find her if we come this way.” He ducked under the low arch of the tunnel to the right. “Will you come?” he asked, turning back to look at them.

Ginny swallowed. It might just be the effect of her and Ron’s lit wands and Harry’s fire, but Draco’s eyes looked... creepy. Almost as if they were shining with their own, inner light...

“We’re coming,” said Harry, waving Ginny and Ron in behind him. “Just give us a second.” He turned to face the Weasleys. “Stay ready,” he breathed. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t think it’s normal.”

“Gee, what a surprise,” Ron muttered.

Ginny kicked him in the shin and followed Harry into the tunnel. It was much shorter than the first one—fifteen steps and they were into the next cave. Water dripped from its ceiling, leaving stone trails behind it in several places. Draco stood in its center, staring at the right-hand wall. Ginny didn’t blame him.

The cave was a tomb. A stone sarcophagus lay on a low shelf of rock against the wall, its occupant carved life-size on its lid. Her wrinkled face looked troubled, as though even in death she hadn’t found peace. Gnarled hands held a slender wand, which pointed towards one of the back corners of the cave. As one, the four Pridemates turned to follow its line.

A large tunnel gaped at the other side of the tomb. Ginny frowned, consulting her mental map. “If the tunnels run straight, that should take us to the same place as the other tunnel out of that main cave,” she said.

“Wonder who she is?” said Ron, aiming his wandlight at the sarcophagus. “There’s no carvings on here, no name or anything.”

“There’s something up on the wall.” Harry waved a hand, and the crude letters sparkled as tiny flames glimmered to life within them. “It looks like Latin. *Filia serpulae sum, sed non mala.*”

“I am the serpent’s daughter,” Draco translated, still in the same singing tone as before. “But I am not evil.” He took two steps closer to the sarcophagus, looking down at the stone woman lying atop it. “Not that she ever believed it, not after what she did—for all that anyone could ever say to her, look you, she was still sure that her soul was torn in two by her actions, that she would rest unquiet forever, seeking through the ages for some way to redeem herself.”

His head snapped up, and he went rigid, staring at the wall beneath the words. “I see it now as I did not then,” he breathed. “A cunning trap, worthy of the one who sprang it. I was hurt, the boy too young, and she had not the strength to take us both... the water came down so fast, there was no time to choose, whoever was left would die...”

He reached for the carved hand of the woman on the sarcophagus. Ginny started forward to grab him, but Harry was faster—flames sprang up around the woman’s figure, startling Ginny into a gasp and making Ron take a step back.

Draco pulled his hand away and stared at the flames in confusion. “That gift, here?” he said. “Have the Houses reconciled? Perhaps the time is come indeed, then...”

Two deliberate steps backwards brought him into the center of the room again. He turned around, smiled at his Pridemates, and collapsed, crumpling like an empty set of robes.

Ginny caught him before he hit the ground and lowered him the last few inches, getting her hand against his neck as she did. “He’s alive,” she said. “But he’s chilled through. Harry?”

“On it.” Harry pointed at his brother. Tiny blue flames appeared all over Draco’s robes, warm but not hot to Ginny’s hands as she laid him in a more comfortable position. “What was that?”

“It looked like he was being possessed,” Ron said, aiming his wandlight down the tunnel they hadn’t entered by. “But he wasn’t fighting it.”

“It didn’t seem evil.” Ginny looked around at the room. “None of this does. Sad, but not evil.”

“He sounded like he knew her, whoever she was,” said Harry, nodding towards the stone woman. “And that bit about the Houses... it says on the wall ‘serpent’s daughter,’ and he said that right after I used fire...”

Draco stirred. “Wha’happened?” he mumbled.

“We’re not sure,” said Ginny. “Can you open your eyes?”

“Maybe. How d’they work?”

“Eyelids go up,” said Harry. “It lets you see all kinds of pretty lights.”

“Remind me to hit you when I can move next.” Draco opened one eye a fraction. “Where are we?”

“Underground,” said Ron, his back still to Draco as he peered down the unexplored corridor. “We

came in through the harbor.”

“That I remember.” Draco got the other eye opened, and after a moment of struggle focused on Ginny. “Walked through this long tunnel, found Harry in a little cave, and then I was on the floor.” He tried to push himself upright, but his elbows wouldn’t take his weight. Ginny slid her arm behind him and lifted, then braced him as he looked around. “Something’s different...”

“This isn’t the same cave we were in at first,” said Harry. “Do you remember anything between catching up to me and now?”

“No.” Draco started to shake his head and stopped. “Should I?”

Harry and Ginny traded a look over Draco’s head. *Tell him later*, was the silent consensus.

“Maybe,” Harry said diplomatically, coming forward to take Ginny’s place holding Draco up. “How about we talk about it when we’re out of here?”

“Kay.” Draco leaned back against Harry’s arm. “I think I’ll be all right in a second.”

“Good, because you’re going to want to see this,” said Ron, leaning back in from the tunnel. “Harry, I think I’ve found what we were after...”

Ginny got to her feet and ducked around her brother, lighting her wand again as she left the area Harry’s fire was illuminating. This tunnel went uphill, she noticed, and there was no longer water dripping from the ceiling—

She stopped in her tracks and stared.

Yes, I’d say this is just about what we wanted.

Footsteps sounded behind her, and she moved to one side as Ron came out of the tunnel, followed by Harry and Draco moving in tandem. Harry’s fireball zipped past them and went to hover near the ceiling, brightening as it went.

“Well?” said Ron, waving his hand at the cavern. “You think it’ll do?”

It was half again the size of the Quidditch pitch, Ginny estimated, and ten feet high if it was an inch. The floor was almost flat, showing only some strange ropelike formations underfoot. Small, alcove-like caves lined the walls, a deep hole within the one nearest Ginny echoing with the gurgles of rising and falling water. To their left was another tunnel, probably leading back to the small cave where they’d started out.

“Only one way in or out,” Harry said, guiding Draco to a small boulder a short ways around the curve of the wall and helping him sit down. “Two if you count that tomb place, but I think we should seal that off. Whoever she is in there, she deserves her privacy.”

And we don’t want anybody else getting taken over by a possessing spirit, no matter how friendly

it seems, Ginny finished silently.

“Got its own water supply,” said Ron, pointing to the cave Ginny had already noticed. “We can always conjure food, or get the house-elves to bring it in for us.”

“Do the Anti-Apparition wards come down this far?” Draco asked, looking around. “We should ask.”

“We will,” said Harry. “But I’m betting they do. We’ll want to get someone to check it for hostile magic, too, but as long as it comes up clean for that, it’s just about ideal for Sanctuary-building.”

Ron walked out into the center of the cavern, gazing at the walls. “What are the odds of finding a place like this first try?” he said with a grin. “Are we not the most lucky bastards ever?”

His words echoed back and forth among the caves, bouncing into Ginny’s ears in pieces. *Find... this... not... luck...*

Draco stiffened. “Please tell me I’m not the only one who just heard that,” he said quietly, looking at Harry and Ginny. “And while you’re at it, what was with the mausoleum back there?” He jerked his head towards the tomb-cave.

“I don’t know,” said Harry, watching Ron spin in circles under the illuminating fire. “But I think we should get back upstairs and tell the others we’ve found what looks like a perfect spot.”

Found. Ginny glanced back down the hall towards the cave where the serpent’s daughter lay in state on her tomb. *Or were led to.*

“Let’s close that up before we go,” she suggested, waving towards the tomb. “Just so no one else decides to go exploring in there.”

“Sounds like a good plan,” said Harry, drawing his wand.

Draco squinted back down the tunnel. “Funny,” he said distantly. “I didn’t get too good a look at her face, but she reminds me of someone...”

“*Wingardium Leviosa,*” Harry interrupted loudly, levitating the boulder on which Draco was sitting. “Whoops, sorry, bad aim, I wanted the one next to you...”

“Oh, like hell you did.” Draco slid off the boulder and pulled out his own wand. “Race you to get it done. *Wingardium Leviosa.*”

“We’ll do the one in the other cave,” said Ginny, beckoning Ron to follow her. “The sooner we’re finished, the sooner we can go.”

And the sooner I can try and forget that we’ll be sharing our Sanctuary with somebody who’s been dead for a very long time.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 40: A Matter of Pride (Arc 6)

Eight Warriors spread out over the vastness of the harbor cavern, peering into shadows with the aid of lit wands and fireballs which bobbed over heads. Draco, declaring himself fully recovered after a leisurely lunch, had brought his broomstick along, and was circling high above the rest, occasionally swooping down to examine something more closely.

Hermione knelt beside one of the long, striped markings on the floor, running her fingers along it. "Pahoehoe," she said aloud.

"Pa what-ee what-ee?" said Ron.

Hermione laughed. "Pahoehoe," she repeated. "It comes from the Hawaiian language, it means this kind of rock with long lines that make it look like rope. But I thought it only happened in volcanic rock, when very hot and thin lava cooled."

"Volcanic?" said Neville, frowning. "There aren't any volcanoes around here."

"Maybe there were, when this cavern was made." Hermione stood up and dusted off her hands. "Or maybe it means something else. Harry!"

Harry turned around from where he was looking at a section of wall. "Yeah?"

"Could you melt a piece of the rock in here without burning us all to death?"

"Is that a challenge?"

"No. And I don't actually need you to do it," Hermione added quickly. "Just... could you?"

Harry placed a hand on the wall and concentrated. "I think so," he said. "I'd want to practice first, to be sure I could channel that much heat that precisely, but yeah, I could melt this. Why?"

Luna slid a foot across the floor. "It's smooth," she remarked. "The other room and the passages have much rougher floors. This almost looks polished."

"Except for these places." Meghan started to walk along one of the markings Hermione had been examining, heel to toe with a dancer's precision. The rest of the Pride moved out of her way. "Some of them are by themselves, and others join up with different ones."

"Everybody get against the walls," Draco called from above. "I see something!" He dived and landed neatly next to Hermione. "Think you can come up?" he asked, holding out a hand diffidently. "It's your area too."

Hermione took the hand, pressed it once, and mounted the broom behind her twin without hesitation. Ron watched them take off with a fond smile on his face that lasted until Ginny

elbowed him in the ribs. “Pay attention,” she hissed.

“To what?”

“I don’t know! Something other than how Hermione’s arse looks from below!”

“I wasn’t looking at her—her rear end!”

“Oh, like hell you weren’t!”

Above, Hermione squeaked once and began to laugh. Draco was grinning as he brought the broom down again. “Good spotting, Pearl,” he said, hugging his little sister. “I wouldn’t have thought to look at the way the lines joined up without you.”

“What’s so special about the way the lines join up?” Ron asked, rubbing the place Ginny’s elbow had impacted.

“Runes,” said Hermione, recovering her breath. “They form runes. Someone put them there on purpose.”

“I thought you said they happened naturally when melted rock cooled,” said Ginny. “How could someone craft runes out of melted rock?”

No sooner had she finished the last word than her eyes widened, and she turned to look at Harry. So did the rest of the Pride.

Harry shrugged. “Like I said, I’d have to practice. But I don’t see any reason why not.”

“And we haven’t even told you what they say,” said Draco, digging in his pocket. “You remember we were a little worried about this place, we thought it might be haunted or dangerous?”

Seven cautious nods.

“If it’s haunted, it’s only by good spirits,” said Hermione. “And the people who made this place would have sealed it off if it were dangerous.”

“How do you know?” Neville asked.

“Because we know them,” said Draco. “Personally.” He unrolled the scroll he’d found and accepted the quill Ginny was holding out to him, then scrawled down several runes. “This is what it says from up there. The top line is the rune for small with a personal-name modifier, the middle one is a past-tense being verb, and the bottom is a near-distance location indicator.”

“In English, please?” said Ron.

Hermione grinned. “It says,” she announced, “‘Paul Was Here.’”

Laughter echoed around the cavern for a good five minutes.

“I can just see him doing that, too,” said Harry, wiping his eyes. “He’d climb up... there.” He pointed to a ledge most of the way to the ceiling, opposite the entrance. “And melt the rock in lines, and let them flow just a little so they’d be obvious before he cooled them off again.”

“And Maura would get on his case for it.” Ginny planted her hands on her hips and mimicked the voice of Gryffindor’s daughter. “*Dad!* Paul’s playing with fire again!”

“In the best tradition of big sisters everywhere,” said Hermione, smiling fondly. “So are we agreed, then? This is where we’ll build our Sanctuary?”

“I can’t think of a better place.” Harry leaned back on his hands. “All in favor?”

“Aye!” chorused the Pride. And though the echoes seemed to hold more voices than had originally spoken, they were friendly, so no one minded.

Too much.

Harry detained Luna in the entrance chamber as Neville and Meghan led the way out to the harbor. “Draco went over a bit odd in here earlier,” he said quietly. “Is there something...”

Luna nodded. “There is a presence,” she said, her eyes drifting out of focus. “A presence, and the shadow of a presence.”

“Beg pardon?” Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ginny tactfully herding Draco and Hermione out of earshot, but hanging back herself. Ron had also remained, and was keeping a dubious watch on the sealed entrance to the mausoleum.

“The spirit who touched Draco is still here,” Luna clarified. “He’s watching. It’s what he does. There are also traces of another spirit. She’s gone now, but she must have been here a very long time.”

“Like being buried here?” Ron suggested.

“That might do it, yes,” said Luna complacently.

“But if she were a ghost, wouldn’t she still be around?” Harry asked. “I thought ghosts lasted forever, because they were afraid of whatever comes next.”

Ron snapped his fingers. “There’s something that’s like a ghost but different. Starts with R...”

“Revenant,” said Ginny, half a heartbeat before Harry’s mind produced the word on its own. “I don’t remember exactly how it’s different, though. Hermione would know.”

“It’s somebody who decided their cause was so important they weren’t going to let anything stop

them from seeing it through, not even death,” Ron said. “Once whatever they’re waiting for happens, they can go on.”

Harry gave Ron a strange look. Ron shrugged. “A couple Cannons fans decided to try sacrificing themselves back in the 70’s,” he said. “Obviously it didn’t work, but they still get the best seats at every game.”

Ginny emitted several loud coughs and took off running up the passage to the harbor.

“Yes,” Harry said unsteadily. “Well. So we have revenants. Or one revenant and one who... went on?” He raised his eyebrows at Luna.

“I can’t really tell,” Luna said, turning her head this way and that. “But that would be a very joyous thing, don’t you think? After so long? And there aren’t any traces of that kind of joy here.”

“What’d she leave for, then?” asked Ron. “If her body’s buried here, wouldn’t this be the place she’d want to stick around? Or is whatever she’s after not related to that?”

“I wish I knew.” Luna leaned against the wall, closing her eyes. “And now the other one has gone away too. His traces are very faint, so I don’t think he was here long. He must be tied to somewhere else, and just came here because we did.”

Harry sighed. “None of this makes any sense,” he said. “Which just means it fits with the rest of our lives right now.”

“We’ve got a spirit-free Sanctuary,” Ron pointed out. “And we’ll work out who she was someday, and maybe that’ll tell us who took over Draco. Right now, we need to get back outside. Quidditch doesn’t practice itself.”

“That’s either really profound or really stupid,” said Harry, gesturing for Luna to go first through the exit tunnel.

Ron grinned. “Come on, Harry. It’s me.”

“Stupid, then.”

“I know you are but what am I?”

“Auntie!”

At the piping voice, Aletha looked down and smiled. “Hello, little one,” she said. “What do you want?”

“Up!”

“What do we say?”

“P’ease?”

“Well. If you’re going to be polite about it.” Aletha reached down and hoisted the tiny creature beside her chair onto her lap. “And what have you been doing today, young man?”

“P’ay wif Echo,” her conversant replied gravely. “Auntie, what do?”

“What am I doing? I’m writing. See, I dip the quill in the ink like this, and then I write on the parchment, like this. It’s a shopping list for your mummy, so she knows what I need more of for my potions. Do you want to help me write?”

“Yes!” Miniature hands clapped in excitement. “Yes yes yes!”

“Scoot forward on my lap, then. There you are. Now, put your hand around the quill, underneath mine.” Aletha guided the small fingers to an approximation of the proper grip. “Not too tight, or you’ll break it and we’ll need a new one. That’s good. Dip it in the ink, let it drip, and bring it back to the parchment. What shall we write? How about powdered limestone?”

“What do?” the other asked again, in between concentrating on helping Aletha send the quill in the proper directions.

“Powdered limestone helps potions fizz.” Aletha slipped her left hand under the shirt made from discarded drapes. “Like this. Fizz fizz fizz.” She tickled, eliciting a shriek of incredibly high-pitched giggles from her helper, until a loud crack in the center of the room cut them short.

“Cissus!” Winky scolded, setting her daughter Echo down beside her. “You is being a naughty elflet, you is running away from Mummy and bothering Mistress Letha!”

“I help Auntie Letha,” Cissus retorted. “I stay!”

“You need to listen to your Mummy,” Aletha told the elflet, setting him on the floor. “But if she says you may stay, then you may. Echo too, if she’d like.”

“Yes!” Echo perked up immediately. “Echo stay!”

Winky sighed deeply. “Mistress is being sure?” she asked. “They is not being a bother?”

“Not at all,” Aletha assured her. “I like having them around. And if they start to grate on me, I know where to find you.”

“This is being true!” Winky gave a laugh of her own, bobbed a curtsy, and vanished with another loud crack. Echo ran over to her brother, grabbed his hand, and towed him into the corner of the room, babbling at such a rapid rate that Aletha wasn’t even sure all the words were English. She watched them until they were established in a game of dusting the books, then returned to her list-writing, thinking as she did.

The rapidity with which Winky’s children had been maturing since they were born in the middle

of February had startled her at first, but Sirius had assured her it was normal for elflets to develop as much in a month as a human baby would in a year. “How else do you think they’re ready for service in eighteen months?” he asked, his mouth acquiring the bitter twist it only got when he was talking about his birth family and their peers. “Some of it’s natural, they’re smaller than we are so it stands to reason they grow up quicker, but some of it has to have been put on them by wizards who wanted to be able to sell them sooner and breed more of them in less time. Merlin’s sparking wand, *why* did I have to be descended from utter bastards?”

Aletha smiled to herself. Convincing Sirius that she didn’t mind his descent, and that he himself was only an utter bastard on the occasions when she wished him to be, had made for a very pleasant evening.

As for these two, they’re darling. She cast a glance at the elflets, Cissus now making a step with his hands so that Echo could climb up to the first shelf and dust the books on the second. *Enough like humans that they help heal a little of the hurt I still have, and enough unlike that they don’t make it worse. And hard workers—the only trouble we have with them is finding work they can handle. I won’t soon forget the day they tried to wash the windows in the upstairs bedrooms!*

Echo finished with her shelf and hopped nimbly to the floor. Setting aside her duster, she took up a place alongside her brother, facing the shelves. Both elflets raised their hands to shoulder level and stared at the third shelf of books with fierce concentration.

Surreptitiously, Aletha drew her wand. *Just in case...*

The books on the third shelf trembled, shivered, began to rise—

And shot one foot away from the shelves, then dropped like stones.

The elflets’ terrified shriek mixed with Aletha’s “*Protego !*” and Remus’ “What on *earth* —” from the hallway.

“I’ve got it!” Aletha called as the last book bounced off her Shield Charm. “No harm done, just a bit of mess!”

“A bit of mess?” said Danger, appearing in the doorway, Remus behind her. “The last time I saw a mess like this was the night Harry and Draco both acted out their nightmares. It’s all right now, little ones, come to Auntie Danger.” This was to the elflets, who were clasping each other and shivering in the center of their book-free circle. “You’re not quite big enough to levitate things yet, are you?”

“We thank you for trying,” Remus added, taking Cissus from Danger’s arms, which freed her to balance Echo on her hip. “It’s good that you want to help your Mummy and Daddy with their work. But you need to find some that won’t hurt you and make more mess than it cleans up.”

Cissus nodded, his lip quivering. “We sorry,” he said quietly. “Was an asident.”

Remus' eyes, for one instant, swirled very brown indeed. "I remember another little boy who said something like that to me once," he said as Danger covered her mouth with her free hand. "He was human, not house-elf, but it seems to me all little boys are very much the same..."

The final list of those who might participate in the spell-breaking year was in Harry's hands less than a week after the initial discovery of Sanctuary. He was severely unsurprised to find that it was almost a verbatim roll call of the original Dumbledore's Army. One or two late-comers, like Ryan the apricot-covered Hufflepuff, had made their way on, and a few of those who had originally been DA, like Cho and the Creevey brothers, were left out.

"Colin and Dennis are the sweetest kids alive," said Hermione when Harry questioned her choice to leave them off the list. "But having them working on Sanctuary with us would be an open invitation to homicide, and killing another member of the year definitely doesn't count as getting along."

Meghan seconded this. "I like Dennis," she said earnestly. "Really, I do. He wouldn't tell the secret... but everyone and her broomstick knows when he's *got* a secret. Graham and Natalie aren't like that. They won't give us away."

Inevitably, the list was Gryffindor-heavy, featuring sixteen wearers of the red and gold, but Harry thought the other Houses had got a decent stake in the deal as well, with six each from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff and four from Slytherin.

Besides, half the Gryffindors are Pride, and Pride comes before House loyalty.

It was a thought Harry would have good reason to remember.

"Morning, Harry."

"Morning, Lee." Harry scratched at an itchy spot on the back of his hand. "How's Maya?"

Lee smothered a yawn. "Twitchy. She knows in her mind that she has two days between that opening ceremony next week and the full moon, so she shouldn't be showing any signs of her transformation that night, but she's still worried she will, and the worry is making her worse." He leaned in. "Listen, Harry, I wanted to talk to you about that. Maya, and her transformation, and... things. You know. Are you free after lunch?"

"Sure, but—"

"Thanks! Gotta run! Bye!" Lee shot out the door of the Great Hall as though Harry had lit the back of his robes on fire.

Harry blinked a few times and stamped his foot against the floor, verifying for his own sanity's sake that he wasn't dreaming. "Even for us," he said aloud, "that was odd."

“There’s a good reason for that,” said Draco, taking another helping of bacon. “Lee isn’t us.”

Luna speared a piece of toast with her quill, smiling. Harry indulged in a small nervous swallow as he saw the smile. It was the sort that went with the words “Are you sure?”

And from the resident Seer, you take that a little differently than you do from anyone else...

“Let me know if I’m out of line.” Lee’s hands sawed at the air, trying to convey the ideas that were so clear to him and so hard to put into the words that would get them across to Harry. “But I’ve never really understood what you have going, Pack and Pride and those things. I hear the words, I know you’re close with your family, and you and Ron and Ginny and everyone have something special going on, but what is it, really? How did it start?”

“Finally, a question I can answer!” Harry wiped his brow in pretend relief. “It started as a joke. Look at us, we’re a werewolf and a dog Animagus, let’s call ourselves the Pack, har har, funny. And sleeping out together started because some of us would have terrible nightmares and need to know other people were there, right there, not down the hall or in the next room but *there*.”

Lee was nodding, his brow wrinkled as though he were fitting Harry’s words into his own thoughts. Harry pressed on. “Everything else just grew from that. From that need to know that there are people around you, people who care about you and will do things for you when you need them done, just like you’ll do things for them when they need things done. If that makes sense.”

“It does. Loads.” Lee leaned against the wall. “Maya isn’t as good as she could be,” he said. “Matter of fact, she’s pretty badly off. She hides it well, but she’s scared to death of herself, and of me.”

“You? I thought you loved her.”

“I did—I do—” A brief laugh. “There’s the problem. Every time I make some tiny mistake like that, Maya takes it as proof that I don’t love her, that I only asked her to marry me out of pity, that I’ll turn around one day and either send her away or just leave.”

“Some of that’s the werewolf curse,” Harry pointed out, thinking of den-night stories of a man in black and a woman in white, alone together in a Great Hall greater than the one he saw every day. “It makes people think things like that, that they’re freaks and monsters and can’t ever be loved.”

“I don’t care.” Lee’s voice was as harsh as it ever was criticizing the Slytherin Quidditch players for their dirty strategies. “Maya hasn’t changed, and everyone except her knows it. She’s still the girl I fell in love with, and she *is* the girl I’m going to marry, and that bloody curse better get out of my way or it’s getting chased down and knocked off its bloody broomstick!” He dropped unconsciously into his carrying announcer tones for the last portion.

“Curses have broomsticks?” Harry asked, hoping to break the tension.

Lee grinned. “Yeah, didn’t you know? Little teeny invisible ones so they can fly around and make everyone’s lives miserable.” He twisted a dreadlock around one finger. “All right, enough of that. Harry, I’ve got an idea about how to help Maya.” Lee’s expression was a mixture of determination and trepidation that Harry hoped he could reproduce at a party sometime. “She’s got wolf in her now. I can’t change that. What I can do is make the wolf happy. Give it some of the things it wants. I guess you could say... tame it.”

A snort of laughter got out of Harry despite all his efforts to the contrary. “Not you,” he choked, flapping a hand at Lee. “Go on. Not you. Something else.”

“You’re sure you don’t need a drink?”

“I’m fine.” Harry pulled himself together. “So you think Maya’s wolf side is trying to hurt her and you want to try and stop it by making it more comfortable.”

“Right.” Lee nodded. “And what I’ve got in mind would also be good for Maya the person who feels everyone will leave her. If she had something solid to depend on, something more than just empty words, maybe she wouldn’t be so afraid.”

“And the less afraid she is, the less hold the curse has on her.” Harry doodled a spiral in midair with flame. “What’re you thinking of?”

Lee explained.

“I like it,” Harry said when Lee was done. “But you’ve got your terminology wrong.”

“I do?” Lee looked confused. “What’m I saying that I shouldn’t?”

“It’s not too bad,” Harry reassured him. “It’s just you’ve got the words back to front. What you’re working on is a group of friends, all around the same age, but what you’re saying is a family with parents and kids. Unless there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Well, eventually...” Lee wiggled his eyebrows. “We are getting married, you know.”

“Mind, pants, out,” Harry commanded, jerking his finger upwards. “Even more, mind, Maya’s pants, out. There’s time for that. Do you know who you want to ask?”

Lee pulled a scrap of parchment from his pocket. “Well, I’ve got a little list...”

“And they’ll none of them be missed, right?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Maya nibbled half-heartedly at a sausage, wishing it weren’t quite so well cooked. It was the last

day of April, and her cravings were starting to get to her.

It's the fourth time I've been through this, I should be used to it by now, but it still surprises me when I wake up and want to run for miles and miles. Or when I have to fight to keep myself from biting people who annoy me. And it doesn't help that everybody around me knows what I'm feeling, and they're walking on eggs to keep me calm. The only thing worse would be if the rest of the school knew about me.

Of course, if the rest of the school knew about me, there would be so many parents complaining that I'd never be allowed to stay.

She sank her teeth into the sausage, imagining it for one second to be an amalgam of everything wrong with her life, then deliberately pushed her thoughts into happier channels. *I have so much to be thankful for. Lee, Aunt Vonni and Uncle Par, Graham and Bernie, the DA and all my friends, and now I'm part of this special group that's working to make a safe place for Muggleborns and break an ancient spell.*

Her lips drew back in a grin. *And the only reason we're trying to break that spell is to keep the bad purebloods from using it to find out who they can kill. That's all. It's not because we found out that the Ministry's ability to perform the Trace is intimately tied up with it or anything like that, oh no, of course not. Not one little bit.*

Gulping down her bite of sausage, Maya made a face as her unpleasant thoughts returned. "Nasty potion at the end of the week," she said aloud. "And oh, does it hurt when it happens."

But I have that potion—thank you, Professor Snape, and aren't those four words I never thought I would say—so I don't have to feel my mind slipping away from me. I won't ever be a beast who'd kill her own best friends, just a very sore and tired me-wolf. And Lee comes along every single time and gives me back rubs until the pain goes away, and then helps me calm down enough to get some sleep...

"Good morning, beautiful," said the voice she was thinking of, as strong hands closed on her shoulders.

"Mmm." Maya leaned into the rubbing. "You can keep doing that for about a year or so. I'll tell you when I've had enough."

Lee laughed. "You ready for your surprise tonight?" he asked, leaning down to kiss the top of her head.

"This had better be some surprise," Maya warned. "With the way you've been talking it up, I'm expecting it's at least as good as, oh, a new broomstick."

"It's better."

Maya affected exaggerated surprise. "Better than a new broomstick? Really? Is that possible?"

“Just barely. But I think I’ve done it.” Lee puffed out his chest for a moment before returning to his massaging of her back. “You’ll have to tell me how you like it when you see it.”

“And when will that be?”

“Tonight. At the... thing.” He twitched his head significantly downwards. “You know.”

Maya nodded, her mind racing. *What in the world did you get me or do for me that has to do with the construction of a Sanctuary?*

And why do I suddenly feel I’m about to get far, far more than I bargained for?

Harry stood near the entrance to the Sanctuary cavern, listening to the rise and fall of the water in the well cave, trying to let it calm him. *It’s no big deal, he tried to tell himself. It’s just another step in the war. Another part of our campaign. Nothing’s going to happen that doesn’t happen every day.*

But his nerves weren’t listening. *You don’t start a spell-breaking year every day, they yammered. You don’t ask thirty-two people to keep faith with each other every day. You don’t tell strangers all about—*

That thought got grabbed in the jaws of Wolf, shaken hard, and sat down upon. *These are not strangers. These are friends, people we know, people we trust. Good people. They’ll do the right thing.*

I hope.

Looking for a new topic, Harry hit upon his own life, everything that was going well and not so well. A finger-wiggle melted two columns into the wall, and he started marking up points on each side.

Good: I’ve got a fair chance of passing my O.W.L.s. Bad: I probably won’t get the grade I need to go on to N.E.W.T. Potions, and I have to have that for Auror apprenticeship. Good: Professor McGonagall’s said she’ll talk to Professor Snape about relaxing his rules in this instance. Bad: Grumpy wouldn’t relax his rules for me if I were the last student in the castle. Harry shrugged. Study a little harder on Potions and worry about it when it happens. Moving on.

Good: The DA grows every meeting. Bad: I don’t know every member personally any more, and there’s always a chance we have spies. Make that a certainty—Voldemort’s going to want to know what we’re up to. Good: I know there have to be spies, so I can try to find out who they are. Bad: I might not succeed.

Good: Hermione keeps getting better. Bad: She still has relapses. Like the one when Krum wrote back last week with the information we need to start the year, and said he’ll come visit sometime this summer with the books we need to tweak the spells. Wonder why it affected her like that?

Probably just because he's male and she hasn't seen him in a while.

Good: Occlumency lessons are on hold until after O.W.L.s. Bad: I'm still going to have Occlumency lessons. Worse: With Professor Grumpy. Worst of all: He's certain to use my not getting into his N.E.W.T. class to get me angry.

Harry glared at the wall, beside his oversized tally marks for the last two points. *What right does he have to hate me the way he does? What right does he have to make my life miserable? It's not fair—*

He snorted with laughter. "If life were fair, I wouldn't have this," he reminded himself aloud, running a finger across his scar. "I'd have my dad and mum still. Moony and Danger would have Fox as their own, and a couple more besides. Hermione wouldn't be shy of every boy she sees and she'd still have her own parents, Meghan would be our age instead of younger, Marcus would've been a whole lot older and he'd never have died..."

"Playing the 'if only' game?" Ginny asked from behind him.

"Mm-hmm." Harry smoothed his fringe back down over his scar.

"Where do I fit in?"

He slid an arm around her waist and pulled her close. "Just exactly where you are. Right along with Ron and all your other brothers not objecting too much."

"They all knew it would happen eventually." She nuzzled at the side of his neck. "They're just grateful it's someone they know and like. But they do have one complaint about you."

"Oh? What's that?"

Ginny grinned. "They can't threaten you properly. You're not afraid of them."

Harry snickered. "I'm so sorry that I cannot oblige them in that," he said in the grand manner Padfoot sometimes used when he was telling a story about purebloods. "But no threats will be necessary, for I could never harm you." He looked down at the freckled face surrounded by its red mane and felt the familiar but still thrilling heat-tight-shudder in his chest. "If anyone else tried... I'm not sure what I'd do, but they wouldn't like it. If they could like anything anymore."

"Don't, Harry, please, don't talk like that." Ginny removed herself from his embrace with a shiver. "I don't want you to kill. Hurt them, yes, but killing—" She shook her head convulsively. "I don't want you to do anything that would make you more like Voldemort. You can't help being connected with him, but there's no reason to make the connection any stronger than it has to be." She reached for his hand and held it, her fingers cold to his touch. "No killing for my sake unless there's no other way. Please. Promise me."

"I promise. No killing unless I have to." Harry laid his free hand on his heart, then caught her other one in it and conjured fire around them for warmth. "But if it's your life or theirs..."

“That’s different and you know it.”

The discussion of how exactly it was different lasted until the first arrivals of their non-Pride yearmates, which ended all talk about anything except the ritual they were about to undergo.

Maya trailed her fingers along the rough stone of the tunnel wall as she followed Lee towards the cavern. The wolf part of her nature approved of this as a safe den to which to bring cubs. It was hidden, secret, secure.

And we’re going to make it even better.

They were among the last to arrive, having waited for Graham and the Moon sisters at the Slytherin dorm until nearly midnight, which was the time they were supposed to begin the ritual. Entering the big cavern, Selena stared upwards in wonder, then arched her back and groaned. “You’re getting to be a pain, you know that?” she said to her belly, which had resumed its natural swollen contours in the harbor cave when she had taken her Concealing Charm off. “And there’s still three months to go…”

“Having second thoughts?” Roger asked, having threaded through the crowd to her side.

“About what?” Selena looked alarmed as soon as the words had left her lips. “No, I mean, of course not, don’t be silly. What is there to have second thoughts about?”

Maya chuckled. “She gets funnier every day,” she said, turning to look at Lee. “Don’t you think—what’s wrong?” Lee’s face was strained, the way he’d looked in the years when Slytherin was winning every Cup going. “Are you all right?”

“What?” Lee jumped. “Yes. I’m fine. Just… thinking about this.” His waved hand took in the cavern, the murmuring people, and the enormity of the thing they planned to do. “It sounds like a Bard’s tale. A bunch of half-trained kids like us, cutting You-Know-Who off from being able to tell magically who is and isn’t acceptable by his twisted standards, and destroying the Ministry’s ability to do a Trace or lay a Taboo, all at the same time? It’s too good to be true.”

“Do you doubt Harry, then? Or maybe I should say, do you doubt Hermione?” Maya craned her neck and located the fifth year, directing a few of the earlier arrivals in drawing runes on the walls with their wands. “If she says we can do it, then we can.”

“You’re right.” Lee drew her close and kissed her lightly on the lips. “You’re always right. How do you do that?”

“Natural feminine superiority,” Maya said in the loftiest tone she could achieve with his hand creeping towards her chest. “And you’d better stop that or I’ll bite you, see if I don’t.”

Lee stuck out his tongue at her. She snapped her teeth at it, but he dodged. “Have to be faster than that,” he teased. “Maybe when you finish your Animagus work, you’ll have cougar reflexes.”

“Maybe.” Maya sighed. “And you’ll have that disease, and be contagious when you change forms.” To her initial delight but later dismay, Lee’s Animagus form was a black-furred wolf, similar to Harry’s. Harry had pulled them aside after one DA meeting to explain the ramifications of this, after swearing them both to secrecy. It had led directly to one of their nastier fights, which hadn’t been made up for two days.

Why can’t he see I’m not worth it? whispered a tiny voice in the back of Maya’s mind. *Why doesn’t he just end it now, before we both get in too deep?*

Maya gave her head and shoulders a little shake, like a cat shaking off water. *You’re not me*, she told the voice. *You’re that curse. I don’t have to listen to you. Lee thinks I’m worth it. He won’t leave me.*

Not until you get too hot to handle, the voice whispered back, a nasty chuckle underlying the words. *Not until you miss your potion and kill someone, or turn them. Or maybe he’ll realize you’re not worth all the work of Animagus, not when it’ll just make him ill and dangerous as well...*

“You’re worth a little ache now and again,” Lee was saying now. Her entire mental conversation had taken place in a fraction of a second. “And why’d I be biting people in any case? Unless they’re Death Eaters, in which case they deserve it.” He smiled down at her, the special smile that made her knees go weak. “I’ll aim for your dad if they break him out of Azkaban, how about.”

“You’re horrible—” Maya stopped as a murmur of “Shhh” ran through the crowd. People were shifting position, moving so that everyone could see the center of the cavern, where Harry was holding up his hands for quiet.

“We all know why we’re here, so I won’t waste time,” he said when everyone had found a place to stand. “It’ll take a load off everyone’s mind to know there’s a safe place for Muggles and Muggleborns to hide if they have to, and it’s to all our advantage if Voldemort can’t test people’s blood magically.” He grinned. “For the record, we had *no idea* this would also stop the Ministry catching underage magic.”

Snickers ran around the semi-circle of students.

“So here’s what I need you to do.” Harry pulled a scroll from his pocket. “Raise your right hand—Fred, George, your other right, thank you—and say ‘I do’ after I read each bit. But *listen* to what I’m saying, everyone. This isn’t a game. If you break this oath, there are consequences. Not death, it’s no Unbreakable Vow, but you wouldn’t care for what happened.” He shot a glance at his sister, standing demurely beside her twin near the end of the arc. “I understand part of it involves boils in places that make riding a broom your new least favorite thing.”

Maya winced. *And that’s just part of it. I don’t think I want Hermione angry with me.*

“So listen carefully, and only agree if you can follow through. If not—” Harry pointed at the tunnel through which they’d come. “No hard feelings. You didn’t volunteer for this, and I won’t

blame anyone who wants to leave now.”

Five seconds of motionless silence.

“That’s what I thought.” Harry unrolled the scroll and began reading. “Do you, students of Hogwarts gathered here, swear to show good fellowship in word and deed to each other until a year from this day, the first of May?”

“I do,” rumbled from thirty-two throats. Maya found herself whispering, and forced her voice to a stronger tone. Lee spoke out clearly, as though he held his megaphone in his hand.

“Do you swear to work with the other members of this fellowship on the task we begin tonight, the task of creating a Sanctuary?”

“I do.”

“Do you swear to never knowingly betray this fellowship to anyone who intends it harm, and to guard with all your might against doing so unknowingly?”

“I do.”

“Do you so speak, do you so intend?”

“I do.”

Harry released the bottom of the scroll, letting it roll up in his hand. “Then so let it be done,” he said quietly. “To your places, please.”

“Places?” Maya said under her breath, looking at Lee in confusion.

“Gryffindors to the south mark,” called Ginny from the center of the cavern, pointing that way with both hands. “Ravenclaws to the north, Slytherins west, Hufflepuffs east!”

The arc broke up and reformed in clots of people, each standing by one of the runes Maya’d seen Hermione masterminding earlier. “East begins,” Ginny continued, sketching a purple arrow in the air with a number 1 next to it. “North goes second. West third, south last. The incantation is *Revelo astra*, and you tap the rune when you say it. Be sure to make it nice and clear, or we won’t have a good view!” She hurried to a place near the end of the Gryffindor’s line, next to Harry.

“A good view?” Lindsey Jordan asked from her place beside her brother. “Of what?”

“*Astra*,” Lee murmured. “*Ad astra, per aspera*. Means through work, to...”

“*Revelo astra!*” cried six voices in unison before he could finish, and six streamers of black shot up the wall to the Gryffindors’ right, blending into a coherent mass as they touched the ceiling, then acquiring tiny dots of sparkling white.

“Stars,” Dean Thomas breathed, staring upwards. “The stars. It’s like the Great Hall, this place, or it will be—we’ll be able to see the stars—”

“*Revelo astra!*” came the cry from the Ravenclaws, and another six ribbons of black added their blotch to the ceiling. The Slytherins went next, Maya beaming with pride at Graham’s strong voice as he cast his part of the spell, and then it was their turn.

Lee raised his left hand above his head, closing his fingers one at a time. Maya watched, her wand against the wall and her heart in her mouth. *If we get this wrong... if we muff it up, after every other House did so well...*

The last finger vanished.

“*Revelo astra!*” The shout could have come from one enormous set of lungs, and the lines of black which flowed up the wall covered the portions of the ceiling which were still stone effortlessly. Cries of delight and wonder greeted the clear and starry night now visible, and Maya felt a rush of pride. Gryffindor had performed its part to perfection, and the Sanctuary was well started.

“Before we go,” Harry said, stepping back out to the center of the cavern. “We’re using this place, this Sanctuary, as one sign of our fellowship. But it shouldn’t be the only one. Say hello to other members of the year in the hallway, even if—especially if—they’re in another House. We need every friendship we have if we’re going to win this war. Get to know people, remember their birthdays, or any other day that might be special to them. And come to their celebrations.” He turned to look towards Maya and Lee. “Like the one we’re about to have now.”

About to have? What is he talking about?

Lee swallowed once, then joined Harry at the focus of all eyes. “You know who I am,” he said, turning to bring everyone into his range of vision as the Slytherins split down the middle, Graham and Blaise joining the Gryffindors, Selena and Artemis the Ravenclaws. “You know who I’m with. And you know what happened to her. What I want to do tonight is make sure she knows that she’ll never be alone.”

He held out his hand to Maya, the entreaty clear in his eyes. Her feet moved towards him before she knew what they were doing, and she had no choice but to go with them. He pulled her against his side and looked from one end of the cavern to the other, and slowly other people began to come forward as well. Graham, hand in hand with Natalie—Lindz, Dean walking beside her—from the other direction, Selena with Roger’s hands on her shoulders—

“What is this?” Maya whispered, staring at her friends as they formed a circle with her and Lee. “What’s going on?”

“We’re making a Pride,” Lee answered in a carrying tone. “Swearing to take care of each other, no matter what. Hands in!”

Numbly, Maya thrust her right hand into the center of the circle, along with everyone else. Lee began to recite, and they all repeated after him, line by line:

*“I swear to you, I swear to all,
That I will come if you should call:
If you have need, I will be there;
By hand and wand and life I swear. ”*

Then everyone was cheering, and Lee was kissing her, and Roger was kissing Selena, which was a slightly more awkward proposition, and Lee had to let her go to laugh at the convolutions their friends were getting into. She grabbed him by the arm and hoisted herself up to his ear.

“I *will* bite you for springing this on me,” she hissed.

“Is there somebody who’s part of it you don’t trust with your life?” he asked, grinning at her.

“No, but I don’t like surprises. So I’m going to bite you.” She fastened her teeth gently around his robed shoulder, then took them away. “There. You’re bitten.”

Lee put on a high, fluttery voice and fanned himself with his hand. “Oh no, oh no, a werewolf has bitten me. Whatever should I do?”

Maya laughed, feeling her spirits rise higher than she would have believed possible an hour earlier. “Get used to it?”

“Sounds like a plan.” He stopped her from retorting to this in the usual fashion of boyfriends.

Life, Maya thought dreamily before she stopped thinking altogether, was very good.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 41: Legends Old and New (Arc 6)

“N.E.W.T.s begin tomorrow, oh twin o’ mine.”

“So they do.” George glanced sideways at Fred. “I know that look. You have a plan.”

“When do I not?” Fred held out a sheaf of parchments. “Read ‘em and laugh.”

George accepted the thick stack and leafed through them. “Been working behind my back, have you?”

“Well, when you keep your front so obligingly turned towards the Sanctuary...”

“As was the arrangement. I do our share of the work there, and leave you free to pursue other goals. I merely hadn’t expected you’d catch them so soon.”

Fred snorted. “You thought I would leave any stone unturned to protect us from the Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests? Especially after the fuss Mum made over our O.W.L.s?”

“Too true, too true.” George peered into the window he’d been looking out of, locating his little brother’s reflection. Ron was sitting with the rest of the Pride near the fireplace, watching Hermione demonstrate something complicated involving her wand and three bits of string. “Think he’ll do all right?”

“He’ll pass more than we did, but we weren’t trying.” Fred leaned against the windowsill. “Does he still want to be an Auror?”

George ran the corners of the parchments along his thumb. “Have you got the key to number ninety-three, Diagon Alley, in your pocket?”

“Thought so. And he’s not going to get that O in Potions no matter what he does. No more is Harry.”

“Draco might, but all that’ll do is make him feel guilty.”

The twins meditated for a moment on the unfairness of life, then shrugged in unison.

“They’ll get over it,” Fred predicted. “And if they don’t, we can always blackmail Snape into letting them in anyway.”

“Or get him sacked. Mum says old Professor Slughorn wasn’t nearly so tough with his requirements.”

Fred perked up. “This is true. How might we go about that?”

“Ask Dumbledore to let him take the Defense post he wants so much?”

A long pause, in which two pairs of brown eyes looked everywhere but at one another. Finally, they met, and both twins burst out laughing.

Helping the family was all very well, but they had to have *some* standards.

Harry picked at his breakfast the next morning. He had known, somewhere in his mind, that the beginning of the spell-breaking year on May Day meant O.W.L.s were near, but even Hermione’s frantic preparation hadn’t brought it home to him like this tense, silent morning in the Great Hall. Fifth and seventh years alike swallowed with difficulty, peering at notes in between bites, and speaking only to trade mnemonics or last-minute ‘don’t forget’s. Fourth years were hushed in respect to what they’d experience next year at this time, and sixth years in both remembrance of their last year’s ordeal and anticipation of next year’s.

Only the younger students, third years and below, were chattering the way they usually did, and Harry couldn’t blame them. They were two years or more from the horrors of O.W.L.s; they couldn’t be expected to understand what this day meant. Meghan and her friend Natalie, the only younger ones near Harry, were ignoring him in favor of casting worried looks at a harried Hermione, who was too deeply engrossed in her textbook to notice.

I wonder what would happen if I tried bouncing bacon off her nose...

A sudden set of bangs from the entrance hall put an end to this idea, as Hermione, along with most of the girls in the Great Hall, shrieked and slammed her book shut. Harry swung his legs quickly over the bench and raced towards the noise. A few steps ahead of the other hundred boys who’d had the same idea, he flung the doors open wide and stared at the scene thus revealed.

Fireworks cavorted around the entrance hall, spinning and fizzing, bursting and sparkling. In the center of the display, seated on their brooms and wearing traveling cloaks, were Fred and George, beaming like a pair of genii whose bottles had been not only uncorked but filled with champagne.

“Mum is going to go *spare*, ” Ron muttered from behind Harry’s left shoulder.

Harry looked down and took a hasty step back. The twins were aloft for a very good reason—the entire floor of the entrance hall had been converted into a swamp. His nose was already informing him how realistic the transfiguration was, and he hoped anyone who might be inclined to lose their breakfast on account of stench would do it in another direction.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Fred began.

“As we all know, O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s begin today,” George continued.

“The pinnacle of testing for wizardly and witchlike skill.”

“Invaluable for anyone wishing employment at the Ministry, Gringotts, or other fine magical establishments.”

“However, for those of us willing to employ ourselves...” Fred sucked his teeth. “Perhaps not quite so necessary.”

“Besides being unduly stressful, at a time when stress is most unneeded.” George beamed genially at the crowd.

Fred bowed grandly from his broom. “Thus, with best wishes to all for a successful testing time, we embark on the next phase of our lives—entrepreneurship.”

“Come and see us at number ninety-three, Diagon Alley!” George added. “Special discount to those taking O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s!”

Each twin produced a bundle of sparklers from under his cloak, lit them with his wand, and tossed them into the air. The sparklers fizzed to life and began to spell out words:

*WEASLEY’S WIZARDING WHEEZES
FOR ALL YOUR HUMOROUS NEEDS
93 DIAGON ALLEY, OPEN MON-SAT*

The students cheered wildly, waving hands and hats as Fred and George took one last bow, then flew out the great oak doors into the clear morning beyond. The sparklers, taking their cue from their creators’ departure, scrambled themselves together and began to spell out a final message:

ONCE YOU GO TWIN, YOU’LL NEVER GIVE IN!

Harry had to sit down on the end of the Gryffindor benches, his knees were so weak from laughing. Somehow O.W.L.s no longer seemed quite as scary.

For one thing, we’ll have trouble getting to them if the teachers can’t clean that up...

The teachers could and did, and O.W.L.s began strictly on schedule. Harry found them running together in his mind, so that he had to make sure he wasn’t writing Transfiguration answers on his Charms paper, or scribbling down History of Magic dates instead of Herbology specifications. He panicked in Arithmancy when he realized with five minutes to go that he’d written down his answers and forgot to show his work, but by dint of frantic effort he got every problem except one fixed before time was called.

The rest of the Pride was hardly immune. Neville, his old clumsiness brought back on by nerves, nearly fell off the Astronomy Tower while trying to adjust his telescope, and Draco got carried away with his stirring during the Potions practical and joggled Hermione’s elbow, causing her to spill essence of sumac on herself. Though her hand and arm were turning red and swelling up, she was still able, at the examiner’s prompting, to name the key components of the lotion with which

she'd be treated in the hospital wing—acorns, ivy leaves, and flowers of zinc—and thus won an automatic pass in case she didn't return in time to finish her brewing.

“How come we never get perks like that?” grumbled Ron, kicking his cauldron to try and loosen the crust of potion that had formed on the lip.

It was in Defense Against the Dark Arts, though, that the Pride and the rest of the DA truly shone. Their attacks were sharp, their shields and blocks firm, their tactics careful and sure. Harry's stag Patronus chased Hermione's lion and Draco's wolf around the room, then danced away from the nipping attacks of Ron's terrier and leaped easily over Neville's doe. The examiners scribbled notes and beamed at them genially, and one asked Harry what memory he tended to use to cast such a strong Patronus.

“It—” Harry coughed twice and swallowed hard. “It depends where I am and what's happening, sir,” he answered truthfully.

“Ah, I see, I see. Thank you, Mr. Potter, that's all.”

“What was that?” Hermione asked as Harry escaped the room.

“Ask *her*,” Harry choked, pointing across the hall before succumbing to laughter.

“Ask *who*?” Hermione turned and began to laugh herself.

Ginny waved from her perch on one of the desks in the room opposite the exam site, where Harry would have been able to see her but the examiners wouldn't. She had put her hair into stiff braids sticking straight out from the sides of her head, painted her face white, rouged circles on her cheeks, and highlighted her eyelids, one in green, the other in blue. “Just in case he couldn't come up with anything good to think about,” she said sweetly.

Harry straightened up and caught his breath. “I'll give you something good to think about,” he said. “Come here.”

“Make me.”

“If you insist.”

Ginny leapt off the desk and fled down the hall, Harry three steps behind.

When the final word had been written, the final punctuation mark put in place, and the scrolls were collected and taken away for grading, the fifth and seventh years let out a collective sigh and collapsed for a night and day. Then they recovered, realized they had survived, and began to wreak havoc on their surroundings and their colleagues out of sheer relief. The rest of the school, having finished their final exams while O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s were going on, were fair game and took part wholeheartedly.

Harry had worried a bit about this time in terms of the spell-breaking year—what if one of the pranks went too far and caused serious consequences? But his fears were unfounded, as nothing more painful than a few interesting hairdos and one case of extremely long fingernails surfaced. The yearmates, he discovered, were more likely to team up and defend each other than to play anything but the most basic of tricks on one another.

“We’re not stupid,” Lee said disdainfully when Harry mentioned this in passing at a Sanctuary meeting about a week before school let out. “This is important. It’s real. No one’s going to blow it for the sake of some dumb prank.”

“No one?” said Maya, looking up from where she was watering their new grass seedlings with a gentle spray from her wand. “Not even Fred and George?”

“Not even them.” Lee was emphatic. “They like a good joke as much as anybody, but this has to do with fighting You-Know—V-Voldemort,” he corrected at Harry’s glare, with barely a stammer. “George, especially, wants it taken off.”

“Why George especially?” Ginny asked, tamping down the dirt around a clump of pansies with the toe of her shoe.

“Oh, he hasn’t told you?” Lee grinned. “Well, I don’t know if I should say anything…”

“Spill it,” Maya commanded.

Lee pretended to cower. “Yes, dear.” He straightened up, stretched his back, and looked at Ginny. “Not a word to your mum,” he warned. “She’ll have enough to be going on with when she hears about the new shop.”

“What *is* it?” asked Harry.

“He’s interested in a Muggle girl.”

“George is?” Ginny frowned. “How did he meet her?”

“She works in the village near your house. He was just flirting with her at first, the way he and Fred do with every girl they meet, but now he’s been seeing her at holidays and writing her letters for almost a year.” Lee chuckled. “What first got her attention was those card tricks he does. ‘They’re amazing! Just like real magic!’”

Harry reached out and pulled an ace of hearts out of Ginny’s sleeve. “Like that?” he asked, holding it up.

“Just like that, except he *is* using real magic, and you’re not, are you?” Lee looked curiously at Harry’s hands.

“Not a bit.” Harry made the ace vanish, then produced it once more from behind Lee’s ear.

“Oh, I see what you’re doing!” Maya exclaimed. “But unless someone was right where I am, they’d never notice!”

“Which is the point, and would you mind not telling anyone what you saw?” Harry lit the ace on fire, dropped the ashes into Maya’s palm, closed her fingers, and blew on them, opening them to reveal the ace perfectly sound in her hand. “After all, a good magician never reveals his secrets.”

Maya stared in amazement. “Of course I won’t tell,” she said, stroking the card’s face with a finger. “Can I keep this?”

“Sure, I’ve got others.” Harry gave her his best Wolf-grin.

Ginny humphed, stomping over and standing between Maya and Harry. “Can’t I turn my back for three seconds without you flirting with some hot werewolf?” she demanded.

Harry blinked. For a split-second, and for no reason he could fathom, he’d thought of Cedric Diggory.

Maybe because that’s how I always felt when I saw him with Cho...

As usual at Hogwarts in the time after exams were over, various professors held optional lecture and discussion sessions on topics in their areas of interest. Three days before the end of term, Professor Jones posted a large notice giving the time and place for her lecture on “Merlin: The Man and the Mythology.” The next day, when she arrived, the room was full to capacity, and people were standing in the back, peering over the heads of the ones in front.

“Oh, for as—here, sit down,” she said irritably, flicking her wand and creating a set of bleachers under the standees. “Can everyone see now, and hear all right?”

A general chorus indicated that this was indeed the case.

“Wonderful. You’re here to hear me talk about Merlin. What do you know about him already?”

Hands flew up all over the room. Professor Jones called on person after person, charming a piece of chalk to write up the answers on the board. Shortly the entire gathering knew, if they hadn’t before, that Merlin was the court magician for the legendary King Arthur, that he’d been known as the “Prince of Enchanters,” that some legends said he’d lived backwards, that others linked him with the Founders of Hogwarts, that he’d supported laws and wizards who helped and protected Muggles, and that the Order of Merlin was named after him.

“Not a bad list, for someone who lived so long ago,” Professor Jones said, leaning her hands on the desk at the front of the room. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, what would you say if I told you that everything on this list has some element of truth to it?”

A puzzled murmur filled the room for a few moments, until Su Li raised her hand. “I don’t mean

to be rude, Professor,” she said when called on, “but how could anyone live backwards? It doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it doesn’t, and that’s why there’s only an element of truth to it.” Professor Jones grasped the floating chalk in her hand and drew a long, horizontal line on the clear portion of chalkboard. “Let me explain it like this. Imagine this as your timeline. King Arthur and his court are here.” She drew a dot near the left end of the line and labeled it with a crown. “The births of Hogwarts’ Founders are here.” Another dot, this one near the center of the line, with a baby’s rattle drawn above. “The Founding of the school is here, and the great Battle of Hogwarts, when Salazar Slytherin tried to take the castle from the other Founders by force, is here.” Two more dots, one with a scroll, the other with a wand spitting sparks. “With me so far?”

An affirmative murmur answered her.

“Now.” Professor Jones rolled the chalk between her fingers. “Remember that Merlin was a truly astounding wizard, especially talented with Charms, and watch this.”

On the segment between the Founding and the Battle, she wrote the word *Youth*. The segment between the Founders’ births and the Founding she labeled with *Middle Years*, and next to King Arthur’s crown, *Old Age*.

“These are the records we have of the wizard called Merlin,” Professor Jones said, stepping back. “You can see how Muggles, ignorant of the workings of magic, might get the idea that he lived backwards. Can any of you, who are better informed, give me a more intelligent solution?”

“Time magic,” said Terry Boot. “It’s got to be.”

“So it does.” Professor Jones drew a pair of arrows, one from the Battle of Hogwarts back to the Founders’ births, the other from the Founding to King Arthur’s time. “In his life, Merlin made two great leaps in time. The first happened when he was a young man, and it was very precisely controlled and executed. The second was accidental, sparked off by the mishap of seeing and being seen by his younger self. That explains both why it was such a long jump back in time and why he appeared so aged when he arrived there—he had used up some of his own life force in making sure he would survive the jump.”

“Was Merlin something to do with the Founders, then?” Susan Bones asked. “You’ve got him all mixed up in there, but I’ve never heard any stories about him being along.”

“Oh, he was something to do with the Founders indeed.” Professor Jones chuckled, leaning back against the corner of the chalkboard. “Here’s a riddle for you. How could it be that Merlin was related to the children of Godric Gryffindor, but not to Gryffindor himself?”

“Paul and Maura are related to Merlin?” Ron whispered in shock as the room burst into buzzing. “They never said!”

“Maybe it’s like their mum,” said Meghan. “They miss him too much to talk about him.”

“Like their mum,” Harry repeated half to himself, and raised his hand.

“Yes, Potter,” Professor Jones said, waving the room to quiet.

“They’d have to be related on their mother’s side, wouldn’t they?” Harry asked. “Gryffindor’s kids, I mean, to Merlin. Was he their uncle or something like that?”

“Not their uncle, no. But you’re right about the way they’re related.” Professor Jones drew her finger along the segment she’d labeled *Youth*. “Remember, this is the period in the Founders’ lives when they were having their own children. Merlin wasn’t much older than those children. Now can you work it out?”

Hermione gasped and flung her hand into the air. “I don’t remember where I saw it,” she said breathlessly when Professor Jones called on her. “But I know I’ve seen it somewhere. There’s one tradition that says Godric Gryffindor was the luckiest Founder, because when he married, he didn’t just get a wife, he got a family—his wife had a child already, she’d been married before!”

Professor Jones smiled. “I wondered if anyone would know about that old thing,” she said. “Yes, that’s the riddle in plain English. Gryffindor married a widow, who had a little boy about three or four years old from her first husband. His name was Emrys, and he was an older brother to Gryffindor’s son and daughter and to all the Founders’ children. He grew up with them, he learned alongside them, he loved them, and after the Battle of Hogwarts, he left them forever.”

“He loved them, so he left them?” Blaise said from his seat near the back.

“Not ‘so,’ Zabini.” Professor Jones sat down on the corner of the desk. “More like ‘but.’ He loved them, *but* he knew he was needed in another time. He’d always heard, growing up, that his stepfather and the other Founders had a mysterious enemy who didn’t want them to meet one another or begin a school. It struck Emrys shortly after the Battle of Hogwarts that without the enemy’s so-called interference, Hogwarts might never have been founded at all. So he plotted a jump through time, back to the births of the Founders, and became their friendly enemy, ensuring the timeline he had experienced would come to pass.”

“Sounds like a Slytherin,” said Roger, ducking Selena’s punch. “Did he see the little kid that was him when he was making sure his mum met Gryffindor?”

Professor Jones nodded. “They recognized one another, the child Emrys and the man, and each of their souls tried to fling the intruder away. Since the child belonged in that moment of time and the man did not, the man was the one who lost the contest. By the time he recovered his senses, he was farther back in time than he had ever intended to go, and he had the appearance of an old man. Whether he remembered the stories of Merlin and set out to deliberately recreate them, or whether he stumbled across the events taking place and simply did what seemed best at the time, no one knows.”

Luna made a soft crooning noise in her throat. “She’s so sad,” she whispered when Harry frowned at her and Ron raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “It’s a sorrow as long as the one in the chamber near

Sanctuary, but even deeper than that.”

“Thanks for telling us.” Ron leaned back in his seat. “How did we get mixed up in all this time-traveling seer-mystical stuff anyway?”

“I didn’t have a choice,” Harry said, tapping his forehead. “Nor did she.” Luna drew back her left sleeve to reveal the crescent-shaped scar where the fragments of her mother’s scrying bowl had struck her. “You can still walk out if you want.”

“What, with these on?” Ron jiggled his pendant chain, making the four medallions jingle faintly. “I’m not that stupid.”

Draco looked over his shoulder. “How stupid *are* you?” he inquired in a tone of friendly interest.

“Not nearly as stupid as you are, Black,” said Professor Jones loudly, causing Draco to execute a jump-and-twist maneuver in his seat and the rest of the Pride to hastily don their best ‘who me, no I wasn’t talking at all’ expressions. “The last person to talk during one of my lectures was never found.”

“Oh boy!” Draco beamed, though worry lurked at the back of his eyes. “I’ve always wanted to see the moon up close!”

Professor Jones turned to Luna and motioned her to stand up. Luna did so, and without further prompting walked over to Draco and plopped herself into his lap. “Close enough for you?” Professor Jones asked as the assembled students snickered.

“It’ll do,” Draco grunted, readjusting where Luna’s weight pressed down.

“Good. Why don’t we return to the topic at hand, namely, Merlin? Thoughts about why he might have been pro-Muggle? Yes, Miss Smythe?”

“Three of the four Founders thought Muggles were all right. If they were like parents to him, he probably would have listened to them...”

The lecture over, Luna started to get up, but Draco’s hand closed around her wrist. “Where’re you going in such a hurry? We haven’t done this for a while.”

“I know. But I have to talk to someone before she goes.”

“Oh, well, if that’s more important than I am...”

Luna flicked Draco on the side of the head. “Nothing is more important than you are to me,” she said quietly. “But this needs to be done. I won’t be long.”

“Off you go, then.” Draco released her, and watched as she threaded her way through the room towards a familiar mane of red hair.

What's she in such a hurry to talk to Amanda about?

A thought came to him. Carefully, making each movement seem random and unconnected, he drew his wand, laid it up by his ear, and whispered a spell Tonks had taught the Pride to improve their hearing with respect to a particular person or people, focusing his attention on Luna and Amanda.

Luna's voice came into focus first. "...allow that as unexpected outside interference?"

"If you'll give me one penalty outside our normal timeline," Amanda responded. "Agreed?"

"That seems fair." Luna nodded and turned away. Draco removed the spell hastily before she could see it on him, and stood up with a smile as she returned to his side.

"Get your business done?" he asked, holding out his hand to her.

Luna squeezed the hand and released it. "Yes, I did. Do you need any help packing, or are you finished?"

"What needs finishing, I can finish on my own. Why don't we go down to the lake for a while, or Hagrid's Place?"

"Not today. Why don't you go with Amanda? She doesn't have anything to do."

By the time Draco got his mouth open to answer this, Luna was already gone, squeezing between a Hufflepuff and a Slytherin and vanishing out the door.

"Something wrong?" Harry asked, seeing Draco standing with his mouth open.

Draco shook his head, half in denial, half in bewilderment. "She's just... weird."

Harry exchanged glances with the remaining members of the Pride, a proceeding which took a few moments. "Too easy," he said at last. "Not taking it."

"Sod off," Draco snapped, and started towards Amanda, replacing his irritated look with a gracious smile. "I hear you might want to go out to the lake for a little while," he said when he was close enough for her to hear.

"Yes, that would be lovely. Thank you."

From behind white masks, fifteen pairs of eyes surveyed Hogwarts' main gates.

This was the day of reckoning.

Birds twittered in the Forest as Draco and Amanda took turns skipping rocks across the lake. “Kind of dead out here,” Draco remarked, watching his stone bounce a fifth time and sink. “Where is everyone?”

“Packing, eating, returning library books to make sure Madam Pince doesn’t send them Howlers over the holidays...” Amanda shrugged. “Matt’s probably hanging out a window somewhere trying to impress his friends. He’s good at that.”

“At impressing his friends, or at trying to impress them?”

“More the second than the first.” Amanda scooped up another rock and stopped in mid-swing as a merman’s head broke the surface of the water. He spouted off a string of angry Mermish and hurled a rock towards them, making Draco dive one way and Amanda the other. The rock clattered to a halt several feet behind them, and the merman nodded angrily and dived back under the surface.

“What was that all about?” Draco asked, sitting up. “And why’re you laughing?”

“I—I don’t—” Amanda got herself under control. “I don’t speak Mermish, but I understand it a little. He said something along the lines of ‘How would you like it if I threw rocks into your living room?’”

“Oops.” Draco leaned back on his hands. “I guess that does it for stone-skipping here. Funny, though, I thought the merpeople lived a lot deeper in the lake.”

“You get loners in every race.” Amanda imitated his pose. “People who’d prefer to go it on their own, who don’t want anybody else hanging around them. Though I suppose you don’t know much about that, living like you do.”

How did she make that not sound rude? Tone of voice, I guess. “I’ve certainly had a lot more of company than not,” Draco agreed. “We grew up fast, too, from being around adults so much and from the trust they put in us. One wrong word from any of us could have broken our world apart.”

“Almost like children who grow up during war.” Amanda’s eyes were far away. “They learn fast, but there’s always something missing. What they have to do to survive, to grow up at all, it breaks a little piece of them off inside and they can never get it back. And sometimes that leads them to do terrible things.”

Draco wasn’t surprised to see the shimmering in her eyes. *What happened to you?* he wanted to ask. *What have you been through that you can say that with so much certainty? Who hurt you like this? Tell me, and I’ll find them and make sure they never do it again...*

Movement beyond her caught his attention before he could speak. He glanced in that direction idly, then stared for an instant before throwing himself to the ground. “Get down!” he hissed, and Amanda flattened herself immediately against the stones.

“What is it?” she breathed, her voice barely louder than the lap of the lake water against the shore.

“Death Eaters.” Draco stomped on all the mental voices clamoring that it couldn’t be, it was impossible, he’d seen wrong, there was some mistake. This was too important to let himself get distracted over. “Do you have your Galleon?”

“Right here.” Amanda pulled it from her pocket and passed it over, lifting her head just enough to see the last of the dark-robed and white-masked figures flitting across the grass towards the castle. “Are they mad? Attacking in broad daylight?”

“I want to know how they got past the wards,” Draco said grimly, pulling out his wand. “But first things first.” He tapped the wand’s tip three times against the golden coin. “To all DA members,” he said clearly to it. “Invasion. Death Eaters. *This is not a drill.*”

All over the Gryffindor common room, students swore or jumped, groping in pockets and pouches. Harry blinked at the message, then shook off his confusion and went to one knee on the hearthrug. “House-elf here!”

With a loud crack, Kady appeared before him. “Master Harry calls?”

“We’ve got trouble, Kady,” Harry said grimly, holding out the Galleon with the word “Invasion” centered on its rim. “Get me the Map, please? And then get everyone to their partners.”

“Yes, Master Harry!” Kady vanished again.

“You’re not taking this seriously?” said Lindsey Jordan in disbelief. “Someone’s having us all on! It’s a joke!”

“If it’s a joke, we all look a little stupid,” Harry retorted. “If it’s not, we all look a little dead. One of those is easier to get over than the other one. Get to your mustering point. We’re fighting.”

Lindsey gulped once, then nodded and clambered out the portrait hole, several other Gryffindors close behind her. Ron came clattering down the stairs from the dormitory with Neville behind him, buckling on the belt that held his potion piece. “Know anything yet?” the taller boy asked, making a wide detour around a clump of chairs.

“I will in—” Harry’s answer was cut off by Kady’s returning crack. “Now. Thanks, Kady.”

“Of course, Master.” Kady bobbed a curtsey and handed over the Map, then produced a piece of leather with worn spots on both sides. “Shall Kady put on Master’s leg-guard now?”

“Please do.” Harry sat down, extended his right leg for Kady’s attentions, and drew his wand. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good,” he muttered, activating the Map. Ron leaned over the back of the chair, watching as the lines of Hogwarts formed on the paper. The common room was mostly empty now, and the dots of people appearing on the Map showed where the students had

gone.

Rooms and stairways might move about at Hogwarts, but corridors were slightly more stable, and the places where corridors met were even more so. Harry had taken this into account when he set up the DA's basic defense positions. Nests of artillery and skirmishers were located at strategic crossroads points, designed to lure attackers in and make sure they got no further. If they did, the Flying Squad and the medics were headquartered in the Room of Requirement with their house-elf partners, ready to go where they were needed.

"Remind me to thank Padfoot and Moony again for making this thing," Harry said, mentally checking off the four artillery positions as where they ought to be.

"You sure about that?" Ron tapped a finger against the parchment.

Harry looked where his friend was pointing and laughed. "Even more sure, with that. Come on, let's get to headquarters. Kady?"

"Ready, sir!" Kady piped from under Harry's robes, where she was now holding tightly to the leather leg-guard all the Flying Squad wore. Harry stood up as Ron came around the chair. The boys clasped hands, Kady reached out to touch Ron's leg, and an instant of compression later they were standing in the Room of Requirement, alive with people and noise.

"QUIET!" Harry bellowed, and kept his grin internal when the DA obeyed instantly. "All right, people, we have about fifteen attackers coming in the front door. They either think we're stupid or they're feeling us out. Either way, we're going to beat them. Communications?"

"Ready," Hermione answered, holding up her Zippo. "We have the main artillery core on the fire, and they have Galleon-communication to the others."

"Perfect." Harry shot a side glance at Ron, who made a triangle with his thumbs and forefingers. "Plan Delta, everyone." He set the Map down on a table that shot out of the floor to hold it, noticing as he did that three of the attackers had peeled off from the main group in the entrance hall and were hanging back as a rearguard. "With a twist," he added. "Davies?"

"Yes, *sir* ." Roger snickered and leaned down to say something to his house-elf partner. An instant later, he was gone.

The oldest member of the rearguard, whose silvering hair was escaping from the back of her mask, heard the choking sob first and whirled around. One of her two compatriots did the same, while the other kept a lookout the way they had been going. Such things as diversions were not unknown.

But the only thing that happened was that a dark-haired girl wearing a Slytherin crest stumbled out of a cross-corridor, crying. She saw the masked figures and gasped, her hands flying to her mouth.

“Don’t scream!” the oldest member cautioned her sternly. “It’s all right, you two,” she added to her fellow fighters. “She’s no threat. Are you all right, dearie?”

“Oh, it was awful!” The girl, assured of her welcome, came forward and fell on the older witch’s shoulder, shivering. “Just awful! But now I know everything will be all right.”

“That’s right, dear, you just relax.” The older woman helped the girl lean back against the wall, then slide down it into a sitting position. “We’ll take care of you.”

“Thank you.” The girl smiled through her teary eyes. “You’re so... so...”

The masked wizard who was watching the way the girl had come made a sound like a sigh and collapsed. The other folded up at the knees and toppled over against the far wall, just as the witch felt her own muscles go limp and her wand drop from her hand.

“So gullible,” the girl finished, her smile magically transformed into a grin. “You never even noticed I sat down on my stun grenades.”

If the witch could have done so, she would have rolled her eyes. *This is going to look fabulous on my record. Outsmarted by a teenager.*

The girl scooped up the three wands from where they had fallen and disappeared back around the corridor from whence she had come. An instant later came a whipcrack noise like Apparition, though that was impossible here at Hogwarts...

So was three of us being overpowered by one untrained little girl.

I suppose there’s a first time for everything.

Then there was silence.

Harry watched the progress of the battle on the Map, nodding in approval as Selena disposed of the rearguard and the skirmishers drew off another set of attackers to be ambushed by an artillery nest. There were eight attackers left in the main group, and they were coming up on a point Ron had chosen as particularly good for the Flying Squad to attack in.

May as well let them have their innings like everyone else.

“Skirmishers to the corridor west of ambush position gamma,” he ordered. “Get the noisemakers ready.”

Hermione repeated the orders into her Zippo, and gave him the nod a moment later to show the skirmishers had heard and would comply.

“Flying Squad prepare to deploy to the corridors on the north and east of that position,” Harry went on. “Shoot to disarm first, then to stun. All except the leader.” His finger rested on a

particular spot on the Map. “He’s mine.”

“How’re we supposed to know who he is?” Lee objected.

Harry told them.

“Got it.”

“Wait for it,” Ron said, watching the progress of the dots on the Map. “Wait for it...”

The last attacker passed through the doorway to the ambush spot.

“Now!”

A series of explosions went off behind the diminished group of attackers. Their leader whirled to face the new enemy, his wand coming up to bear—

Only to see empty doorways staring him in the face.

Two seconds later, a spell hit him in the exact center of his back.

The attackers’ leader shrieked as Harry’s spell sent him staggering across the room and tore the wand from his left hand. Harry took two steps forward and caught the wand neatly. “We win,” he said, looking around at the slumped figures of masked and robed attackers on the floor.

The leader recovered his balance, turned around, and glared through the eyeholes of his mask. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You scream like a girl when you get disarmed from behind.”

“I do not!”

“Yes, you do,” said Professor Longbottom, stepping out of one of the other corridors. “And I told you not to treat them like easy targets,” she added to the reviving figures on the floor. “You, especially,” she said to the leader. “I would have thought you of all people would have some respect for just how good they’ve become.”

“Yeah, well...” The leader pulled off his mask, exposing tangled black hair and a sheepish pair of grey eyes. “I guess I didn’t want to believe you.”

Professor Longbottom shook her head. “Does Aletha know you still hide from facts like this?”

“She will,” Harry said, grinning at his godfather. “You want your wand back, or can I keep it?”

“Shut up and give it here.” Padfoot stuck his hand out. “And no telling Moony about this,” he

added. “Or Danger, either. Let me break the news of my ignominious defeat myself.”

“Fine by me. You’ll see them before I do anyway.”

“Don’t you lot get cocky over this, either,” Professor Longbottom warned the DA as more of the Aurors dressed as Death Eaters unmasked and stood up, groaning. “This was just a preliminary exercise. Real Death Eaters play a lot harder. But I do have to admit, I’m impressed with your response time and overall professionalism. That little game with the rearguard notwithstanding.” She turned to give a look to the members of that group who had just arrived, Auror Leticia Halcyon in the lead. “Playing the role to the hilt, are we?”

Auror Halcyon shrugged. “It’d have about a one-third chance of working for real, if the girl hit on a pureblood snob who recognized her and not one of the sort who’re blood-crazed or just plain crazed. I wouldn’t recommend trying it twice, though.”

“That goes for all these tricks,” Professor Longbottom went on, giving her husband a hand up from the floor. “Because that’s all they are, is tricks. Your spellwork should still be your main focus. Though I can’t say I saw anything to be ashamed of there either...” She sighed. “What I’m talking all around is, well done, Defense Association. Don’t let yourselves get slack over the holidays. That’s all.”

For now, Harry finished mentally. But when real attacks come, they’ll come, and we’ll fight back. There’s no sense worrying about them until then, except to plan and practice.

And for today, there was a victory to celebrate.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 42: A Whole New World (Year 6)

Crystal Huley, who earned her spending money working weekends and vacations at Ottery St. Catchpole's tiny paper shop, woke with a start. The weather was warm even for the beginning of July, and she'd left her bedroom window open, so why was the faint night breeze suddenly blocked? Why wasn't the moonlight forming its proper square on the floor? And what was making that noise? It was hushed and breathy, almost like... almost like...

She turned towards the window and glared at the person leaning in across its sill, one hand across his mouth to stifle his snickers. "What are you *doing* here?" she hissed.

"Came to see you, what else?" Moonlight sparked off red hair and a wide grin across a freckled face as George Weasley beamed at her. "Beautiful night out here. Care to come out with me?"

"How are you doing that?" Crystal asked suspiciously, sitting up in bed.

"Doing what?"

"Does that innocent look fool anybody who knows you?"

"Not really, but it's always worth a try."

"I'm sure. Now answer the question. How did you get up here and how are you not falling back down?"

"Come and see." George waved a hand vaguely out the window. "You'll like it."

Crystal eyed her not-quite-a-boyfriend with suspicion. "*Try it, you'll like it.*" *Where have I heard that before?*

But in the year or so since the daughter of a former sailor and the son of "those strange folks on the hill" had been cautiously feeling out what they wanted to, and could, be to one another, they had been alone together plenty of times. If George's intentions had been bad, he probably would have revealed them by now.

In which case I would have showed him what my daddy taught me. And I still can, if he starts doing anything I don't like.

Besides, he's piqued my curiosity.

"I have to be home by sunrise."

"No problem." George slithered back out of the window, did something complicated with his hands and feet, and then stood up—

On what?

Crystal approached the window with care, flushing as she came into the light and saw George's eyes widen at her pajamas. *Of all the nights to try on the silk harem-girl ensemble Mum got me for my birthday...*

Two more steps brought her close enough to see what George was standing on, and her clothes suddenly seemed more appropriate.

It really should be a carpet, said the tiny corner of her brain which wasn't stunned by the revelation of just how strange "those strange folks on the hill" were. *And he should be wearing a turban. The robes look okay, though.*

Balancing without apparent effort on the handle of his hovering broomstick, George reached a hand back through her window and smiled at her with his most winning look. "Do you trust me?" he asked quietly.

This is insane, Crystal's mind yammered at her, *this is absolutely insane, it has to be a dream...*

But dream or no dream, she knew the right answer to that question.

"Yes," she said, and laid her hand in his.

Up in the Weasleys' orchard, the ambushers waited.

"Are you sure about this?" one of them muttered to another. "He's an awfully good shot."

"He won't be looking for us to start with, and he can't see those once the charms go active." The second ambusher's eyes swept the tops of the nearby trees, where the third and fourth members of the team were setting up the spells they'd specially filled the day before. "And if he takes one of them out anyway, well, that's why we brought four."

"I thought we brought four so we'd get the surround effect."

"That too."

"Both of you shut up," said a tinny-sounding voice from a tarnished mirror hanging at the first ambusher's belt. "They're on their way."

"Fine, fine," grumbled the first ambusher, retreating under cover. The second merely blew a kiss to the mirror, then raised a hand and waved frantically to the two members of the team who were still exposed. One of them began to clamber down, while the other simply pushed off and coasted to the ground. Within a few moments, the clearing where the Weasleys played pick-up Quidditch in the summertime appeared as deserted as it should have been.

The second ambusher smiled coolly, peering out of concealment to watch the unmistakable shape

of a double-loaded broomstick zooming closer every second.

Appearances are such deceptive things.

"Magic is real?" Crystal knew it was at least the tenth time she'd asked the same question, but it wasn't one she wanted to leave open for debate. "Unicorns and dragons and wizards?"

"Oh my," George agreed with a snicker. "There's a herd of unicorns living in the Forbidden Forest at my school up north. Former school, I should say. We've left now, Fred and I. Going into business for ourselves. As for dragons, there's a colony in Scotland and one or two in Wales—my brother works at one of those, comes home every so often missing all his hair. And wizards?" He squeezed her hands where they met around his chest. "You're riding with one."

"And is your whole family—?"

"Every one of us." George wove the broomstick deftly through the trees of the grove the kids in Ottery St. Catchpole called the Haunted Orchard. "Dad's a wizard, Mum's a witch, and there's seven of us kids, and not one of us a Squib."

"Squib? Is that what you call..." The words tasted bitter, but she had to get them out now or she never would. "People like me?"

George shook his head. "Your sort are Muggles. No magic at all, don't even know it exists. Squibs are born to a magical family but not magic themselves. Hard lines on them, but it's not like there's anything we can do. Though if Mrs. Letha's right—friend of the family, she is, and a Healer who's looked into this some—there might be." He brought the broom to a halt in the center of the clearing they'd come into and turned to face her, sitting sidesaddle on the broom's handle with his legs dangling off the opposite side from hers. "Some wizards think it's wrong, dirty even, to marry anyone but another wizard. Or witch, I should say, let's not get into that whole mess."

The uncomfortable expression on his face made Crystal giggle, but then it turned serious again. "Trouble is, magic runs in families, and there's only so many Muggleborns—people who have magic when their parents didn't, just came out of nowhere—and those same wizards think *they're* dirty too. Stupid bastards."

Crystal ran through the implications of the scenario he'd outlined in her head. "Inbreeding?" she said. "Is that what causes, what was it, Squibs?"

"Seems likely to me." George slid an arm around her waist. "So it ought to be pretty easy to avoid having a Squib kid. But none of that sort are willing to accept that. They're all too interested in their stupid 'purity.'" He grinned. "And I do mean stupid. Half the ones who've been marrying their cousins for all these years are thicker than two short wands. And a good percentage of the ones who can manage to count to eleven without taking their shoes off are psychotic."

"You seem nice enough," Crystal said, investigating the texture of the invisible cushion on the

broomstick with her free hand. "And you might be thicker than one short wand, but I don't think you're thicker than two. I wouldn't know. I've never seen a short wand."

"Have you ever seen a long one?"

"No."

His grin turned distinctly scandalous. "Want to?"

She felt her face heat as she realized she'd been suckered. "Depends on how you mean it," she said indistinctly, looking away.

"We'll start family-friendly, then." George's robes rustled, and a foot-long wooden rod, slender and polished from its rounded tip to the grip carved into its other end, was deposited in her lap. "One long wand. Fairly long, that is, I've seen longer, but mine's on the upper end as far as length goes."

Telling her dirty mind to get lost, Crystal peered closely at the wand. "So how long is it?"

Judging by George's face, he was having the same thoughts she was, but he plowed on nonetheless. "Twelve inches exactly. Made from ash and phoenix tail feather. Fred's is the same length and core, but hickory instead."

"How do you pick that out?" Crystal let her fingers trail along the smooth surface. "Or do you?"

George shook his head. "They say the wand chooses the wizard, not the other way around. When you try them out, there's always one that likes you best—here, I'll show you what that means—"

His hand went for the grip, but Crystal's was already there.

"Ready," the first ambusher breathed, handing the bag of lozenges back to the third. "Call it."

"On three," the second mouthed to the fourth, who raised one of the longer wands George had seen and aimed it carefully at the first of the spells mounted on the treetops. "One, two—"

Eyes met. Lips touched tentatively, then clung. One of them was about to break it off first, and Crystal wasn't sure for the life of her which one it was, when a burst of music made her gasp.

Almost made her, that was. Actively gasping in the middle of a kiss which had become as involved as this one somehow had would have had some unpleasant consequences. Fortunately, she was able to stop her impulse in time, and George pulled her a little closer while the music swelled, then let her go and winked one dark eye. "Hold on!" he shouted, spun himself back into flying position, and leaned forward.

Crystal barely got her arms around him in time as the broom rocketed skyward. The back of her mind noticed that the music was following them, and recognized the song just before a strong young tenor began to sing the lyrics.

What could be more appropriate?

*I can show you the world
Shining, shimmering, splendid
Tell me, Princess, now when did you last
Let your heart decide*

They were flying lower now, zipping past darkened houses and rustling the leaves of trees. Idly she wondered why no one was outside to see where the music was coming from, but reasoned that the same magic which was capable of building an actual flying broomstick could probably keep sounds from being heard by anyone they weren't meant for.

*I can open your eyes
Take you wonder by wonder*

George's half-heard, half-felt chuckle was her only warning as he threw the broom into a fast climb followed by a barrel roll, then shot below an outstretched tree branch so close that Crystal could have reached out and picked herself a twig.

*Over, sideways, and under
On a magic carpet ride
A whole new world*

They rose into the clearer air, letting her look down on the roads and houses below. She had to crane her neck to find her own home, and shook her head in wonder at how tiny it looked from here.

*A new fantastic point of view
No one to tell us no
Or where to go
Or say we're only dreaming*

A sweet mezzo-soprano took over the song, and Crystal found herself whispering along with the words.

*A whole new world
A dazzling place, I never knew
But when I'm way up here
It's crystal clear*

George half-turned to grin at her, and she stuck out her tongue.

That now I'm in a whole new world with you

The tenor came back in over the end of the line.

Now I'm in a whole new world with you

The mezzo returned the favor, and George guided the broom still higher, pointing silently at the beauty of stars on the river.

Unbelievable sights

Indescribable feelings

Soaring, tumbling, freewheeling

Through an endless diamond sky

Crystal's original suspicion hardened into near-certainty. This whole night had been carefully planned to pander to her secret (*though obviously not secret enough*) love of Disney. She didn't know how George had planned for her outfit, though if he had this kind of magic available for a simple midnight visit to her house, she'd bet he was capable of spying on her to see what she wore to bed. Or if she was wearing anything at all.

Somehow the thought wasn't as repulsive as it would have been with most of the males of her acquaintance....

A whole new world

She was starting to feel overwhelmed, both by the flight and by her own thoughts, but the tenor's chiding tone stopped her in mid-motion.

Don't you dare close your eyes

The mezzo summed up her thoughts about the situation perfectly.

A hundred thousand things to see

The tenor's tone warmed as he made the promise.

Hold your breath, it gets better

George winked at her and sent the broom into a dive, and the mezzo's clear, ecstatic high notes followed them down.

I'm like a shooting star

I've come so far

I can't go back to where I used to be

Every turn a surprise

They tumbled through a complete circle, then began to climb again.

Every moment red-letter

The two voices blended in harmony, and Crystal discovered the reasoning behind her earlier lack of revulsion at George seeing her undressed. George was... not innocent, the word was laughably inapplicable to him in its usual context, but *focused*. He had things he cared about and things he wanted to do, and sneaking around leering at girls who didn't want to be leered at wasn't on either list. If he'd caught an eyeful or two of her naked body, he might have been cheerfully appreciative, but he wouldn't have been creepy about it.

I'll chase them anywhere

There's time to spare

Let me share this whole new world with you

And whatever we tell men, or ourselves, on that subject, there was never a woman born who didn't like to be appreciated.

The song wound towards its finale, tenor and mezzo echoing lines back and forth, tenderly interweaving words over each other's held notes.

A whole new world

(A whole new world)

George put the broom into hover and turned back to face her. The focus she'd just been thinking about now centered on *her*, and Crystal swallowed once.

That's where we'll be

(That's where we'll be)

What the hell. Every girl says she wants to be the most important thing in his world. I'll give it a go.

A thrilling chase

(A wondrous place)

She leaned forward into his kiss as the two voices blended to finish the song.

For you and me

The four ambushers slipped down the hill and back to their field base, where their back-up and transport team awaited to escort them home. The operation had been completely successful.

This did not help them when they were discovered on their way up the stairs to their control room.

"*Sneaking out at this hour of the night!*" The voice was precisely calculated for maximum effect on the wrongdoers, while allowing most of the occupants of the house to continue their slumbers. "*Running off to heaven knows where, without leaving so much as a note!*"

Ron was cringing, and Draco looked as though he'd like to put his fingers in his ears. Ginny's arms were folded, but her defiant expression was wearing thinner by the second. Hermione had her back against the wall of the stairs, seemingly trying to push herself through it and disappear.

"And *you!*" Mrs. Weasley turned to Charlie and Tonks, who gave her near-identical smiles of hopeful pleading. "*Helping* them! Have you *no* sense at all? There are *Death Eaters* out there, you could have been *attacked* —"

"We'd have known," said a voice from the first floor hallway.

Mrs. Weasley lifted her chin at the speaker. "Oh, really?"

Harry came down a few stairs, holding up a tarnished rectangle of glass. "Two-way mirrors," he said, pointing at the matching article hanging from Draco's belt. "We were watching them every second, so we'd have been able to get them help if they ran into anything Tonks and Charlie couldn't handle."

"Which isn't likely," added Neville from behind Harry, Luna and Meghan beside him. "Death Eaters prefer working alone, or in small groups. No more than four."

Ron straightened up, emboldened by his friends' arrival. "We could probably take four of them ourselves if we had to," he began, then wilted under his mother's stern look. "Well, we could," he muttered.

"Beside the point, all of it." Mrs. Weasley looked reproachfully at them. "I thought you had more sense than this. It seems I was wrong. So I want your promise—all of you," she added, looking up the stairs at the other four Warriors. "No more gallivanting off in the middle of the night for fun and games. No leaving the house at all, unless it's with an adult. A *real* adult, not one of these overgrown delinquents." She twitched her head towards her second son and his wife, who bristled at the description but subsided when Charlie kicked her in the ankle. "Honestly, I'd thought after last Christmas you would have learned something."

Hermione flinched away from the words, and Ron drew himself up in indignation. Ginny elbowed him in the stomach and stepped in front of him while he was still gasping for breath. "We promise, Mum," she said, glancing up and down the stairs to make sure she had the approval of the whole Pride, however grudgingly it might be given in some cases. "We won't do this again."

"Good." Mrs. Weasley sighed wearily and massaged the back of her neck with one hand. "It's not that I don't understand," she said in a gentler tone. "You're young. You don't want to be cooped up here all the time. But you can't just run off whenever you feel like it. It isn't safe."

"We understand," said Harry, giving Neville a significant look. The shorter boy nodded and waved

Luna and Meghan back down the hall towards the Pride's den room, where they'd been watching the success of the ambushers through Harry's two-way mirror, before beckoning Draco and Ron, now with Neenie draped around his shoulders, up the stairs behind Harry.

Mrs. Weasley gazed at him. "Do you?" she asked, then gave herself a little shake. "No, that's silly. If anyone your age can understand it, Harry, you would. Do try and explain it to the rest of them if you can, though it's not a thing that's easy to explain..."

"No, it's not," Harry agreed as Ginny joined him at the top of the stairs. "But I'll try."

"Thank you, dear." Mrs. Weasley smiled. "Good night, everyone."

A round of "Good nights" later, the Warriors of the Pride settled grumpily onto the cushioned floor of their den.

"Why did you agree?" Draco demanded of Ginny. "You *know* she's going to call any adult who would take us out of here once in a while another 'overgrown delinquent,' and that means we'll be stuck in here until term starts again!"

"You weren't listening very carefully, were you?" Luna reached up with one bare foot and tweaked a strand of Draco's hair between her toes, making him color and the rest of the Pride snigger. "She wasn't upset that we went out, or even that we went out with only Charlie and Tonks. She was upset that we went out without telling her first."

"She's being a dictator," griped Ron, scratching Neenie's chin.

"This is something new?" Ginny quipped. "I agreed because if I hadn't, she'd have slapped us all with locator spells and *made* us stay in. Luna's right. All Mum really wants is to know where we are, and that we're as safe as we can be. And once she cools down some from panicking over us being gone, she'll realize we were safe tonight. We never left the wards around the Burrow, and even at Christmas..." She gave a small shudder of her own. "Even then, they had to lure us out of the wards. They couldn't get in themselves."

"What did she mean about you understanding, Harry?" asked Neville, idly spinning the selection chamber on his unloaded potion piece. "Why you?"

Harry looked around the room. "Were any of you there when she went after the boggart last summer?" he asked. "I mean there in the room, not down in the kitchen or off someplace else?" Shaking heads greeted him. "I didn't think so. I was. That's what she meant, or part of it."

"I remember she had a hard time with it," said Ron. "Mr. Moony ended up getting rid of it, didn't he?"

Neenie nodded, as did Meghan. "He said she had so much trouble because it had a lot of alternate forms it could take," the younger girl said. "So when she tried *Riddikulus*, it would just change its shape."

"It did have a lot of them, but they were all the same." Harry let his eyes unfocus and drifted back to that evening, the hairs on his arms lifting in deference to the memory. "People she loves. Your brothers. Our families. Us." His own features, pale and totally still, glasses hanging precariously by one earpiece, before Moony's calm incantation sent the boggart fleeing for its un-life. "Dead."

The silence in the den room was total.

"That's what she thinks about when she wakes up in the middle of the night," Harry went on after a few breaths. "That's what she worries about, every minute of every day. She's seen it happen before. All our parents have. Their friends, their family, people they liked or loved, who didn't get a chance to say goodbye. They just never came home. And it isn't something you 'get over.'" His eyes met Draco's, then Neenie's, then Meghan's, thoughts of Andromeda Tonks clear in all of them. "You go on, but you have to go on *with* it. There's no other way. Not unless you forget those people." He laughed a little, weakly. "And I should have thought of all this before we agreed to help out tonight, shouldn't I?"

"Being the alpha doesn't mean you're the only one who gets to think," Draco said. "We all should have thought of it. I did think of it, but I thought staying within the Burrow's wards and being with Charlie and Tonks all the time would be enough."

"Enough? For Mum in a 'my precious babies' mood?" Ron guffawed, raising a mild hiss of protest from Neenie at the noise. "You can get down if you're so fussy," he told her. She smacked him on the nose with a paw. "Or you can do that."

"So we didn't consider Mum carefully enough, and now we're semi-grounded." Ginny rolled onto her stomach and arched her back to bring her head against her heels. "Not the worst punishment we've ever had. At least she agreed to take our word, instead of hauling out the locators right away."

"She knows we keep our promises," Luna pointed out. "If we were Fred and George, she would have used the spells."

"If we were Fred and George, we would be of age already," said Meghan, a distinct pout in place. "And we would have our own shop and our own flat and not have to worry about *parents*."

"And we wouldn't be ourselves, which would be more of a pity for some of us than others," said Neville in an offhand tone.

Meghan looked at him sideways, unable to decide if she'd just been complimented, insulted, or both.

"All right, enough." Harry held up both hands. "We're not Fred and George. We are the Pride. We're also on parole inside the house, which won't be as bad as it was last summer because there's no more massive cleaning to do and there are some unused rooms if we have to get away from each other. And there's always summer homework if we get desperate."

"Have to be pretty bloody desperate," said Ron. "But I see what you mean. It's not like we wouldn't be stuck mostly inside wherever we were, with a war going on and all. Mum just made it official."

"As she so loves to do," murmured Ginny.

Neenie flowed down from Ron's shoulders and changed back. "Getting our summer homework done early might be a good idea," she began, and waved her hands irritably at the chorus of boos and cat-calls. "Would you let me *finish!* "

Harry stuck two fingers into his mouth. The room went silent. "Floor's yours," he said, taking them out again.

"As I was *saying* ." Hermione favored both Ron and Draco with one of her patented withering glares. "If we finish our homework now, while we're still in trouble for sneaking out, then we'll have it done by the time Neville's and Harry's birthdays come... and if we've been good until then, we can ask to have their party at home, and make the strengthening of the wards that will need an excuse to keep going back for the rest of the summer."

"Sneaky," said Draco. "I like it."

Ron slid an arm around Hermione. "I knew there was a reason I loved you."

"You mean besides my putting up with your moods?"

"And on that note," said Harry as Ron pulled Hermione into his lap and attempted to tickle her, getting a nip on the thumb from Neenie for his pains, "the business portion of this Den is adjourned. Who's for Exploding Snap?"

Crystal tried to keep her eyes from bugging out and her jaw from dropping, but it was hard when every step brought a new wonder into view. Cauldrons and owls, wands and broomsticks, and everywhere people in long robes, looking as strangely at her T-shirt and jean shorts as she would have at their clothing on the streets of London or Ottery St. Catchpole. George, towing her down the street by one hand, seemed as unimpressed by the spectacle as though he saw it every day.

Which he must, since he said last night he and his brother have a shop here now. I wonder where

An enormous yellow-on-purple sign in a window ahead caught her attention.

Oh. There it is.

She mouthed the words to herself and began to giggle. George looked over his shoulder with a grin. "Like it? We figured we'd do our bit for morale, keep everyone as happy as possible."

"Except the people whose friends give them the stuff," Crystal retorted. "That's just cruel."

"Hey, we figured out an antidote for it."

"Which you'll sell at double the price of the original formula, right?"

George sighed happily. "I knew you were a keeper. Speaking of which, don't let me forget, I've got to introduce you to my little brother and sister at some point, but for right now come on up and say hi to Fred, and meet his girl and our other two friends who're helping us out with this."

A tap of his wand unlocked the door, and they hurried through the colorful shop and into the back room, up a flight of stairs, and into a narrow hallway with a door off either side. George knocked at the left-hand one, and it was opened after a few seconds by his twin. "Luck?" he asked, then noticed Crystal. "Luck indeed."

"That's right." George waved his brother back and led Crystal inside, and Fred shut the door behind them. "Who should I be hexing for that little surprise in the orchard? You, Lee, or both?"

"Why should you be hexing us?" asked a dreadlocked boy lounging on a sofa, transforming one of his bare feet into what looked like a dog's paw and back again. "It worked, didn't it?"

George rolled his eyes. "Crystal Huley, Lee Jordan," he said, waving at the two of them. "My graceless brother you already know."

"Graceless indeed," Fred began, but a tall girl, as blonde as Crystal herself, opened the door of a far room before he could continue.

"Who's here?" she asked, then spotted George and Crystal. "I see all went well."

"Did you expect anything else?" George preened. "Crystal, this is Danielle..." He made a strained face.

"Reading, like the city," Danielle finished for him. "Honestly, I've only been going out with your brother for nearly a year now." She shook her head and turned her attention to Crystal. "Are you any good with getting people to think clearly about things?" she asked.

"Um. Maybe?"

"Maybe is better than no. Come in here."

Crystal looked at George, who shrugged. *Up to you*, he seemed to be saying. She considered it for a moment, then crossed to the door, which Danielle vacated for her and closed behind her.

A third girl lay across the bed in this room, her shoulders occasionally heaving and her mass of long dark hair obscuring her face. Danielle sat down on the bottom of the bed. "Maya, sweetie," she said gently, "this is Crystal, George's new girlfriend. This is Maya, if you missed it," she added to Crystal. "She's with Lee, and she's got a little problem."

"No, I do not have a little problem!" Maya rolled onto her back and sat up, revealing a golden-tan face which was probably quite attractive when it wasn't red-eyed and blotchy from crying. "I have a big problem, and you're just pretending it's little because you want me to stop worrying about it!"

"Why don't we let Crystal decide what kind of problem you have?" Danielle suggested, flicking her wand to slide the desk chair out for Crystal. "She hasn't heard any of this before, so she'll be impartial."

Maya sighed theatrically. "Fine. Fine. Where do I start?"

"My name is..." Danielle prompted.

"Har har." Taking a deep breath, Maya pushed her hair back from her face. "My name is Maya Pritchard, and in January I did something very brave and very stupid..."

Crystal listened awestruck to a story which certainly merited both those adjectives, and to all the various aftereffects from that one painful moment of Maya's being bitten by a werewolf. She wasn't sure exactly what a real werewolf was like, as opposed to the variety of fictional ones she'd heard about, but the detail of the slumber party being on the full moon told her one thing and Maya's obvious hatred of that night told her another. Her fingernails cut into her palms when Maya's parents admitted they had agreed to the attack, and she had to physically stop herself from cheering when they were arrested and Maya's aunt and uncle stepped in.

"They're who I'm worried about now, really," Maya said with a sigh. "Them and Graham and Bernie. I love them so much, they've given me everything I have now, and all I've given back to them is trouble. People throw eggs and rocks at their house, there've been death threats, someone even burned a wolf in effigy on their front lawn..."

"But you're not living there, are you?" Crystal asked, looking around at the obvious signs of occupancy in the bedroom. "Did you ever?"

Maya shook her head. "That doesn't matter to these people," she said darkly. "Uncle Par and Aunt Voni accept me, and that's all their kind cares about."

"Maybe it's not." Crystal thought back through the story. "Didn't you say your dad was some kind of big shot for the bad guys, the ones who don't like Muggles?"

"He is—was," Maya corrected herself with a grimace and a half-hearted giggle. "Why?"

"And your uncle finally got the better of him over you," Crystal went on without answering. "And then joined the good guys full-time, instead of sitting on the sidelines."

"He and Aunt Voni both," Maya agreed. "And Graham is training with us at school."

"So maybe somebody who was a friend of your dad's is using you as an excuse to go after your aunt and uncle." Crystal nodded firmly. "That's got to be the answer. This isn't about you at all."

You're just a scapegoat, a convenient reason why 'normal people' should hate your relatives, probably to get somebody on board who isn't so sure they want to be with the baddies. Maybe a bunch of somebodies. This isn't your fault."

Maya's face was starting to clear. "That... makes sense. That makes a lot of sense. Thank you, Crystal. I feel so much better now. I was thinking *I* was the reason they need to leave their house and move to somewhere safer, but you're right. If I wasn't around, there'd be some other phony reason why people were going after them. You're right. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Crystal squeezed her new friend's hand, intercepting a broad wink from Danielle. "Happy to help."

Magical people, it seemed, had just as many problems as Muggle people.

And they're in the middle of a war. Why am I here again?

Even as she asked herself the question, herself answered it with a snort of amusement. *Because George is here and not about to leave, and he may have magic but he doesn't always have common sense. Besides, if they lose we're all screwed anyway, so I might as well see what I can do to help.*

And, I have to admit, because it's real magic and you're not getting me away from it with anything short of—what was it, a Beater's bat?

"If you want to pay me back," she said with a chuckle, "maybe you can explain to me just what 'Quidditch' is, and what it means that 'Gryffindor took the Cup two hundred seventy to forty'—thanks, of course, to George's 'magnificent Beating', and unless *that* means something different than I think it does, I ought to be on my way out of here as fast as my legs can take me!"

Both girls burst into laughter, and Crystal joined them, remembering something her mother had told her.

"Always laugh where your man can hear you. It keeps him nervous, wondering what he's done that's so funny."

And I'm going to need every bit of help I can get to keep this one nervous, oh yes I am.

But it will all be worth it in the end.

The "somewhere safer" to which Par and Voni Pritchard moved their family the very next day was originally intended to be a safe house in the country, but Brian Li happened to spot the house's location while he was assembling information for his next mission and immediately sent Remus a message that it was no more than a mile from one of the larger werewolf camps he'd visited. There was no guarantee the family would be recognized there, but then again, there was no guarantee they wouldn't, and Aletha, Danger, and Molly settled the whole thing between them by cleaning out and fixing up two of the unused rooms on the third floor in the time it took the male members

of the Order to agree that they had a problem.

"Voni didn't work outside the home, so with us to keep an eye on Graham and Bernie for her, she can take on Order duties full-time," Danger said. "She's dependable and good with her wand, which is something we desperately need in a full-timer."

"Besides, with the crowd we have around here, two more kids are hardly going to be noticeable," said Sirius, leaning back in his chair and tweaking one of Meghan's braids.

"*Dadfoot!*"

Graham, as it turned out, was the less noticeable of the pair, simply because he was seldom around. Maya slept at Lee's flat in Diagon Alley, but most mornings she (and Lee, and Fred, and George) arrived at Grimmauld Place for breakfast, then departed again with Graham in tow for Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, where there was always work for willing hands and wands, even ones belonging to a thirteen-year-old.

Meghan, held by the Pride's promise to Mrs. Weasley, griped under her breath about not being allowed to go along, but Graham made up for his frequent absences by joining her in her homework sessions every few days and being startlingly helpful. Clearly he was learning more than jokes from his cousin, Lee, and the twins.

Bernie, on the other hand, spent the first few days of her new existence in a foul mood. She'd *liked* her home, she'd had *friends* there, and here, as nice as everybody was, it was the nice of the big kids to the little one, or the grownups to the baby, and that wasn't what she wanted. She wanted people on her own level, and she wanted them now.

Her wish was granted from a source no one expected.

"You go first!"

"No, you go first!"

Bernie sat up straight in the big chair in the bedroom she shared with Graham, dropping the book she'd been pretending to read on the floor. "Who's there?" she said loudly, sliding down and looking towards the open door. The voices didn't sound like grownups...

The speakers sidled into view, and Bernie stared. She had seen house-elves before, a few of her friends' families had them, but those house-elves had been almost as big as she was, and these were tiny, not much bigger than a cat. And they were wearing *clothes*. Clothes made out of old dish towels and couch covers, maybe, but still clothes. It didn't make any sense!

"Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Echo, Mistress," said the little elf with blue eyes, blinking them a few times rapidly.

"My brother is Cissus. We is being twins."

"You're twins?" Echo was wearing a skirt, so Bernie guessed she must be a girl, and Cissus, being her brother, was of course a boy. "How old are you?"

"Five months, Mistress," said Cissus. "Which is like five years for humans."

"You're five? Really?" Bernie sat down on the floor and patted two spots beside her. "I'm six—I didn't think there was anybody else my age around here!" Something occurred to her. "Why're you calling me Mistress?"

"You is human," Echo murmured, sitting down tentatively in one of the places Bernie had indicated. "Humans always is being our Masters and Mistresses."

"Not this time," Bernie declared. "Not me. I don't know how to Mistress, and I don't want to learn. I just want friends." She smiled at both elflets, and Echo's returning smile was stronger than her voice had been, while Cissus frankly grinned at her. "Will you be my friends?"

"Yes!" said Cissus immediately, and Echo nodded.

"Good." Bernie's smile broadened. "Now we have to do something to make sure everybody knows we're friends. Something just a little bit bad. Something like... like..."

"Like sneaking up on Kreacher," Echo blurted, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Yeah!" Cissus seconded. "We can sneak up on Kreacher and spy on him!"

"Kreacher?" Bernie frowned in thought. "Is that the mean nasty grown-up house-elf who lives under the water tank?"

Both elflets nodded. "His Master told him stay in there after he had a fight with our daddy," Cissus said solemnly. "He doesn't like his Master, or our daddy or mummy, because both of them are free elves that got clothes from their old Masters."

Bernie's frown deepened as she tried to figure this one out. "But if he doesn't like *his* Master..."

"He thinks his Master is being a bad wizard," Echo said in a hushed tone, glancing over her shoulder. "He believes all wizards should be hating Muggles."

"Pbbbt to him," Bernie declared, blowing a raspberry in the direction of the water tank, several floors below. "He's stupid. Let's go spy on him and listen to him be stupid, and then throw a water bomb on him and run away and laugh."

Both elflets agreed that this course of action sounded highly agreeable to them.

"Scuse me."

Sirius looked up—or, rather, down—from his typewriter into the face of a small, dark-haired girl flanked by a pair of elflets. "Yes, and what can I do for you?" he asked gravely.

"Sorry to bother you when you're working," Bernie recited all in one breath. "But we were spying on Kreacher—"

"You don't want to do that," Sirius interrupted, stifling a groan. *Great, what kind of language did they hear that I'm going to have to account to Voni and Winky for?* "Kreacher's old and he doesn't always think straight, he says things that aren't nice. Or even true."

"I know," Bernie said. "But he kept saying this one thing over and over, and crying. And then he said a whole story. I didn't understand it all, but Echo and Cissus listen to him lots, so they helped me with some of the harder parts." The elflets nodded in unison. "And after that he went back to saying that same thing again, and I thought since you were his Master I better ask you." Her eyes never left his, inquiring brown locked onto worried silver-gray. "How come Kreacher says it's his fault his Master Regulus died?"

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Facing Danger

Chapter 43: Memories and Muggleborns (Year 6)

Letha caught up with Harry outside the second floor toilet. "Explain," she said without preamble.

Harry thought of trying to lie, but Letha's face was set in the preternatural calm she only wore when she was playing Quidditch or so angry she didn't dare show it. Fibbing would get Mrs. Weasley's stay-in-the-house order amplified to stay-in-your-room-and-do-nothing-but-homework, and he liked himself sane.

"It all started when Bernie and Echo and Cissus were spying on Kreacher," he said. "They heard him say something about Regulus Black's death being his fault, and told Padfoot because he's Kreacher's Master. Padfoot tried asking him about it, but Kreacher freaked out and started yelling that he'd been ordered never to tell the family and he wouldn't tell such an awful Master anything anyway. So since I'm not technically family, Padfoot waited until Kreacher calmed down, then had me ask him instead."

"I take it you got results."

Harry nodded. "Do you remember last summer when Luna said there was something strange about this big old locket we found while we were cleaning up?"

"Is that the one Albus came and took away? The one you said looked like Voldemort, and felt like the diary that possessed Percy and Ginny?"

"Yeah, that one. It turns out it was Voldemort's, and he used Kreacher to test its hiding place. Kreacher was supposed to die after the testing was over, but Regulus had told him to come home when Voldemort was done with him, and he got here before the Inperi got him."

"Inperi?" Letha shook her head. "Never mind. Keep going."

"Regulus was really angry about it," Harry said, condensing Kreacher's rambling narrative on the fly rather than reporting it as close to word-for-word as he could, the way he had for his godfather. "He liked Kreacher as much as Padfoot didn't, so he decided he wasn't going to let Voldemort get away with it. He had Kreacher take him back there, and he, Regulus, tripped the spell on the hiding place, and the Inperi did kill him. But Kreacher got back here with the locket, and under Regulus' orders to never tell the family what he'd done."

"Mm-hmm." Letha nodded slowly. "And you told Sirius this how long ago?"

Harry checked his watch. "About an hour."

"Long enough." She started to turn away, then stopped and let out a breath that had a little laugh in its end. "Quite an interesting family you ended up with," she said, giving him a brief, tight hug.

"There's good interesting and bad interesting in families," said Harry, hugging back. "And we're

good interesting. Now if you want to talk about *bad* families..." He pitched his words to carry down the hall, where Draco had just come into view.

"Really want to lose a duel today, do you?" Draco snapped his wrist, popping his wand into his hand. Harry did the same.

"Don't break anything," said Letha, heading for the stairs. "Including each other."

I'm not planning to. Harry sized up the opposition, feeling himself being measured in return. *On the other hand, Fred did just teach me that spell to flip your enemy upside down and turn all his hair into springs...*

Aletha took the stairs two at a time, less to get away from the spellfire beginning below her than to get to her bedroom above. She could already hear the vague sounds of crashes and growls coming from it, which meant either Sirius was making so much noise he was overwhelming the Silencing Charms or he hadn't cast them properly.

He never could concentrate properly on his magic when he was angry. Severus used to provoke him before exams just to try to make him fail...

She tried the door. As she'd expected, it was locked. As she had half-expected, a simple *Alohomora* did nothing. A more complex Full Unlocking charm, though, did the trick, and she keyed up her Beater's reflexes and stepped into the room.

Padfoot the dog tore two more mouthfuls of cloth out of the duvet he was disemboweling before he looked up and noticed her. Aletha had time to close the door behind herself, reset the Silencer her entry had nullified, and take a seat on the floor beside him. "Feeling better?" she asked, indicating the shattered furniture and shredded fabric that covered the room, along with the fresh gouges in the walls.

Sirius retransformed and glared at her. "Get out."

"This is my bedroom too."

"Well, it's my goddamn *house!* "

"In which you have given a number of people guest-rights," Aletha pointed out. "And you're disturbing them, and our cubs, with this little display. If you're so angry you can't control yourself, I'll be glad to go out to the Den with you. There's no one there, so you can rant and rave and smash things all you like."

"I'll go." Sirius thrust his hands against the floor and got to his feet. "You're not coming."

"Orders," said Aletha with a calm she was far from feeling. "No one goes out alone."

Sirius spat an oath. "Fine, then, come if you're so damn worried. Stupid witch, thinks I can't take care of myself..." The last word was cut off by the loud crack of his Disapparition.

He must be upset. Usually he barely makes a sound doing that. Aletha stood up and spun in place herself, concentrating on the Den's music room. A brief constriction, and she was there, just in time to duck as a book hurtled past her head. Sirius growled something that might have been charitably interpreted as an apology before returning his attention to the bookshelf he was denuding of its contents.

Aletha retreated to the cover of a wing chair and watched as her husband transformed a room which had been left as neat as Danger's orders and the cubs' sweat could make it into a fair replica of a battleground. The only things he left in their places were the heavier pieces of furniture, such as the couch and her piano, and even they came in for a few savage kicks. Finally Sirius knelt in the center of the room, panting. A fist slammed into the carpet, once, twice, again, and on the third blow he screamed, a sound raw with anger and pain and disbelief.

Then he crumpled, and Aletha was beside him in a heartbeat, drawing him unresisting into her arms. He clung to her as he once had when she awakened him from nightmares of Azkaban, burying his face against her breasts and sobbing with the harsh, broken sounds of a man whose tears did not come easily. She hummed under her breath and stroked his hair, his shoulders, his back, pushing her own fears away. Sirius needed her now. That was all she could allow to matter.

"Tell me," she said when the worst was past. "I only got the quick version from Harry. Something about Voldemort, and Inferi..."

Sirius shuddered, but sat up and fished in his pocket for a handkerchief. Aletha swallowed a snicker and handed him hers, with which he managed to make himself halfway presentable. "It starts with that locket," he said hoarsely, tucking the cloth away when she motioned for him to keep it. "You remember, from last summer?"

"We got that far, yes."

"I guess it was more important to Lord Snaky-Pants than anybody ever knew." Sirius tried for a smile and got only a shaky grimace. "Even he would only set up a lake full of Inferi and a potion that sounds like it was brewed with dementor spit to guard something *really* important..."

He explained further, and despite herself, Aletha was impressed by the interlocking cunning of the plan. Even if an intruder made it to the island and forced himself to fight through all the memories and visions of horrors to finish the potion, he would then have to drink from the lake, and the Inferi would drag him under to drown and become one of them, increasing the locket's protection by recruiting its erstwhile thief.

Or that's how it was supposed to work. In theory. Like most theories, in practice it hit a snag.

A snag named Regulus Black.

"No one ever knew what happened to him," Sirius said, looking out through the glass of the back door with unseeing eyes. "I always assumed..." His voice choked off, and he had to stop and get his breath back before he could go on. "I always assumed he'd lost his nerve. Backed out of a raid or froze up in front of an Auror. I never thought... he's a *hero*, dammit, and all this time I've been thinking about him like..."

"I know." Aletha kissed the side of his forehead. "But that isn't the only reason you're upset by this, is it?"

A half-hearted growl rumbled in Sirius' throat. "Do you have to do that?"

"We're in the middle of a war. I don't want you emotionally paralyzed in the middle of the next battle you have to fight. Now, what else is bothering you about this?"

"You mean there has to be something besides finding out my little brother is an animated corpse at the bottom of a lake guarding an evil artifact for the bastard we're fighting against?"

Aletha let her cheek rest against Sirius' and considered the matter. "Yes," she said finally. "Let's have it."

"I... I don't know, Letha, it doesn't even make sense in my head..."

"Silly Sirius." Aletha laughed aloud. "Emotions don't make sense. They just *are* ." She sobered. "If you don't tell me, I'm going to have to start asking questions."

"Merlin's wand, no! Not questions!" He pretended to cower in fear. "All right. I'll try. But it doesn't want to go into words."

"The complicated ones usually don't." She stroked his hand, willing some of her own strength into him. "Take your time. I'm here."

Sirius took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Kreacher," he said on the last wisps of it. "It's Kreacher."

"That he lived and Regulus died?" Aletha prompted when several moments passed with nothing more.

"No. Yes. Well, sort of." Sirius snorted a brief, bitter laugh. "Covers all the hoops, doesn't it? What I mean is, yes, I'm angry that he's alive and Regulus isn't. But that's not the real reason. The real reason is..." He scuffed a heel back and forth against the carpet. "You've met Kreacher. He's a nasty little waste of space. He insults you and Danger, he insults Remus, he insults the cubs and me and everyone else he meets. He won't do the work around the house himself, but I had to order him to get out of the way and let Dobby and Winky do it. I even caught him one day trying to brainwash Echo and Cissus into his own freakish philosophy. And that is what Regulus thought was worth giving up his life for."

"I think you need to add three words to that sentence," Aletha murmured, feeling her muscles

tense as they might if she were about to tickle a sleeping dragon.

"Three words?" Sirius sounded uncomprehending. "What three words?"

"These three." Aletha drew a deep breath of her own and hoped she was doing the right thing. "And that—*and not you*—is what Regulus thought was worth giving up his life for."

"Me?" Sirius gaped at her. "This has nothing to do with—"

"Bullshit," Aletha cut him off. "I remember why you left home even if you don't."

"I left home because my parents were a couple of damn bigots who thought Voldemort was doing good work!"

"That's the big reason, the overall reason. I'm talking about the twig that broke the broomstick's handle. You were trying to stop Regulus from going out to a Junior Death Eater meeting, and you thought you might actually be getting through to him when your mother burst in and started screaming at you, telling you to stop corrupting her one good son. It turned into a huge three-cornered argument, and you ended up grabbing your things and stamping off to the Potters'."

Sirius spent several seconds looking at her. "You remember my life better than I do."

"You've spent twenty years trying to forget that scene. I haven't."

"Point. But what does it have to do with anything?"

Aletha sighed. "Is it so hard for you to admit you loved your brother?" she asked softly. "And that you're angry and a little bitter because he didn't seem to love you back?"

"Didn't *seem* to?" Sirius scoffed. "He couldn't have cared less about me! I'm just fooling myself into thinking he was listening to me that day. Probably he got tired of my 'moralizing' and signaled for dearest Mumsie to get me off his back." He shook his head irritably. "I almost wish I'd never found out about this. He didn't want anyone to know, so maybe we shouldn't have asked..."

"He didn't want anyone to know because he was afraid Voldemort might find out someone had taken his pretty necklace," Aletha corrected. "And someday, after this war is over, we'll find that cavern and do what's right, for Regulus and for everyone else whose bodies are there. Right now, you need to listen to me." She poked a finger against his temple until he turned to face her. "Regulus wasn't a Gryffindor. He may not have had the courage to go against your mother openly. But when it came down to the hard decision, when he had to make up his mind about right and wrong, he didn't make any mistakes then. And some of that, without a doubt, was because he had your example in front of him. For today, that's going to have to be enough."

Sirius laid his head against her shoulder. "I'd hate you if you weren't so damn right."

"Why not hate me because I'm right? It's more traditional."

"Since when have I been traditional?"

"True enough." Aletha kissed the top of his head, treasuring the scent of his hair and the possessive strength of his arm around her waist. "We should get back before Danger sees what you did to our room."

"She knows I always clean up after myself when I get like this."

"Has that ever stopped her from scolding you for it?"

Sirius blanched. "Let's go." He started to get up, then stopped, looking ruefully at the destruction which surrounded them. "*After* I fix all this."

"I'll help," Aletha said, drawing her wand. "If only to make certain you're too deeply in debt to me to be able to say no tonight, when I ask you to..." She whispered a few words into his ear.

Sirius blinked. "Why would I say no to that? It sounds like a great idea."

"Who was that I remember giving me grief about how long it takes to get ready the first time we tried it?"

"Yeah, but I didn't know how much fun it was then. Now I do."

Trading quips to make each other laugh, blush, or both, the Blacks went to work.

"Just treat me like a trainee," Frank Longbottom said. "It's what I am, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah... but you're my dad!"

"Your mum was your teacher all year, and you got used to that."

"That's *different*," Neville protested, then laughed at the whining tone in his own voice. "Okay, I'll try. Welcome to the artillery, Trainee Longbottom."

"Thank you, sir," said Frank, deadpan.

Neville kept his own face straight with an effort and pointed at the item lying on the table beside them. "This is a DA-standard personal potion piece. It is not yours yet because you don't know how to use it. Once you know how to use it, and you've practiced with it until I say you're good enough, then it will be yours. When I say it's yours, I mean you keep it with you. You don't put it away in a drawer and forget about it. You don't play around with it where people can see you, either. It may look like a toy, but it is not a toy. It is a weapon and a tool, just like your wand, and you will treat it like your wand. Do you understand?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"You're *not* helping," Neville said out one side of his mouth, trying to keep his laughter under control.

"I'm sorry." Frank dropped a hand onto his son's shoulder. "I shouldn't tease, but you do sound a lot like some of the basic trainers I've had. And been, for that matter. I take it that's a prepared speech?"

"I freeze up in front of people unless I know exactly what I'm going to say. Or unless I have a... a person to be, I guess. When I'm working with the artillery, I don't have to be just me—actually, I can't be. I'm their leader, and I always have to know what I'm doing." Neville grinned ruefully. "Even when I don't."

"I suspect there are stories there." Frank chuckled under his breath. "But we'll get to that later. How does this thing work?"

"It's based on a Muggle water pistol, but we changed it some." Neville picked up the potion piece from the table, being careful to keep the muzzle pointed down the range which was more used to Aurors' spells than blasts of potion. "It has three chambers where most water pistols only have one, and where you have to pump them up multiple times to get good distance, this runs on a rechargeable spell." He put his left hand on top of the chambers, curled his right around the grip, and pulled with the one as he pushed with the other. The chambers moved towards him, then snapped back into place, and a faint whine filled the air. "Armed piece."

Frank nodded in approval of the warning call, then stepped back to watch as Neville took a square-shouldered stance in front of one of the spell targets. "You grip with both hands and bring it up to ready," the boy said, doing so. "Aim, by seeing what you want to hit marked by the crosshairs. And..." His finger slid inside the trigger guard and squeezed. "Fire."

Downrange, one of the targets developed a large splotch of crimson near its center ring.

"Good shooting," Frank said. "You'll be turning Death Eaters red in no time." He grinned at Neville's unamused look. "I know, I know, this one is loaded with dye so I can learn how to work it without destroying the range. What's your usual load?"

"Depends on who's taking it." Neville performed the arming action in reverse, causing the whining noise to stop. "Safed piece." Laying the potion piece back on the table, he drew his own. "Mine has a pretty standard mix. Different potion in each chamber, with a color-coded selector up top near the aiming ring to tell you what you're shooting." He spun the chambers so Frank could see. "Blue is for Shrinking Solution, which is my favorite out of the non-lethal stopping potions our research team picked out. I like it because getting turned into a baby won't kill anybody, even by accident, but they won't be chasing me anymore."

"Very sensible, and good for use on obstacles too. What else do you have available?"

Neville rubbed a finger along the top of the chamber, thinking. "Purple is Swelling Solution, because they can't run after us if their legs or arms are weighing them down. Orange is the potion

equivalent of a Hair-Thickening Jinx. And pink..." Naming the color seemed to have influenced his face. "Which is a short-term Love Potion."

Frank burst out laughing.

"It's mostly girls who carry that one," Neville added. "That's part of the reason we made it short-term, so it would wear off quickly enough that they can't use it to play jokes. One girl tried anyway and we had to have her leave the DA."

"I think I remember hearing about that from your mum. Bit of an ugly episode, wasn't it?"

"A bit." Neville shuddered. "Anyway. There's also white, which is a basic healing potion that the medics carry, and a few specialty mixes we label with stripes, but those are mostly for use outside battle. Those first four are the best varieties we've found for fighting with." He rotated the chambers, bringing up a different color. "Yellow is absolutely standard. Everyone who carries a potion piece has it in at least one chamber, and some of them have it in all three. It's a knockout potion, based on Dreamless Sleep, but modified—don't ask me how, I just shoot it—so that it works whether it hits somebody on the skin or the vapor gets breathed. They have to wear masks when they brew it."

"That's what the Moon girl used to take out our rearguard in the exercise, isn't it?" At Neville's nod, Frank went on. "How did she keep from going down herself?"

"We have antidotes for all of the potions we use. With the grenades like Selena used, she took one before she went out. For the pieces, we have a safety patch." Neville changed his hold on the piece to reveal a green swath across the back of the grip, where he couldn't avoid touching it when he fired. "It changes at the same time as the chambers, so you always have the right antidote for the potion you're shooting. Even if it drips onto you, you won't be affected."

"That's clever. How did you come up with all these ideas?"

Neville grinned. "Mostly by having problems and figuring out ways to deal with them. We didn't start with this design, and I don't know if it's the last one we'll have. It's just the best one we've come up with yet."

"But a good and workable best." Frank spun a finger in a circle, indicating that Neville should rotate the chambers one more time. "What's the red potion?"

"Red is... not for use on human targets." Neville looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Maybe I should just show you."

"Please do." Frank stepped back again, giving Neville the same clear zone he would have given a fellow Auror who was practicing his spellcasting.

"Selecting red," Neville murmured, turning the selector on his piece one click to the right.

"Arming now." The contrary-motion action that made the piece ready to shoot, done so swiftly

that Frank blinked in surprise. "Armed piece. Ready." He took his stance again and brought the piece up. "Aim." His finger went to the trigger. "Fire."

For one instant, the red-splotched target developed a wet stain on the other side of its center ring. Then, with a poisonous hiss, the wetness began to steam, and a gaping hole appeared where it had been. Five seconds after Neville had fired, half the target had been eaten away.

"I don't know what they make it from," Neville said, lowering his piece. "But they call it Semi-Universal Solvent. Safed piece," he added, disarming the weapon. "Most of the DA doesn't even know it exists, except as something we're trying and failing to make."

"Very, very wise." Frank looked again at, and through, the target. "How do you keep it from destroying your piece while you shoot?"

"We treat them with the same antidotes the safety patch uses." Neville snapped the yellow chamber back into place and holstered the piece. "All of them, even the ones which won't use the solvent."

"How do you know which ones those are? You could learn to trust any of the DA to that extent at some point."

"But some of these don't belong to the DA, not directly. Or they're not being used by the DA, would be a better way to put it." Neville shook his head. "I'm not making any sense, even to me."

"No, you're not. Start over and use small words."

"How small? Can I get as big as 'Muggleborn'?"

Frank chuckled. "If you have to."

"I do have to, because that's who a bunch of DA members are. Even more of them are half-blood. So they have Muggle relatives, people like Seamus' dad or Amanda Smythe's parents, who'll be in danger from Death Eaters and can't fight back." Neville patted the dye-loaded potion piece affectionately. "Or that's what we hope the Death Eaters will think."

Frank closed his eyes for a second. "You gave magical artifacts to Muggles."

"No, we gave Muggle artifacts to Muggles," Neville corrected. "They're classified as Muggle toys, slightly improved with magic—the arming spell and the safety patches are the only magical parts—so that's legal as long as they're given by magical relations or friends. Which they were. And the only potions we passed out for them are the knockout potion and the healing potion, which aren't dangerous, so that's not illegal either."

"Why am I suddenly being reminded you're in league with Arthur Weasley's youngest children?"

Neville attempted to look innocent. It would have worked better if he hadn't also been trying to suppress laughter.

"I could make all sorts of cracks about creating monsters, but I won't." Frank laid his hand across his son's for a moment. "I will say something I don't think I say enough. I'm proud of you, Neville. I've never been anything else, but seeing how much you've learned and grown, hearing about everything you're a part of, makes me even more so."

"Thanks, Dad." Neville squeezed his father's hand in reply, then let go. "So do you want to learn how to shoot?"

"Yes, I do." Frank picked up the potion piece, fumbling with it a bit. "How do you hold this thing anyway?"

"Here, it's like this." Neville rearranged his father's hands around the grip. "Use your off hand first, and then your wand hand over that, with your finger outside the trigger guard until you're pointing the muzzle at something you're sure you want to shoot at..."

Sirius leaned against a table in the Leaky Cauldron, flicking a finger back and forth along the edge of his shopping list. *Bit of a pain to do the shopping for the cubs this way, but they violated Marauders' Rule Number One. They got caught. So we're supporting Molly's little prohibition even when she's lifted it for her own bunch.* He glanced at Ginny, giggling in a corner with Luna and Danger, and Ron, who was finger-combing soot out of his hair even as he stepped aside to let Neville out of the fireplace behind him. *Probably give them their release next week for Harry's birthday. Or we could move it up to Draco's—they really have been good...*

The bell over the door jingled, and Sirius let his hand drift to his wand's hilt unobtrusively. It wasn't likely attacking Death Eaters would announce themselves that way, but Aurors didn't live to retirement by dealing with things that were likely.

"See, I told you there was a door there!" The voice was young, feminine, and triumphant. The person attached to it reminded Sirius emphatically of Meghan, though this little girl's skin was several tones lighter than his daughter's and her dark hair was long and straight instead of elaborately braided. She wore Muggle clothing, as did the young woman behind her, who, though not unattractive, had thoroughly forgettable features. Currently, those features were twisted into a look of mingled bewilderment and fear Sirius had seen before.

He caught Remus' attention. *Going to help those two,* he signaled, indicating the woman and the girl. *Catch up with you later.*

Remus nodded assent, and Sirius threaded between the tables to confront the pair. "Are you looking for something, ladies?" he asked, though the glint of green ink on the folded parchment the girl was clutching told him what was going on. *Muggleborn witch, here to get her school supplies, with a mother or an aunt or something similar...*

"Yes!" the girl blurted. "We're looking for Die-gone Alley!"

"Diagon Alley? It's out the back, I can let you through if you like."

"You can? Oh, thank you!" The girl bounced on her toes. "See, Miss Meade? I knew somebody would help us!"

"All right, Annette, that's enough." The woman smiled at Sirius. "Thank you from me as well. I'd have felt silly going up and down the street asking people if they knew where to find an alley full of magic shops."

"No need for that," Sirius said, holding the back door open for them. "But you do need a wand to get through, so I'm glad I came over."

"A real magic wand? Do you have one?" Annette peered eagerly at Sirius. "Are you a wizard like I'm a witch? Will you show me some real magic?"

"Only if you say the magic word," Sirius mock-scolded.

Annette folded her hands at her waistline and looked demure. "*Pleeeeeease* . "

Sirius drew his wand. "Well, since you asked nicely." He made a few unnecessary passes around her head, then thought *Orchideous !* and caught the bouquet that flew from the tip. "For you, madame," he said with a bow, handing the flowers to the girl.

"Ooooooh." Annette cradled her flowers in her arms, gazing at them rapturously. Sirius traded amused glances with Miss Meade as he tapped his wand against the proper brick to open the wall.

"Please tell me they'll teach her a little restraint at this school," the woman murmured to him with half her attention, the other half focused on the slowly forming archway. "She's enough of a holy terror at the Home as it is—we were grateful to have *some* explanation for all the things she can do, even if it is magic, but I was still the only one willing to come along with her, in case..."

"In case this was some huge, insane practical joke?" Sirius finished, slotting the last mental pieces into place. *Muggleborn orphan witch—we need to get something in place for that, if one of these kids gets the wrong influences it could be a disaster...*

"No such luck, I'm afraid," he said aloud. "For it being a joke, I mean. They will teach her some restraint, though mostly along the lines of gruesome stories and examples of 'this is what happens if you misuse magic'. It's not all unicorns and rainbows, you know."

"It never is." Miss Meade tapped Annette on the shoulder, waking the girl from her daze. "But then no one ever promised life would be a rose garden." She glanced again at Annette's flowers and smiled. "Though I suppose for some of us it's closer than for others."

Sirius chuckled, but her words had stirred up once again the memory that Aletha had invoked at the Den, the memory of the last time he'd seen his brother. *No one ever promised either of our lives would be a rose garden, not even with magic. It might actually have made things worse for us, because we expected it to do everything and it couldn't...*

Half-willingly, he saw once more the thin and strained face so like his own, the pale hand frozen

on the doorknob, and his lips moved silently, repeating the first words of that useless conversation.

"Where are you going?"

"What business is it of yours?" Regulus snapped back.

He held onto his temper. Shouting would only make things worse. "I'm your brother."

"That doesn't make you my keeper."

"I'm trying to stop you from doing something you'll regret."

Regulus looked away. "It's too late for that," he said indistinctly, then turned back a sneering face. "And who are you to say what I'll regret?"

"Believe it or not, you don't know everything."

"Neither do you!"

"I didn't say I did. But I do know you're going the wrong way." Through the hostility, he sensed indecision, fear, a desperate desire for a way out, and pressed forward. "No matter what you think has happened, it isn't too late to turn around. Let me help you..."

"Only he didn't need my help," Sirius muttered, cutting off the flow of memories before his mother could come bursting in with her usual shrill screams. "Not to do the right thing, not in the end."

No, he needed Kreacher's help. And Letha was right—that really burns me. I wanted so much to save him, to teach him about the good stuff in life and double-team Mummy Dearest with him and do all the things we never got a chance to do because purebloods were supposed to be above all human feeling. And instead my only link to him is a sulky house-elf who hates me for living when he died. Well, guess what, Kreacher? I hate me for living when he died too. So we're even there.

"Whatever you're thinking about, stop," said Danger from just beneath his left ear, startling him into a small jump. "This is supposed to be a nice day out with your wife and your friends, and instead you've got a worry line the size of your wand across your forehead."

"Sorry. I'll behave myself." Sirius gave his wayward thoughts a mental shake and stepped through the archway, nodding to the Longbottoms, who were holding rearguard positions. "Do you think we should have brought the cubs?"

"No, it'll do them good to miss an outing. Bring it home to them that they're really not supposed to go cavorting around without us." Danger chuckled. "Who knows? One of these days, they might even listen."

"Percy! Penny! Hi!" Ginny charged down the aisle of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes and bestowed a crashing hug on her older brother, then waved an enthusiastic greeting to his dark-haired girlfriend. "Mum finally let us out of the house, she was being so unfair about it—"

"I hardly think she was being unfair," Percy said, nodding a hello to Ron as he followed Ginny into the store. "That was quite a risk, going out at night."

"Not as much as it could have been," Penelope pointed out, looking up from the diagram she was showing to Crystal, who perched on a stool behind the counter. "They were within wards, and an adult wizard and witch were with them at all times. Two wizards, when George arrived—hello, George," she added as the named twin materialized from the back room.

"In other words, it was just like it is now," said Crystal, grinning. "Did you two do the singing?"

Ginny raised her hand. "I did Jasmine's part," she said. "Our friend Draco did Aladdin's, he's not here but you'll meet him some other time. I'm Ginny, by the way, this is Ron, but you probably knew that already."

"I had a fair guess," Crystal admitted. "Since I think I've met all the rest of your family by now. Immediate family, anyway, I'm sure you've got cousins all over the place."

"You're not kidding," said Ron, propping himself against the end of a shelf. "And it's only going to get worse. Weasleys have always had lots of kids, but Mum and Dad take it to extremes, and when we all get married and start popping them out, I don't know how we're going to keep them all straight..."

"Don't you mean when Hermione starts popping them out?" George grinned as Ron's cheeks reddened. "Works every time."

"Oh, stop it." Crystal slapped him on the shoulder. "Like you were never embarrassed over a girl."

"Not like that, I wasn't..."

"Ooh, look at this place!" a girl's voice echoed in from the street, cutting George off from whatever else he was about to say. "I want to go in here!"

"Not right now, Annette," a woman's answered with a sound of waning patience. "We have to get your books and your supplies first, and then if there's anything left we can see about things like joke shops."

Percy and Penelope exchanged a look, and a pair of gold coins appeared in Percy's hand. Penny took them, added one from her own pocket, and hurried towards the front of the store, forestalling George with a raised hand. "We do maintain a fund here for the hopeful pranksters of tomorrow," she said, stepping into the doorway of the shop to hold out the coins to the girl. "Anything you don't spend, you can keep for later."

The girl reached up for the money with a hopeful smile, the woman beside her opened her mouth

to protest—

A thundercrack of Apparitions sounded up the street, and people began to scream over the sound of shouted spells and wild laughter. Ginny had just time to see Penelope shove the other woman to the ground and pull the girl into the scant protection of her own body before Percy snatched her up and threw her bodily over the counter, Ron following an instant later under his own power. "Stay down!" the older Weasley shouted, and ran for the door, George half a step behind him. "Penny! Penny! "

Ginny started to peer around the corner of the counter, but Crystal yanked her back just in time as a spell shattered one of the front windows and toppled a shelf into the space where her head had been. Then three more shelves fell, one of them scattering fireworks over Ron's hastily erected Shield Spell, and after that Ginny was too busy helping him maintain the Shield against the constant rain of lit fireworks and berserk merchandise to have more than two thoughts.

The Death Eaters are attacking.

We're all going to die.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 44: When the Battle's Lost and Won (Year 6)

"It's called a spear for a reason! Use the pointy end!"

"Shut up and let me fight!"

"I would if you looked like you knew what you're doing--no, not like that!"

"Maybe you'd win more if you didn't micromanage your pieces," Draco said, leaning back against the wall of the Pride's den-room. In the center of a circle of cheering chess pieces, a pair of pawns, both rather battered by now, were circling one another warily, the black one giving Harry surly looks for his unsolicited advice.

"Maybe I'd win more if you didn't always take white," Harry grumbled, getting up to hang on one of the ceiling-mounted bars in lieu of finding an age-adjusted Shrinking Solution and leaping into the Ring of Death (Padfoot's personal adaptation of wizard's chess, which he otherwise considered "too boring") in his pawn's place.

"Aww, does ickle Harry have a problem wif being all black and evil?" cooed Draco.

Harry's answering glare was rendered less furious than he'd probably intended by his position. Swinging upside down from one's knees, robes threatening to obscure one's face at any moment, was not the optimal position from which to glare furiously.

"Behave over there," Hermione called idly from the armchair where she and Meghan were sprawled side by side, reviewing Hermione's notes from the opening weeks of third year Transfiguration. "Don't make me turn you into newts."

"Can you?" asked Meghan with interest.

"Not yet. Ask me at Christmas."

"Ooooh." Meghan favored Draco with a grin that scared him much more than Harry's glare, then turned back to the notes with renewed attention.

"Why do we have to have scary smart sisters?" Harry asked, dropping ungracefully to the padded floor as the pawns attacked each other again.

"Would you prefer stupid giggly ones?"

Harry shuddered. "Good point."

The black pawn found a weakness in white's defense, and both boys leaned in eagerly, calling encouragement to their sides. "Yes, that's it!" Harry enthused. "Get him, go, go, go--"

White stumbled and went down, black's spear driven into his stone heart.

Draco's growl of mock anger died unvoiced as his pendants went colder than he had ever known them.

Across the room, Hermione gasped and Meghan's wordless cry of dismay turned into a shrieked "HARRY!"

Green eyes, squeezed half-shut in glee, flew wide open in surprise, then turned terrifyingly empty before rolling back in their sockets as Harry pitched forward towards the chessboard.

Harry struggled against the slick, taut fibers holding him.

What just happened? It felt like a Portkey but it can't have been, I didn't touch anything--maybe that emergency one Dumbledore gave me last summer at the Dursleys' is set to activate whenever the pendants get cold, but you'd think he would have told me that--also, I could do without the headache, and what do I have to be happy about? Unless...

His vision cleared sufficiently for him to look down at himself. He was only half there, the colors of his skin and robes pale and washed out, his whole body translucent. The silver cord leading back towards his physical body led between two blocks in the nearest stone wall, offering no possibility of escape in that direction. The net in which he was tangled hung from the ceiling of a round tower room, chill and bare except for a small table and a throne-like chair near the opposite wall. And in the chair--

Sometimes understanding what's going on doesn't make things better.

Sometimes it makes them a whole lot worse.

In the chair reclined Lord Voldemort, perfectly at his ease, his red eyes fixed on the gleaming tabletop, where Harry could dimly see moving forms and flashes of light. The evil wizard didn't seem to have noticed Harry's existence yet.

See how long that lasts.

Panic closed his throat, but Harry forced it back open. Falling apart or giving into his fear would serve Voldemort's purposes perfectly. The trouble was, so would getting angry, which was the other obvious choice at the moment.

So go for a non-obvious choice. Play for time. Keep him out of my head, keep him away from my body, and help's bound to come within a few minutes. It's not like I was alone when it happened. Meghan's voice screamed his name again in his memories, Hermione's hand darted into her robes for her pendants, Draco's face lost its over-the-top glower for an honest look of shock and concern. They know what they're doing. Probably have me home before everybody gets back from Diagon Alley. Then we'll work out what went wrong and make sure it doesn't happen again...

Keeping the internal monologue running with one part of his mind to stave off sheer terror, Harry reached up with another and summoned fire. It responded sluggishly at first, as though this were not its natural home, but finally he had enough that he felt capable of using it on the ropes confining his spirit-body.

They may not be real ropes, but if it walks like a hippogriff and talks like a hippogriff, it might as well be a hippogriff.

The ropes parted reluctantly, but they parted, and within a few moments Harry slithered out of the net and landed in a crouch on the floor. His shape shifted as he dropped, so that it was Wolf who wrinkled his nose at the musty odor of old scales and dry stone infusing the room, then settled into a sit and waited with predator patience. *Packmates will come soon. We will fight the hunter and then we will return to den.*

They had better come soon, whispered a voice of worry. *You only have two hours to be out of your body before it starts deciding you're not coming back--and that's when you left voluntarily. What's it going to do when you've been yanked out like a bad tooth?*

Quiet, you. Wolf snapped his perfectly good set of teeth in the direction of the worry. The sound, unphysical though it was, broke Voldemort's concentration as Harry's escape from the net had not, and Wolf found himself on the receiving end of a penetrating red gaze. He started to growl defiance, but Harry pushed forward and took control, filling his mind purposefully with the memories he used to power a Patronus--the day of Padfoot's trial, the winning of the Quidditch Cup, his first kiss with Ginny--

"Hmm." Voldemort broke off eye contact. "How very clever of you, Harry. Rather than trying to close your mind against me, something at which you seem woefully inept, you fill it with the emotions you know I most dislike. But how long can you sustain such a tactic?"

Harry stood up human and leaned back against the wall. "As long as I have to," he said, stifling a yawn in favor of queuing up his next set of memories. Would anything from the Triwizard Tournament do? Fighting the dragon and rescuing Ron from Crouch-Moody, perhaps, though that had a lot of dark overtones Voldemort might be able to use for himself, so best not. The second task had always been one step from disaster, but the all-Pride pool party beforehand had been fun. Into queue it went. The third task--

No. Just no.

But hold on a tic. Harry felt a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth, and allowed it to have its way with one of them, though it nearly turned into a second yawn. *I'm going too fast. There was something before the third task, remember? Something silly and shiny and frivolous--everything Voldemort hates and despises--not to mention, it takes up plenty of time, which is exactly what I need right now--*

The other memories gave way as Harry laid a hand against his pendants and concentrated.

"As long as you have to?" Voldemort repeated, tracing a pattern with his wand on the tabletop he'd been watching when Harry had arrived. "That may be quite some time, Harry. I don't think you have properly understood what it means that I can reach your mind. That the wall you had in place to keep me out has fallen. That wall had a name, did it not? A particular person with whom it was affiliated?" A final flick of the yew wand, and the picture on the tabletop sprang into three dimensions. "What do you think it means for him?"

Don't look! a voice cried in the back of Harry's mind, but it was too late. He was looking already, and the memory he'd been trying to summon shattered like one of Neville's cauldrons in first year. Moony lay sprawled on the cobblestones of Diagon Alley, a thread of blood tracing a line from the corner of his mouth to the ground. His eyes were half-open, his face slack and expressionless, his arms and legs askew. More blood seeped from gashes on his right hand, which looked as if it had been trampled. The wand lying beside it seemed whole, but how could that matter when Moony was--

The dead don't bleed, another voice whispered. And we know what death feels like through the pendants. This is all wrong. Don't let him trick you!

"Or these two, perhaps." Voldemort tapped his wand against the tabletop again and new pictures replaced Moony's. Harry deliberately unfocused his eyes, though not quickly enough that he didn't recognize Padfoot and Letha struggling against a magical rope that held them back to back, and threw his attention into his memories.

Yes, the first voice murmured, and a sure and guiding hand joined his on the index of his mind. Yes. No matter what's happening to them-- a small catch in the voice, quickly smoothed over--we have to fight our own fight. You have to get home safely.

First part's done already, said the second voice, ending the word with a sigh of satisfaction as the memory Harry'd been looking for slid into view. Start through this and watch us for cues. We'll talk more when we're out of here.

Harry blinked twice, signaling assent and forcing away his upstart tears at the same time, and backed a few steps along the curve of the room, sliding his feet carefully along the flexible floor. "I don't like your show very much," he said aloud, making a flicking motion with his right hand, like releasing a Snitch. "What say we watch mine for a while?"

Voldemort's reply, if he'd had one, was cut off by the music of a piano, chiming a run of descending notes. The run repeated, with the notes doubled high, and a pair of slender figures stepped forward into the light, one in pink, the other in blue.

The Narrators. Harry shaped a bit of the wall into a rest for his elbow and leaned back into it as Hermione's memory-double began to sing about people who dreamed of doing wonders with their lives. *And am I making it up, or did she just give me a look this way on the third word she sang?*

"Show me what you like, Harry," Voldemort said over the reply of the Ginny-figure about people who didn't plan anything but hid all their hopes instead. "Sharing your memories with me this way

can only mean you are allowing me into your mind." He spared a moment's smile for Hermione's line about not being able to judge right from wrong. "So kind of you."

That's all it can mean, is it? Harry blinked twice as Hermione glanced his way again on the repetition of the word she'd emphasized before. You just keep on thinking that, oh mighty Dark Lord. You keep on thinking that as long as you like.

As long as you're thinking that, you won't be thinking about what else might be going on.

The Narrators finished their introduction and waved their hands towards the spotlighted figure of the "boy whose dreams came true." Draco pivoted on the spot, sparing the world's briefest wink for Harry, and the memory swung into the bouncy second number. Voldemort sat back in his chair and looked contemptuously uninterested in the foolish posturing of the dream-people in front of him.

If he only knew I'm using his boredom to keep myself in a good mood...

The entrance of the brothers gave Harry a new reason for worry. *Meghan. She never wants to stay behind, but she's also wide open with her Ravenclaw powers. If Voldemort feels anything from her, if he gets his hands on her--*

But the little figure in the costume of Benjamin danced her steps without a bobble, and Harry relaxed into his lean once more. *Either she's into the dance so far that she's not afraid or she finally agreed to stay home on something and this is just my memory of her. I hope it's the second one.*

The brothers sneered their jealous disapproval of Joseph's marvelous coat, while Joseph strutted his way across the front of the imaginary stage. As he proclaimed how handsome he looked, his eyes flicked first to Harry, then back to the scowling Meghan.

Good. It is the second one. Somehow they got her to agree just to look, just to watch, not to come along--and as soon as we get someplace we can talk, they have to tell me how--but that cuts our problems way down. Fox and Neenie and I can take care of ourselves.

I hope.

The portion of the song featuring the colors of Joseph's coat seemed to be causing Voldemort acute pain, Harry noticed. Swallowing a snicker, he amused himself by making the memory a little louder with every color. *You dragged me out of my body. You get to live with the consequences.*

The final shouted "blue!" actually made Voldemort flinch, and Harry hastily toned the noise back down. Making the enemy so angry that he tried changing the rules was no part of this plan.

Especially since the moment he tries, he'll realize we're not in Kansas anymore. Or wherever his particular Fortress of Solitude happens to be.

It was Ginny's turn to narrate, which in the original show had meant Hermione was offstage. Here--Harry narrowed his eyes, letting them rove around the stage area as Joseph told his brothers about his first dream. *Where is she?*

A light brush against his sleeve answered the question. He disguised his jump as a lean forward to see the action more closely. "Don't do that," he hissed out the side of his mouth.

"Sorry." Hermione's invisible hand closed around his arm. "Come on, you're hidden now--I put a shape in your place, he shouldn't notice as long as you move slowly--"

Harry eased himself out of position, leaving his attentively listening shell behind. "What's the plan?" he asked, watching Draco finish his second solo and vanish as he went offstage. "Home?"

A brush of hair on his arm as Hermione shook her head. "Too dangerous. Voldemort might be able to grab you again, or even possess you, while we were trying to get someplace safe. We have to take him out of the running for a little while before we dare go back."

"And, of course," added Draco's voice from Harry's other side, "we have to figure out where this someplace safe might be, and how we're going to get there quickly."

"I can help with that one," said Harry, thinking of the gold phoenix hanging against his pendants. "But as for taking him out--we can't do that here. It's his ground. He has control."

"Way ahead of you." Draco's smirk was audible. "Back up slowly, now. We have to make him think he saw us by accident."

"Split up and run for the woods once we're in," Hermione advised as the three siblings backed towards the wall. "We'll send Voldemort the long way around and meet up in the clearing. You'll find it, don't worry," she said impatiently over Harry's half-formed protest that he had no idea what she was talking about. "Just look for us and the trees will point you the way."

Thank you, Hermione, now I understand even less. But there was no more time for arguing. They were almost at the wall, the dream figures of the brothers were advancing in their final formation--Voldemort was rising from his chair, his eyes narrowing even further than usual in anger--Harry saw his shadow stream out in front of him as a light came up behind--

"The dreamer has to go!" chanted the brothers, and in the same breath Hermione shouted "Run!"

Harry spun on his heel, dropped into Wolf's form, and charged across the open plain that had appeared behind the wall. For one instant, a cat and a fox ran on either side of him, and then there were three wolves, or rather, three Wolves, bolting for the cover of the trees ahead. Voldemort was going to have to decide which one to chase, and if Hermione's comments about sending Voldemort the long way around meant what Harry now thought they did, it didn't even particularly matter.

Because he'll never catch us before we make the forest, and once we're in there, it'd take either a

miracle or a very determined and pissed-off wizard to find us before we want to be found.

Trouble is, Voldemort fits that last description way too well for my taste.

Wolf skidded to a halt under a handy bush at the edge of the woods, dropped to his stomach, and caught his breath while watching his enemy stalk right past him, wand in hand.

But Hermione and Draco trained in the same school I did. They'll keep an eye on him and make sure he never gets angry enough to start blasting things apart wholesale. As long as we can keep him playing by the rules, we can win.

Because this is our world now. And that means we make the rules.

The clearing that served as their dreamworld's base camp looked just the same as it always had, which discomfited Hermione more than a change would have. Her outside world had been shaken profoundly by what she'd seen in Voldemort's scry, though she'd kept her composure for Harry's sake. Shouldn't this inside world have changed just as much?

"It will if we let it," Draco said, shooting out of Snow Fox's shape. "So we can't let it. We have to keep it totally solid. If there's even one crack, Voldemort will exploit it, and we're all dead."

"You're so reassuring." Hermione combed her hair back with her fingers, then focused on her favorite persona from their nighttime games of Valentina Jett-inspired roleplay. Draco was already halfway to his preferred look, though Hermione suspected he hadn't thought of his current form as a costume for some time.

I almost wish he weren't so comfortable in it. Looking at him makes me hurt. What if we're wasting time playing here when we ought to be out helping--

Firmly, she squashed that thought. *We are not wasting time, and we're only playing in the sense that we're setting up a game we know we can win, even against Voldemort. It's the best chance we have to get Harry, and ourselves, home safely.*

Nothing is more important than that.

Her own modifications finished, she drew her wand and pulled on its two ends, lengthening it into a staff. A few moments in her training sequences ought to help clear her mind.

As Hermione had promised, her trail and Draco's were easy to follow, and two minutes at Wolf's easy lope brought Harry to the edge of the clearing she'd mentioned. His original intent, to bound straight in and demand the fullest explanation possible as soon as his mouth could form human words, was toppled off its mental perch by sheer amazement as soon as he caught sight of his siblings.

And here I thought we'd left all the theatrics behind us.

Draco, or so his scent proclaimed, sat on a handy tree stump with one knee up against his chest, twirling his wand between his fingers. Harry had to go by scent because the boy in front of him was no one he'd ever seen before, not even when he returned to his human form to make sure he was seeing the colors properly. Thick brown waves of hair, broad triangular face, a middling-dark tan which matched the base shade of his camouflage-dyed shirt and trousers, and--

Ah-ha. Harry grinned to himself as eyes of cobalt blue scanned the clearing, then returned to the circular blur of wand. *I knew I'd seen the parts somewhere before, I just didn't know how to take them apart properly. Stupid of me not to think--if he could look like anything, of course this is what he'd pick.*

Hermione, standing behind her twin and going through a staff exercise at half-speed, had exercised a bit more imagination in her choice of shape. Delicate ears, furred in orange-and-black, stuck up out of her hair; her eyes, as blue as Draco's, blinked out of a white feline face. The hands curled around the carved wood had sharper fingernails than usual, not to mention a more prominent crop of fuzz along the backs. Altogether, she looked rather like Harry had always imagined Padfoot and Moony's stories about Animagus accidents, though he didn't think he'd be saying that out loud.

It's perfect. Strange enough to unsettle His Snarkiness and keep him off-balance, but not so much that he'll realize he's being gamed and try to destroy the whole place. We hope.

On a hunch, Harry dropped back into Wolf's form and cast about for his own scent. His backtrail was clear, but there was another hint, coming from a different direction--

Except I haven't been near that tree.

So why don't I fix that right now.

Examined up close with human eyes, the tree clearly showed a latch on one side and hinges on the other, very like the one in which a pair of seven-year-olds had discovered a battered Quaffle on a particular eventful winter day. Stifling a stir of worry for Ron and the others of the Pride--*nothing we can do from here except take care of ourselves*--Harry lifted the latch and swung the door wide.

His breath went out in an approving sigh. "Hermione," he said softly, "you're a genius."

Skinning out of his robes, he began to dress for battle.

Lord Voldemort was most displeased. What should have been his simplest victory of the war, the byproduct of an otherwise successful attack, had been almost entirely negated by Harry Potter's stubborn refusal to admit when he was beaten. Still, it was not yet beyond redemption.

His delaying works in my favor, though he does not know that. He thinks he is confusing me, buying himself time to escape my nets. Instead he is allowing me time to comprehend this reality of his creation, to use what I know about him to turn it against him.

The Dark Lord allowed himself a small smile. *It should not be hard. By showing me what he uses to defend himself, he has handed me the key to his heart. His family gives him the courage to go on, it seems--so what will he do when I tell him my plans for them, and how soon those plans will come to fruition?*

This was going to be enjoyable.

Stepping to the edge of the clearing where an armored figure knelt, helmeted head bowed against the flat of a silver sword with its point buried in the earth, Lord Voldemort prepared his first strike.

Harry held his pose, every muscle tense but his breathing slow and even. The sword under his gloved hands was recognizably Gryffindor's, but the blade was wider and differently pointed than the sword he had pulled from the Sorting Hat, the rubies on the hilt smaller and fewer. Hermione claimed that this was the sword's original form, that it had changed over the centuries thanks to a spell similar to that on the Hogwarts plumbing, bringing it up to date as new inventions became widespread. What this had to do with anything, Harry wasn't sure, but chattering about magical esoterica was Hermione's way of beating pre-battle jitters and thinking it over seemed to be his.

Don't panic, Pearl, he repeated silently, mouthing the words he had spoken aloud earlier. Don't pull the chain too soon. We'll let you know when it's time.

The real-life situation Draco had described setting up in Grimmauld Place, in what Harry suspected was his brother's personal routine for fighting fear, employed Pack-pendants in ways for which they had probably not been intended by the Founders.

On the other hand, they don't like Voldemort any more than we do, so I can't see them objecting.

Hermione had used her pendants in the approved fashion, wearing them double with Harry to slip into his mind with her werewolf curse as cover. Meghan, however, had loosely knotted Draco and Hermione's wrists together with her chain, then retreated to the other side of the room and invoked a blue pendant jewel to allow her to watch their adventures in the dreamworld. If Voldemort looked to be taking over, she would yank the chain loose, freeing Draco from his contact with Hermione and giving the cubs a fighting chance.

And let's not forget her other little contribution. A Sleeping Spell so powerful that it took down not only me, but the Lord of All Things Scaly through me. Though that wouldn't have lasted three seconds if Fox weren't so obsessively observant about making his dreamworlds perfect. Or if Neenie hadn't been able to get in there and see the reality for him to copy in the first place...

"Yes, yes, we were all wonderful," said Hermione's voice from directly beside his ear. "Now it's

your turn, oh knight in shining armor."

"Shame Ginny can't be here," Draco added musingly. "I think she'd like seeing you in mailshirt and helmet."

Hermione's voice acquired more than a touch of smugness. "Silly Fox. That's what reruns are for."

Inwardly, Harry groaned. *I'm never going to live this one down. Ever.*

But there are worse things than that.

Like not living at all.

A rustling step brought him to full awareness. *And here comes the number one advocate for that particular fate of mine...*

"So this is how you see yourself," Voldemort said, his tone a delicate cross between enlightened and mocking. "The noble protector of virtue, as your ancestor was before you. *Or was he?*" The final three words came forth in a venomous hiss as the Heir of Slytherin invoked his line's gift. *"Your ancestor was nothing but a killer for hire, a doer of other men's deeds, who never dared to strike out on his own and forge a path for himself! You think you are a hero by virtue of the blood of Gryffindor? You know nothing! I will tell you the truth that Dumbledore himself is keeping from you--"*

Harry exploded to his feet, wrenching the sword free and swinging it around in a controlled arc. Voldemort's final hissed word broke off in an unserpentine squawk as the sharp edge sheered neatly through his outstretched hand, clipping off three fingers and sending his wand flying.

"What makes you think I'm going to believe anything you tell me?" Harry said coolly, bringing the sword up to guard. "You're a liar. You lie easier than you breathe. How do I know those pictures you were showing me were even true?"

"You know... because... we are here," Voldemort wheezed, cradling his maimed hand against his robes. Despite the pain, his face split into a manic leer. "Gryffindors... always so quick... to deny the obvious..."

His left hand shot out in a summoning motion, and the discarded wand flew back towards it. Harry swiped with the sword but missed, turning the motion into a shoulder roll to try to get out of the way, but Voldemort was bringing the wand down--

A bolt of white light shot down from one of the trees surrounding the clearing and arched into a shield over Harry. Voldemort's snarled "*Crucio!*" ricocheted off at an angle.

"The only obvious thing I see," said the brunet Draco, dropping from his sniper post and bringing his wand to salute position, "is that you're outnumbered." He squeezed the wand lightly, and a beam of light shot from its tip, curving back towards him, then dropping directly towards the ground before it bent one last time to meet the wand's grip end. Voldemort blinked at the resultant

shape, for which Harry couldn't blame him. He'd done a bit of goggling himself at what Draco called his wand-bow.

It's a bit showy for combat, probably just as well he hasn't worked out how to do it in real life yet, but it could help us a lot if it fires nonverbally like he claims it does...

Voldemort twitched his wand towards himself, binding up his hand and apparently easing his pain, since his breathing slowed towards normal. "Outnumbered by children," he sneered, "just as my Death Eaters were outnumbered by fools at Diagon Alley, but still they triumphed. I thought Wormtail would prove too tempting a bait for your loving *Pack-parents* to turn down." His voice dripped disdain. "Apparently they prize revenge over returning home safe to their dear little *cubs*. And now they will do neither. How very sad."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Harry said, coming back to his ready position. Draco curled his fingers around the magical bowstring and drew it back, an arrow of light materializing as he did. "Maybe you'll be the one who won't go home tonight."

"With only two of you to fight me?" Voldemort's thin lip curled in disdain. "One of whom I can control if I so choose? I somehow doubt--"

As quickly as that, he struck, jabbing his wand towards Draco's feet. Harry swung the sword at it a second time and sliced an inch from its end, sending a shower of sparks across the clearing as Draco dived to one side to avoid them. Voldemort jerked the wand back over, sparks and all, and fired a spell towards Harry which Harry managed to partly deflect with the sword blade. The bit that got through hit him in his chain-mail-protected stomach, sending him over backwards with the wind knocked out of him but no other damage he could feel. Draco was drawing Voldemort's fire, ducking in and out of the trees, making taunting faces, but even the Fox couldn't keep that up forever--

"*Ennervate*," whispered a voice in Harry's ear, and his lungs suddenly began to cooperate again. "We'll distract, you strike," the voice went on. "Hurry, before he figures it out!"

Harry nodded and pulled himself to his knees, watching as Hermione bounded across the clearing, wailing a feline war cry as soon as she was far enough along to get Voldemort's attention without bringing his eyes onto Harry. Draco seized the moment and disappeared into the boughs of the nearest tree, where he shielded Hermione from Voldemort's first spell and augmented her return shot through her staff with one of his own. Voldemort staggered back under the double blow, but came upright again in frighteningly short order, his eyes shining with madness.

"Unnatural brats!" he howled. "When I rule the world, all cats will be destroyed--" Hermione twisted herself under a spell which shattered a rock behind her "--and the one whose looks you ape will be forever erased from the earth!" This was shrieked to the tree where Draco had last fired from, and coupled with a blast from the sparking wand which shredded it into bark mulch. "He, who should have been my greatest triumph!"

Attempting not to think too much about the possibilities inherent in that statement, Harry

scrambled to his feet and hefted the sword. He'd only get one shot at this.

"The line of Godric Gryffindor will be totally destroyed!" Voldemort screamed. "As the Heir of Salazar Slytherin, I swear it! By my own hand, Grandfather--no other is worthy of such a sacred trust--"

Planting the palm of his left hand on the sword's pommel for extra stability, Harry charged.

Voldemort's speech ended in a stifled gurgle this time, as nearly a foot of blood-slimed silver suddenly protruded from the back of his robes. His eyes, already glazing, locked on Harry in disbelief. "This... does... nothing," he whispered hoarsely. "I cannot... die..."

"Maybe not." Harry twisted the sword to break the suction, then yanked it back out, taking a quick step to the side to avoid the gush of blood. "But it does what I need it to do." In the periphery of his vision, Hermione's staff was gesturing.

"What... is that?" Voldemort gasped, wrapping his arms around his belly in a futile attempt to hold in his life.

Harry let his eyes shift to what was behind Voldemort, and a smile of satisfaction spread across his face as a bright green spell-arrow struck it dead center, starting it up. "Why should I tell you?" he asked. "Can't you read my mind?"

Stepping forward, he gave Voldemort a little push on the shoulder.

The evil wizard stumbled three steps backwards and toppled into an oversized outdoor hearth, its flames burning the brilliant emerald of a Floo fire.

"Home," Harry ordered, and Voldemort vanished in a sparkling swirl of green.

"That was nasty," Draco said, jumping down from his perch. "Riding that thing with a gut wound--can you imagine?"

"I don't want to." Hermione was pale under her fur, and her voice was as calm as it could only be when she was clinging to it by the barest clawhold. "We have to get back. He won't take long to figure out how he was tricked. Harry?"

"Coming." Harry pulled his own wand from his pocket, hastily *Scourgified* the sword, and sent it back to its storage chest in the hollow tree with a flick. Two more flicks removed his mailshirt and the segmented helmet, and he trotted across to Hermione's side looking almost normal. Draco whipped a finger across his throat in the general direction of the woods, signaling Meghan to release his contact with Hermione, and vanished just as Harry grabbed Hermione's hand. Her claws dug into him--he sucked a breath through his teeth in pain--

And his eyes opened to the ceiling of the Pride's den at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. Beside him, the chessmen he and Draco had been playing with were gathered at the edge of the board, passing comment on his appearance. Meghan hurled herself across the room and into his lap,

barely waiting for him to sit up. Hermione, fully human once more, slipped a comforting hand into her little sister's, but her attention was on Harry as he dug through his robes.

No kidding. She has no way of knowing, we none of us do, how long it's going to take Voldemort to get over what we did to him, how fast he can recover from dying in a dream, whether or not this will all have been for nothing...

His fingers felt like a bunch of sausages attached haphazardly to his arms. After a few seconds of scrabbling, he hit on the happy idea of grasping the chain at the back of his neck and pulling the pendants up from there. They emerged from their hiding place with a faint clink, and Draco reached out and deftly separated the tiny gold phoenix from the four medallions and the locket. "This is what we want?" he asked.

"That's it," Harry confirmed. "Everyone get a finger on it." He followed his own advice, grasping the carving near its top, and thought with a pang of the last time he'd used this safeguard. *It brought me back from the Department of Mysteries. I felt a lot like this, tired and sore and scared, but it wasn't so bad, because Moony was there with me...*

He shoved these thoughts away. *Voldemort's a liar. And weirdly obsessed with Moony for some reason, but I'll think about that later. Right now, I have to get as much of my Pack as I can to safety.*

That's what alphas do.

"Denward bound," he said clearly.

The Portkey activated with its usual jerk to the navel. Having Meghan huddled up against him, Harry found, made for a bizarre combination of forces. *My guts feel like they're being pulled out and pushed back in. At the same time.*

Maybe this is what Voldemort felt like in that dream-Floo...

Harry Potter arrived in the Hogwarts Den laughing.

Nearly an hour later, the sound of an opening door jerked Harry out of an uneasy doze. Draco was already awake, cat-Neenie lifting her head in his lap. Meghan mumbled something unintelligible, then scrambled up as Dumbledore appeared in the doorway to the bathroom. His robes were stained and wrinkled, his face deeply grave and, for the first time since Harry had known him, showing every year of his advanced age.

"Sir?" Hermione said uncertainly, standing up human beside Draco. "What's--" She broke off with a gasp and darted forward to embrace the person behind Dumbledore, her breath sobbing out of her in relief. "Danger, Danger, oh Danger!"

Draco and Harry reached their Pack-mother in a dead heat, Meghan only a step behind. Danger

hugged them all fiercely, murmuring reassurances that she wasn't hurt, only shaken up, but Harry could feel her trembling against his shoulder.

She's here alone. Danger's never alone.

What happened out there?

"We were ambushed, in a place where we were unprepared," said Dumbledore, which startled Harry until he realized he must have asked the question aloud. "May I sit? Old legs, I fear..."

"Of course, sir." Harry snapped his fingers to summon a chair, and Hermione raised one from the floor for Danger, turning cat immediately thereafter and taking over the half of her sister's lap that Snow Fox hadn't already appropriated. Meghan sat down on the floor and wrapped an arm around Danger's leg, and Harry leaned against the chair's back. He had the uneasy feeling he might need the support.

"As I think you have already discovered, Remus was badly injured," Dumbledore began. "The Healers hold out some hope for his mending, but caution us not to expect too much. He was struck with several spells at once, including two which were very Dark magic indeed. Dark enough that one of them injured a Healer who was attempting to give him first aid. I do not think it advisable that any more... direct solution be sought at this time." His look was clearly directed towards Meghan, who pressed her face into Danger's robes with a little whimper. "There are several others who were injured, including Fred Weasley, but Remus' case is the worst. I do believe, however, that he will recover eventually."

Bad, but not as bad as it could have been. Harry drew a deep breath and let it out, conscious of every ridge and valley in the grain of Danger's chair back beneath his fingers. *Dumbledore doesn't lie. Moony's alive and going to stay that way. It'll take time, but he'll get well.*

So why am I still worried?

"There were, in this attack, three people killed," Dumbledore said slowly, his eyes still on Meghan. "One was a young witch of Muggle birth, buying her school supplies for her first year at Hogwarts. Her name was Annette Benson. The second and third are known to us both. Penelope Clearwater, and Frank Longbottom."

Harry felt again the sensation that Voldemort's spell had caused when it slipped around the sword blade and hit him in the gut. *Neville's dad? Percy's girlfriend? Why? How? This doesn't make any sense...*

Dimly, it occurred to him that finding out people you knew were dead didn't seem to get easier with practice.

Or maybe I just haven't had enough of it yet.

The thought did not fill him with confidence.

On the floor, Meghan had her hands over her mouth, the distress in her silver eyes too deep for words or even tears as of yet. Danger roused her lapful of furry creatures and gently set them down beside her, then gathered Meghan into her arms. "I'm sorry, love," she whispered. "It isn't over quite yet."

Harry's stomach went from immobilized into free fall. *Padfoot. Letha. No, please, no...*

"We also have people unaccounted for." Dumbledore's words were halting, as though he were trying to find some way to make this news less terrifying. "Three Muggle women, one the teacher who was accompanying Miss Benson, one the mother of Amanda Smythe, and one the grandmother of Terry Boot."

Hermione was shaking her head, her breath starting to come raggedly. Draco sat with his arms curled around his knees, staring blindly into the distance.

"Percy Weasley is missing as well, and we have several eyewitnesses who saw what became of him. And of Sirius and Aletha." Dumbledore looked up at them at last, his eyes as bleak and chill as a rain-filled sky. "There can be no question. They were taken prisoner by the Death Eaters."

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Facing Danger

Chapter 45: Rewards and Rulebreakers (Year 6)

He had read once, in a book about a particular type of transfiguration and all the ways in which it could go wrong, that talking to oneself was the first sign of madness. Some twenty years of experience with that type of transfiguration later, he was fairly sure that was wrong. The real trouble, in his opinion, began not when one was talking to oneself, but when oneself started answering.

I did it! exulted one voice. I did it! I tricked them out of their safety, I lured them out to where they could be attacked, and now my lord will give me a reward! Anything I ask for, anything at all!

But what if you ask to be released from his service? whispered the voice he hated to listen to, the voice he had tried for so many years to silence. What if you ask him to let you go? Even if you swear a Vow that you'll stay in your other form all your life and never approach any member of the other side to offer them help, do you think he would do it?

He tried once again to quash this voice. *Why would I want to leave my master's service? Now that I have proved I can be useful, he will give me anything I want, anything I need...*

Except your freedom. The voice was being obstinate. Except the ability to choose where you go and what you do. Especially what you do. Maybe it would have been better to run away and hide all those years ago, before he had a share in you, but now you are marked—and Marked—and he will never let you leave him. Not living, anyway.

Shut up and leave me alone, he snapped, the words coming out, in his current state, as a small squeak and an irritable hiss. I need to think about what it is I want.

Comfort? the voice suggested snidely. Friendship? Sanity? All the things you had, way back when, before you traded them for—

Shut. UP! Wormtail whipped around and buried his sharp front teeth in the closest portion of his anatomy that he could reach. It hurt, but that was good. Pain drowned out the voice and stopped the madness for a little while.

He wondered how soon he would have to start inflicting pain on himself constantly.

Danger arrived on the front steps of Headquarters feeling far more drained than Side-Along-Apparating Meghan would have accounted for.

Do you think maybe fighting in a horrific battle, watching two of your best friends in the world be taken prisoner, barely stopping your husband from being killed, and dealing with your foster-son's debilitating disease which chose this moment to flare up—not to mention you have the same disease and your body's already flashing warning signals at you—could have something to do with

that?

Dumbledore, who had arrived silently beside her, put out a hand to steady her. "You need rest," he murmured. "I know how much there is to do, but working yourself into exhaustion will help nothing."

"I could say the same for you." Danger regained her footing, staring blindly out into Grimmauld Place. "When do you plan on resting?"

"As soon as I contact the Ministry to make sure they have accounted for all the dementors they once employed. There are enough ways in which our friends could be harmed in the Death Eaters' hands. I hope to ensure that one is not included..." Dumbledore stopped, looking at her intently. "What do you see?"

"I don't know." Ignoring the sound of the door opening behind her and Dumbledore's quiet conversation with the person who had opened it, Danger blinked a few times and brought her eyes back into focus. The street looked much the same as it usually did, rather dingy and run-down. The few passers-by had their heads down, concentrating more on where they were going than where they were. All except one.

Directly across the way stood a nondescript man, hands in his trouser pockets, looking at number twelve.

At her .

"Danger?" Not Dumbledore's voice, this time. Voni Pritchard's, she thought, and was proved right as she turned. "Is everything—no, forget I started that, it's a fool question at a time like this. What can I do?"

"Pearl, love." Danger stroked the side of her goddaughter's face, and kissed her forehead when Meghan lifted her tearful face from Danger's robes. "There's someone I need to talk to for a moment. Will you go with Mrs. Pritchard? I'll come straight back as soon as ever I can."

Meghan swallowed once, then nodded. Graham appeared beside his mother and held out his hands to her, and she let herself be drawn into the house. The door was starting to close when Danger realized what else—who, rather—she needed. "Voni!"

"Hmm?" The other witch stopped.

"Is Luna here? Can she come out for a moment?"

"I'll find out." The door shut firmly.

"Do you hope she will give you refutation, or confirmation?" Dumbledore asked.

"Confirmation. Definitely." The man's pose, that comfortable and nonchalant half-slump, had only rung the faintest of bells in her mind at first, until it had dawned on her why he was waiting across

the road, why he hadn't simply walked up to her and started a conversation.

There are rules, you know. And half the point of rules is knowing when to break them, and when not to.

The door creaked again, and Luna poked her head around it. Danger pointed wordlessly at the man across the way. Luna observed him for a moment, then whispered a name into Danger's ear.

Danger snorted. "Typical. All right, I'm going over. I shouldn't be long. Can you wait for me?"

"I can," Dumbledore said gravely.

She was halfway across Grimmauld Place before it dawned on Danger just how cavalier she was being with the time and attention of one of the greatest living wizards of their age.

On the other hand, if he minded, he has plenty of ways of making that known. And I need to have all my wits about me for this conversation, none of them wandering.

She corralled her wayward thoughts, put on her best motherly you-brought-this-on-yourself face, and strode right up to the vaguely smiling man.

"So good of you to come and see me, Mrs. Granger-Lupin," he began, but Danger cut him off before he could go one word further.

"Alexander Zacharias Slytherin, just *what* do you think you're doing here?"

Sirius awakened from a nightmare of watching Remus fall limply to the pavement into a reality he couldn't say he liked much better.

He was lying on a cold stone floor, his back sore where he'd wrenched it trying to escape the Death Eater's noose. From the way his arms were pinned behind him, tied together at wrists and elbows with coarse, bristly rope, he hadn't made it. His head was enveloped in a smelly cloth bag, but no effort had been made to gag him.

Which means they've hauled me off somewhere that no one's going to hear me if I yell. How encouraging.

A soft moan sounded behind him, and his heart sank another foot and a half. *Stuffed things up well and truly this time, haven't I? It wasn't enough to get my stupid self captured, no, I have to go and drag along somebody I'd rather die than see hurt—*

"Letha?" he said, or tried to say. His tongue felt thick in his mouth, and the word emerged garbled enough that he could barely understand it.

"Sirius." Her voice was breathy, threaded with fear, but under control. "Are you hurt?"

"Not badly." Experimentally, he twisted his wrists, and found a bit of give in the ropes. "Hold on a second, I want to try this..."

The Death Eaters who had tied up their captives had been thinking in terms of showmanship, Sirius surmised, flexing and relaxing several muscles in his arms alternately. Certainly none of them had ever seen Frank Longbottom's favorite party trick, in which he escaped in less than half a minute from what had looked, to Sirius' eyes, like a completely secure set of conjured restraints.

As in, I conjured them, and would have laid money on their being inescapable. If Letha hadn't talked me out of it. Which she did, and then talked Frank into teaching me how it was done...

He hissed under his breath as the bristles scraped his knuckles raw, but a little blood was a small price to pay. His left hand was free. A few seconds' fumbling work, and he could sit up, pull the bag off his head, and go to work on Aletha's restraints.

"That had better be—" she began. He spared one hand to unmask her, and laid it on her cheek for a moment before returning to work. "Oh. It is you. Where—never mind, you won't know that any more than I do. Are we alone?"

"No." The knots were tight and difficult to unpick but not complicated, so Sirius could look around the room without stopping. "Four others that I see. All adult-size, no one else awake. Masked, so I can't tell, but I don't think Moony or Danger are here." He sniffed, clearing his nose from the stale aromas of the bag. "Make that definitely not. But there is someone else here we know. Possibly two. Can't get any more specific until—ah-ha!" The last rope slid free, and he bent to kiss her abraded wrists.

She twisted out of his hold and spun herself around in the same motion. "Don't waste it there," she breathed. "Not when—"

"I know." Sirius kissed her lightly on the lips once, then pulled her close to his chest. "God, Letha, I'm sorry—"

"Don't be." Aletha's hand burrowed into his hair and stroked it. "I made my own decision. Don't I always?"

"Yes, you do. Always."

"Not your fault, then." She tilted his head down towards her. "Don't you ever think it was."

There were millions of things Sirius wanted to say, but most of them could be encapsulated in one simple three-word phrase. "I love you," he whispered against her lips, and kissed her again more thoroughly, a lovers' parting kiss, to treasure until they met again, whether that was in a day, in a year—

Or never.

He shoved that thought away. They weren't going to die, not here, not now. There was still too

much they had to do.

And right now, that starts with finding out who these other people are, and which of them need help.

Releasing Aletha and scooting to the first person's side, he started untying a pair of small, pallid wrists.

Ron was swearing again.

On the whole, Ginny preferred Ron swearing to Ron crying. Ron crying was difficult to deal with, not least because he refused to admit what he was doing and wouldn't let anyone give him so much as a tissue. Still, Ron swearing got monotonous after a while. He didn't have the creativity of the twins, nor did he have Charlie or Bill's multi-language vocabulary to draw from, so he was stuck repeating the same few words and phrases over and over, and Ginny was getting tired of hearing them.

"I'm going for a walk," she said, standing up from her place in the corner of the Pride's den room. "I'll be back."

"Fine," Ron said without changing his tone, and aimed a kick at the wall. His foot bounced off and unbalanced him, so that Ginny's last view of him was of him flat on his back swearing at the ceiling.

Must not laugh at brother. Must not laugh at brother. Must especially not laugh at brother when other brother is missing.

The thought of Percy, and the subsequent ones of Penny, took care of her unwise flare of humor. She wandered down the hall toward the stairs, letting her thoughts go where they would.

Before the war had started, her only exposure to death had been her grandfather and her uncle Bilius, both of whom had died when she was too young to really understand what death meant. Even when she had helped Harry recover from watching Cedric die, or grieved with the Pack over baby Marcus, it hadn't struck her the way this did.

I didn't know Cedric, not really. And none of us knew Marcus. But Penny, we knew. Percy'd been bringing her along on visits for two or three years. She was real to me, she was a person, and now... now she's gone. She may have died trying to save that little girl, trying to be a hero, but she still died, and so did the girl, and it's all such a stupid... useless... waste...

Something broke under her knuckles. Startled, Ginny pulled back and shook her head, clearing her eyes. *What did I just...?*

The plasterboard on the hallway wall had a neat Ginny-fist-sized hole in it. She muttered one of the words Ron had been using in profusion and tried to draw her wand to fix it, but her hands were

shaking too hard, she couldn't, she just couldn't...

"Easy, now, Gin-Gin," said a calm voice beside her, and Lee's strong hand closed around hers. "Hold still a second, you're pretty scraped up, and I don't think Mr. Padfoot'll thank you for leaving blood all over his hallway."

"No more will Kreacher," Ginny managed to get out, and heard Lee chuckle.

"And we wouldn't want to get Kreacher mad, now would we?" His wand appeared in her peripheral vision and made a swoop, and the white dust she had dislodged disappeared. Two more waggles, and the bleeding scratches on her knuckles disappeared. A final slash, and the plaster looked as good as new. "Care to come in? Danielle's keeping us updated from St. Mungo's on her Galleon, the Healers think Fred should be all right by next week now..."

Ginny nodded dumbly, and Lee steered her into the next bedroom on the right, which happened to be the Pride girls' room. Crystal jumped up from her place beside George on Hermione's bed and hugged Ginny tight, then deposited her on George's other side. Lee plunked himself down at the foot of Meghan's bed, next to where Graham was already sitting, both of them watching—

Knuckling tears out of her eyes, Ginny took a longer look at the extraordinary collection of people perched on Meghan's bed. Maya sat with her legs folded under, Meghan asleep in her lap like a much younger child. In Meghan's lap, likewise asleep, nestled little Bernie, and completing the picture on Bernie's lap were a pair of sleeping elflets. Cissus was snoring faintly, and Echo had her thumb in her mouth.

Ginny couldn't help but smile, even laugh a little, weakly, and George turned at the sound and gave her a one-armed hug and a knuckle rub that made her yip and slap his hand away. "There we are," he said with satisfaction. "That's more like our ickle Ginnikins."

Crystal poked him in the side. "Stop calling names. She's here, have you thought about it any more?"

"Thought about what?" Ginny asked.

"Hang on." George turned again and flipped a glittering piece of gold towards Lee, who bobbed it once but caught it with his other hand. "Keep a watch and let us know if anything changes, mate? We need to run up and drag Ron out of whatever he's got himself into by now."

"Will do." Lee tossed them an offhanded salute, and George stood up and scooped Ginny over his shoulder. She considered struggling, but decided it would only add to the awkwardness of the moment and instead went limp. Crystal led the way up the stairs to the den room and knocked on the door.

"Go'way," Ron snarled from within.

"You can't tell me that," Ginny called back, nodding at Crystal to open the door, which she did.

"I can them." Ron's eyes were redder than they had been when Ginny had left, and his glare at George and Crystal was unfriendly in the extreme. "Go'way."

"Here on business, little brother." George set Ginny down and stretched oh-so-casually in a way that just happened to expose the potion piece holster he was wearing under his unfastened robes. "Want to make a deal with you."

"About?" Ron still sounded ungracious, but his tone was picking up some interest.

"May we come in first?" Crystal inquired.

"Yes, you may," said Ginny, overriding Ron's grunted, "Go ahead."

George stood back to allow his sister and his girlfriend entrance to the room, then shut the door firmly behind him and Imperturbed it. Crystal tested the poufs on which the Pride girls usually sat, found one to her liking, and dropped into it. "So," she said, settling back with a look of bright and cheery Muggle cluelessness on her face. "Death Eaters."

Ginny knew Crystal and George had been developing this as a double-team tactic to find out which of their suppliers would cheat a "silly little Muggle" and proceed to fleece them shamelessly. What she didn't know was if Ron knew it as well. Judging by his sour expression, she didn't think he did.

Whatever they're here for, my nearest and dearest brother is about to get taken for a ride.

Serves him right.

Over the next ten minutes, her admiration for the tactic only grew. Crystal skillfully milked Ron of everything he knew about Death Eaters, how nasty and brutal they could be, how powerful their magic often was, how they struck unprepared and unaware targets whenever possible. Her questions, even for a Muggle with only a few weeks' exposure to the magical world, were ludicrous, but her manner was so engaging that Ron edged out of his shell to answer them, and once he was out Crystal refused to let him go back in.

"So you would say," she pursued, "that the best thing to do if there were known kidnap victims is to go after them immediately."

"Of course, but how do you find them?" Ron flung his hands out into the air. "That's the point of kidnapping. The kidnappers know where they're going and we don't. They could be anywhere, and we haven't got a clue how to find them..."

"Don't we?" George interrupted. The words were innocuous enough, but his whole body had come to a pose of alertness, attention, as if he had heard some call to arms that Ginny had missed. His eyes were focused on Ron, but not on his brother's face—no, he was looking at Ron's collarbone, at the wedge of skin neither robes nor shirt covered up.

Or at the gold chain just visible at the edge of that skin.

Ginny hooked her pendants out of her robes as George's idea came into focus behind her eyes. Percy, she commanded mentally, and the metal cooled against her skin as her family carvings flickered weakly. For a moment, she wished she could see her mother's charmed clock, to find out if it considered Percy's current situation to be "mortal peril" or not—

Don't be stupid. He's been captured by Death Eaters, of course he's in mortal peril. It just isn't immediate, which is why the pendants didn't go off until I asked. They can't tell us everything about everyone all at once, or we'd never get any rest, especially not in a war.

"But what good does that do us?" Ron asked. He'd followed Ginny's logic to the point of bringing out his own pendants, and she could see the fitful glimmers of light which meant he had probably asked the same silent question she had. "We already knew he was in trouble—"

He broke off, looking intently at something on the medallion. When he lifted his head again, his eyes were narrowed, and he looked from George to Crystal as though sizing up an enemy. "You're not leaving us behind," he said flatly.

"Wouldn't dream of it." Crystal hadn't changed her posture on the pouf, but her tone made Ginny think of one of the mazes Professor Longbottom had dreamed up for the DA to practice the fine art of the ambush. "Doesn't work without you, does it now? We couldn't very well—"

"I mean at all," Ron cut her off. "No telling us to stay outside or stay in the car or wherever. You want our help with this, you take us along as fighters. Nothing else. Got that?"

Ginny swallowed, the taste of jubilation in her mouth mingling badly with that of terror. Whatever Ron was talking about, wherever they were going to go, he had finally done something she'd feared he never would. Without a second thought or a question, he had included her in his "us" as an equal. He saw her now as Harry and the rest of the Pride did, as a strong fellow Warrior to be depended on, not his fragile little sister who had to be shielded and sheltered. She had wanted that from him for years.

And of course it has to be now I find out what Mum means when she says getting what you want can be the scariest thing in the world...

Firmly, she banished that thought. *This is what I want to do. What I've been training for these last four years—longer than that, really, when you consider the extra rules the Pack adds to things like hide-and-seek. I can't let myself freeze up now.*

Not when Percy's life might depend on it.

George frowned. "Ron, this isn't a—"

Ginny whipped her wand from her pocket. "*Expelliarmus*," she snapped, catching George halfway through his own draw, and swung her point down to freeze Crystal in the act of pulling her potion piece. "Don't," she said shortly, over Ron's growled "*Mucinno!*" and George's curse as the handle of his own potion piece was suddenly too slimy to grasp. Crystal held her hands up, palms out, and

treated Ginny to a short wink.

Ron reached out his left hand and absently snagged George's wand out of the air on its way towards Ginny. "A game?" he finished, holding up his prize. "Never said it was. But it's like she said." He jerked his head towards Crystal. "It won't work without us, which means we have to go along. And it'd be stupid to drag us all the way there, wherever 'there' is, and then not let us fight. If there even is any fighting. The best thing would be to get in and out without them ever knowing. And as long as we know where we're going, which we will, we can do that."

Belatedly, Ginny's mind caught up with what George and Crystal were suggesting, and with why she and Ron were needed. *It could work. It did work. Twice, actually, once to find me and once to find Harry and Draco and Hermione. Here's hoping good things come in threes...*

"Fine," said George, holding out his hand for his wand. "You can come. But if you get killed, you get to explain it to Mum all on your own."

"I'll write her a note before we go." Ron tossed the wand over. "How are we getting there?"

Crystal got to her feet and stretched. "I can drive," she said, her fingertips brushing one of the bars installed in the ceiling. "I even have a license, which I would bet none of you do. And I've been dreaming about flying since I was four years old. Granted, I never thought I'd fly a *car*, but you do what you have to."

"Such a hardship for you," Ginny agreed, maintaining her straight face with an effort. "Let me grab a couple things we might be able to use and then we can get going. The sooner, the better."

Sirius surveyed the small room with a certain gloomy satisfaction. The Death Eaters' snatches, apart from him and Aletha, appeared to have been random, but they had netted a surprisingly resilient group.

If they were looking for someone who's going to fall apart just from fear alone, they grabbed the wrong people.

He'd met Remus' friend Sue several times on her visits to the Den, and been impressed with her good sense and her ability to function in the magical world nearly as well as she did in the Muggle. She was seated now with her back against a corner, talking quietly with Miss Meade, who seemed calmer here than she had when Sirius had first encountered her in the Leaky Cauldron.

I don't like what that implies about her past, but it's the present and the near future we need to be concerned with at the moment.

Mrs. Smythe, for her part, was bending over a still unconscious Percy with Aletha, showing her something. Sirius craned his neck and caught a glimpse of one of the DA's potion pieces. *That's right, they were going to pass them out to Muggle relations once they had enough. Knockout potions and healing only, though—wait, healing—*

He scooted across the floor to join them. "Were you going to use that on him?" he asked, indicating the potion piece.

"Why, won't it work?" Mrs. Smythe tucked a bit of auburn hair behind one ear. "Aletha was just saying she doesn't think he was hit with any particularly Dark magic..."

"I'm not sure he was hit with magic in the first place." Aletha explored Percy's swollen face gently with her fingertips. "These all look like physical injuries. He may have been knocked off his feet by a near miss, and this is just the result of a too-close encounter with a wall."

"Will it harm him to leave him as he is for a while?"

"It shouldn't." Aletha lifted her head to look at Sirius directly. "Why?"

Her tone was superficially calm, but Sirius could feel the tension roiling just under its surface. *Hold it together, love*, he willed, wishing for an instant they shared a bond like Remus and Danger did. *Please, don't fall apart on me, I'll never make it through this if you do...*

"First off, we don't want them knowing what you can do with that thing yet," he said aloud, blotting at Percy's sluggishly bleeding lip with a fold of the young man's cloak. "They left it with you, which means they don't know what it is, and it could make the difference between life and death for you later. And second, he's bunged up enough they might not recognize him right off. Which could make the difference between life and death for him. If they know who he is, they'll use him to hurt his family, possibly even try to turn his dad—"

Aletha snorted. "Good luck."

"Yes, well, you know that and I know that. But when they find it out, what happens to him?" Sirius let Percy's cloak drop from his hand. "Whereas if he's just another Muggle, a toy they can play with at their leisure, they might not get around to him, or to any of you, before the Order finds this place."

"Any of you?" Sue repeated, coming to join them with Miss Meade beside her. "Not any of *us*?"

"They know exactly who Sirius and I are," Aletha answered quietly before Sirius could find the right words. "And who they can hurt by hurting us. They won't pass up that opportunity, and neither will any of them want to miss it. You won't be guarded heavily, they'll be assuming you're helpless, that none of you can do magic or have any weapons..."

"It's a war," Miss Meade put in unexpectedly. "You have to take your chances where you find them."

"That's it exactly." Sirius chuckled once, without much real humor. "Not going to say I'm thrilled to be providing said chance, but it's what I do for a living. Professional trouble magnet."

"Troublemaker's more like it." Sue gave his hand a quick, hard squeeze. "Don't do anything you don't need to. Either of you," she added after a glance at Aletha. "What do you think, Grace? Call

him yours?"

"It should fly as long as they don't look too closely." Mrs. Smythe ran her fingers through Percy's hair, a few shades brighter than her own. "This is not what I expected to be doing with my day, I can tell you that much..."

The nondescript man blinked at Danger. "I beg your pardon?"

Danger glared at him. "Don't you dare play dumb with me, not after the day I've had. I *knew* you were in there the moment I saw you, Luna just confirmed it, and you are damn well going to talk to me right now or I am going to kick you from here to the Den and back again. Without stopping. Through as many mud puddles, nettle patches, and piles of dung as I can find. Is that entirely clear?"

The man blinked again, his eyes changing from muddy brown to vibrant green in the instant of closure. "Dammit, Danger, I shouldn't even *be* here," he hissed. "Do you have any idea how many rules I'm breaking?"

"No, but I know perfectly well what I'll be breaking if you don't stop playing with me." Danger fought against the tightening of her chest, the shaking of her voice. *I can't do this now. Not now. I have to keep going, keep fighting, I'm the only one left, the only one...*

"It isn't playing, it's—" Alex cut himself off with an exasperated sigh. "To hell with the rules, you'll do no one any good if you fall apart. Come here."

Danger stumbled into the offered embrace and pressed her face against a grey-clad shoulder, muffling her explosion of sobs and keeping her tears from showing. "I hate this," she whispered after the first bout was over. "Please tell me I don't have to do the rest of it alone."

Alex sighed again. "I wish I could. But you do. It's the only way they'll have a real chance."

"I was afraid you were going to say that." Drawing a deep breath, Danger straightened up. "All right. I have a few ideas of my own about finding them, I should be able to manage that on my own, it's just being away from Remus for so long that I can't see a way around. Is that what you're here for?"

"Yes." Alex closed his hand around hers. "If you ask, we can put your bond into abeyance, put it on hold for a little while. As long as neither of you goes picking at it, it should last until you're together again."

"That does sound like what I need. What's the price?"

Alex shuffled a foot. "I want you to know this wasn't my idea."

"It's never your idea. Spit it out."

A third sigh. "A day off the time you can spend apart. Permanently. You'll still have twenty-four hours relatively healthy, but after that the symptoms will mount about two-thirds faster than they did before."

"Killing us in two days instead of three."

"Not the most diplomatic way of putting it, but yes."

"It's my life. If I'm not allowed to be undiplomatic about it, who is?" Danger twisted a tangle out of her hair. "The only reason for us to be apart for longer than a day now that we know about the bond is because one of us was captured. And in that case, I doubt either of us would want to survive anyway. I agree to the price. So I speak, so I intend."

"So let it be done." Alex laid a hand against her cheek. "If anyone asks, Ezra Smythe was hoping you would have some news about his wife. And Amanda sends her love to Draco, if you see him again before you leave."

"I plan to. Unless leaving immediately would have an impact on things...?" Danger trailed off at Alex's shaken head. "Alex, are you—yes, you are. You're *crying*. What on earth—"

"Don't ask." The words emerged in a harsh whisper. "Just remember. By the time you could get there, it would already be too late."

Green eyes closed, and opened again a somber brown. "Dear me." Ezra Smythe reached into his pocket for a handkerchief. "I do beg your pardon. I don't know what's come over me."

"It's a terrible thing to feel helpless when someone you love is in trouble," Danger heard her voice answering in impossibly normal tones. "Believe me, I know. You'll be the first to hear as soon as we find anything out."

"Thank you, Mrs. Granger-Lupin, very much." Mr. Smythe blotted at his eyes. "I hope your husband recovers soon."

"They think he will. But thank you for your good wishes." She inclined her head towards him in lieu of shaking hands, then turned and hurried back across the street, trying to get into familiar territory before tears could blind her. Three words echoed endlessly inside her ears.

Already too late.

Wormtail slipped out of his hiding place and popped back into human form as the Dark Lord entered the room, waving the Death Eaters back to their celebration when they would have risen in respect. Another twitch of the long fingers summoned Bellatrix to his side, and a third called a thin man Wormtail didn't know from the crowd.

His master looked... ill, Wormtail decided, studying the Dark Lord from the corner of his eye. One

couldn't exactly describe him as *pale* , given that his normal skin tone was parchment-white, but he looked grey and tired, as though he'd been working a great deal of magic.

Maybe it didn't go well.

He buried that thought instantly. That was disloyalty, and unworthy of such a fine servant of the Dark Lord as he was today. If his master saw such thoughts in his mind, the promised reward might be taken back. There might even be punishment, for daring to think that the Dark Lord could ever do anything less than well.

Quite some master you serve. The snide voice was back. Not just your actions, not just your words, no, even your thoughts have to conform to what he wants...

Wormtail bared his teeth before remembering he was human once again. A hard pinch to his already sore left arm by the hard silver fingers of his right hand did a satisfactory job instead. *Shut UP, I said. The night is almost over. My Lord will decide what happens to the prisoners, we will do it or watch it done, and then he will give me my reward and I will be able to go enjoy it in peace.*

"Bring me where they are," the Dark Lord ordered, raising his voice so that everyone could hear him. "Let me see them for myself."

"Of course, my lord." The stranger bowed deeply and opened the other door of the room, waving Bellatrix and the Dark Lord through it before him. The Death Eaters fell in behind, most of them laughing and joking. Wormtail followed, his skin prickling with his desire to return to rat form. *Sirius and Aletha might not notice me that way...*

The voice scoffed. *Sirius? Not notice you? When he spotted you in the middle of a battle, and got himself and his wife captured because of it? The only thing rat form might get you is killed, if he can get his teeth into your scruff before anyone can drop him. Or if she steps on you hard enough to snap your neck. Why not give it a try? You'd be well out of it. Not even your precious Dark Lord can call you back from death.*

Trying to keep this thought from taking him over, Wormtail barely noticed when the procession of Death Eaters halted outside the room where the prisoners were being kept. What broke him from his reverie was a hand on his arm. He looked up.

"He wants you up front," said Rodolphus Lestrage, smirking. "Wants you to watch, since you did so well in the battle."

Swallowing back his usual timidity, Wormtail nodded and allowed himself to be escorted forward between the files of watching eyes. They passed through the doorway together and joined the Dark Lord and his court, standing at the opposite end of the room from the half-dozen prisoners.

Sirius growled deep in his throat when he saw Wormtail, then turned away to support a middle-aged woman who was cradling a young man's battered upper body on her lap. Aletha's eyes were

as cold as midwinter mud. Behind her stood a matronly woman with silvering hair, one arm around—

Wormtail clenched his teeth, the better to keep his mouth from dropping open in shock. His eyes widened of their own accord. A secret dream, hidden in the back of his mind for more years than he wanted to remember, was coming alive again.

"The wizard and the witch come with us, to our current base of operations," the Dark Lord was saying. "The Muggles will remain here until we have finished with the proper treatment of their betters. Then we shall see what can be... devised for them." Snickers filled the room. "If no one has anything to add—"

"My Lord!"

Death Eaters stared, whispered, pointed. Lord Voldemort himself turned slowly to see who had addressed him. Wormtail would have turned to look, but he knew it would do him no good. He had recognized the voice in the moment of its speaking as his own.

"Yes, Wormtail?" said the Dark Lord after a moment of silence. "Did you wish to say something?"

"M-my lord." Wormtail bowed, clumsily, cursing at his tongue for its stammer. This would need to be said without a stumble if it was going to work. "You promised—you said I could have, I could ask, I would be given a reward. Anything I wanted. Within reason."

The Dark Lord inclined his head. "So I did. Must we discuss it now?"

"My lord, we must." Wormtail turned towards the prisoners and pointed. "I want *her*."

Sirius sucked air between his teeth and started forward. Several wands snapped up into place, pointing at him, and Aletha's hand locked onto his arm. "Don't—" she started to say, but was interrupted from behind.

"It's all right," said a soft voice, as the young woman at whom Wormtail had been pointing laid a hand each on Sirius' and Aletha's arms. "I'll go."

"He's a little rat bastard," Sirius said from the side of his mouth, but loud enough that everyone in the room could hear him. "What if he hurts you?"

A smile flickered on her face and was gone. "That's a chance I'm willing to take."

Aletha nodded in acceptance and released Sirius' arm, stepping back. Sirius, manifestly unwilling, did the same. The young woman glanced first at the older one who had been sheltering her, then at the middle-aged one who knelt on the floor with the young man in her arms, giving each of them another flashing smile for goodbye. Then, as calm as though she were going on a journey she had planned herself, she stepped forward towards Wormtail, until she was close enough that he could smell her faint perfume.

"Keep her under control," the Dark Lord ordered. "If she gets out of hand, she will not be allowed to remain."

Wormtail hastily grabbed her arm. "My lord, I will!"

Other Death Eaters forced Sirius and Aletha forward, blindfolded them, tied their hands. Dolohov was chosen to stay behind in charge of the Muggles and allowed to select three others to join him. The rest of the Death Eaters followed their master towards the back door of the temporary hiding place, where they would Apparate to the base they had been using for more than a year, ever since the Dark Lord's return. Through all the chaos, Wormtail found himself unable to look away from his prize for more than a few seconds at a time.

It's perfectly normal, he tried to tell himself. She's young, healthy, not too bad looking, and she's mine. The Dark Lord said so himself. No one will dare take her away from me after that.

And why are you so concerned about— the voice tried to ask.

Shut up. Wormtail grinned at the ease with which he had vanquished his niggling annoyance this time. *She's mine—I can do anything I like with her—I finally have someone who will—*

"Let us go!" the Dark Lord called out, and Wormtail had to abandon this line of thought in favor of grasping his new acquisition's arm tighter in preparation for Side-Along-Apparating her.

"This only lasts a moment," he murmured absently, pulling her close. "Don't be afraid."

"I'm not."

Wormtail almost wondered what this meant, but shoved it aside in favor of a clearer thought of his destination. The turn into darkness—constriction and airlessness—a loud pop, and they were there, the young woman looking rather pale.

The other Death Eaters, the Dark Lord at their head, were moving off towards the meeting hall, Sirius and Aletha being bullied along in their midst. Wormtail considered following, but decided he had better take his reward back to his own room first. "This way," he said, starting down the corridor in the opposite direction.

A left, a right, the second left past that, and they were there. He tapped the doorknob with his wand, and it turned, revealing the room in the same disorder he had left it. "Bloody useless house-elves," he grumbled, waving the young woman into the room in front of him. "Keep their masters' rooms sparkling, of course they do, but lift a finger to help me? Not likely."

"House-elves?" She took a seat on the edge of the bed without being asked, folding her hands in her lap. "What are those?"

"Annoying." Wormtail gestured vaguely around the height of his knee. "About so tall, brownish skin, squeaky voices, great huge eyes and ears. Look like some Muggle puppet designer's bad dream..." He caught himself before he could go on talking to this girl as though she were his equal.

"Have this place cleaned up by the time I get back," he said in a tone he hoped would pass for sharp and commanding, crossing the room to his wardrobe. "There's a sink in there for water." He pointed a thumb towards his tiny washroom, then flicked his wand at the grating, lighting a fire. "In case you need to burn rubbish."

"Thank you."

Biting his lip before he could say *You're welcome*, Wormtail pulled his robes over his head, did a quick Freshen-Up Charm on himself—it would last him until whatever was happening out in the meeting hall was over—and slid into clean robes, finger-combing his hair into place. He almost let his dirty robes fall where they were, but instead tossed them into the corner he was using for laundry. One bit of helpfulness wouldn't spoil the girl beyond use.

He started for the door but was brought up short by her voice. "What's your name?"

"Wormtail."

"No. Your *name* ."

"Everyone calls me—"

"I don't care. I want to know your name."

He looked down at his hand, gleaming silver against the tarnished brass of the doorknob. *I should discipline her... I can't let her get into bad habits... she has to realize her place, understand where she belongs...*

"Peter," he said under his breath.

"Thank you." A long pause. "I'm Evanie."

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Facing Danger

Chapter 46: Worse than Death (Year 6)

Percy opened his eyes, then closed them again. Even through the blurring from the loss of his glasses, he could tell he was nowhere he might reasonably expect to be. Still, his face and arms were only moderately sore, which argued for some sort of friendly attention. The last thing he remembered was seeing the pavement approaching at high velocity.

Though I would much rather have seen that and not what I saw immediately before it...

"Sounds like it," said a woman's voice, with the air of answering a question he hadn't heard, and a female figure topped with silver-speckled hair appeared as he opened his eyes again. "Ah, you are awake. I'm glad. Can you sit up?"

"I can try." His voice sounded harsh and breathy in his ears, but he managed the feat requested without too much difficulty. "Where . . ."

"Don't know exactly, but it's wherever Death Eaters store prisoners they don't think much of." The woman waved a hand at herself and the other person Percy could now see, another woman about his mother's age, if his eyesight could be trusted. "We know who you are, had some friends in here earlier who confirmed it for us, but for the time being we've got them thinking you're Grace's son. Can you remember that?"

"Yes." He felt as though his mind were filled with fog, and welcomed the feeling with all his heart. Thinking about anything at this point seemed likely to send him into a screaming panic. "And you are?"

"Call me Sue." A cool hand closed around his for a moment, then moved to his cheek and his forehead in turn. "Good, you're cooling down. Seems that healing potion we used on you has a side effect or two, like temporary fever and delirium."

"Many home brews have that designed into them, to keep them from being misused," Percy recalled his Potions N.E.W.T. "If people think they can heal everything with just a cauldron and a few ingredients, they might not see a Healer in time to help something truly serious . . ." He trailed off, recognizing the implications in the second symptom Sue had mentioned. "I hope I didn't bother you with any babbling," he said uneasily. "I do apologize, if I did."

"You talked a little, but nothing we couldn't handle," said the other woman, Grace, moving closer so that Percy could see the auburn hair which had likely made her his designated mother for the time being. "I can tell you that your sister and your brothers are all right as far as we're aware. They weren't brought in with us, certainly, and from the bragging these Death Eaters seem to think is appropriate when they kill someone, we would have heard about that as well. Your girlfriend, though—Penelope—"

"I know," Percy interrupted, more roughly than he had intended. "I was there. I saw it. The little

girl—the one she tried to protect—do you know—”

“I’m afraid she died as well,” Grace said gently. “But her teacher survived, because Penny pushed her out of the way in time. So it wasn’t quite for nothing, what she did.”

Percy turned his face away, bringing an arm across to shield it. “How did you know?” he whispered.

“I’ve lost people in my time.” Grace’s hand rested on his shoulder for an instant, then withdrew. “And the hardest thing in the world is thinking, even knowing, that they died for no reason. Or for no reason except some fool’s need to show off how much faster or stronger or better he is than the next fool down the line.” Her voice had gone hard as stone. “Which is the same thing, and never think it’s not.”

The words would make sense eventually, Percy knew, and when they did, they might help. For now, though, he had no ability to understand anything but grief and pain.

Penny, he wept silently, watching on the backs of his eyelids as she swept the child into her futile embrace, as three spells converged on them at once, two blasting through the Shield Charm he had managed to cast, the third ricocheting off and heading straight for him. *Penny, no, not you, please not you . . .*

Evanie Meade pulled her feet up onto the bed, tucking them under her crossed legs and closing her eyes. Her hands, twisted together in her lap, were slick from nervous sweat, but her voice had held steady. She found a moment’s irrational pride in the knowledge.

Why did I do that?

The question had no direct answer, nothing simple or easy to understand. She was sure she had a reason, but it was buried deep in the back of her mind where her instincts lived.

Instincts, sneered the usual voice of disdain, the one that spoke in the tones of the man who had taught history and philosophy at the secondary school near the Home where Evanie had grown up. *Crude, base, animal things. Just like desires—you have to deny them, fight against them, if you ever want to be fully human. Listening to them is the stupidest thing you can do.*

She wondered briefly what that said about him, who hadn’t fought his own instincts and desires when it came to her and several of the other girls in years near hers, but a deep inhale silenced the voice and the exhale sent it on its way.

That was a long time ago, she reminded herself, *and it’s over now. He died three years ago*—she had found this out almost by accident, and was still unsure whether her spasms of glee ought to be guilty or not—*so he can never hurt me, or anyone else, ever again. And knowing the signs let me stop two other men who were trying to do the same thing to my girls.*

I wonder who will watch out for them now.

Memory lanced through her, making her gasp with pain. *Annette. I didn't watch out for you very well, did I? Poor baby . . .*

Annette was, she had been, so bright and filled with promise, so sure that her life would hold more than a gray little job and a gray little flat somewhere, it had hardly been a surprise to Evanie when the middle-aged woman in the ill-fitting black dress and tartan sash made her careful explanation and handed over the green-inked letter. The matron, naturally, was skeptical, but Evanie had professed herself willing to take the chance of looking foolish.

I almost wish now I hadn't.

The moment seared her mind, as clear as though it were happening in front of her now. The kind-faced young woman with her long curls, holding out the gold coins to Annette—the masked men appearing from nowhere, laughing wildly, pointing slender sticks at them—the shove that sent her stumbling away, out of the line of fire but near enough to see the eye-burning green that struck the young woman and Annette, dropping them limply to the pavement—

Tears slid down her face now, hot and cold all at once. She let them come, encouraged them even. Crying would help her accept the loss, and if she cried now she could wash the traces away and look normal by the time Peter returned.

Ah, yes. Peter. And that same question again. Why?

She was usually quite good at guessing people's ages, but Peter was a walking contradiction. His thinning hair and lined face should have belonged to a man at least in his fifties, but he moved like a much younger man, almost like—

Of course, now I recognize it. He moves like some of the older boys at the Home, when they know they shouldn't be where they are or doing what they're doing. Not the ones who've given up on being good, the ones who've decided the world thinks the worst of them and they might as well live down to that—no, he's like one of the ones who wishes he had a mother to come along and haul him home by the ear.

Splitting the difference, then, Peter was likely close to her own age of thirty-two. More importantly for Evanie, he hadn't always been what he was now, and he didn't seem happy with it.

But he isn't strong. The contempt on the faces, now unmasked, of the other—*Death Eaters, what an odd name for a group*—told her that much. *He fell into bad company and couldn't find his way back out, and he's been sliding downhill ever since.*

The pattern was heartbreakingly familiar to anyone who had ever worked with the children the modern world called "underprivileged". Too many of them could only see what Annette had been able to look beyond, that gray little job and that gray little flat, and out of quiet desperation went searching for their answers in places polite people didn't talk about.

I suppose even having magic doesn't change human nature.

But that same human nature might save her now. Her instinctive reaction was coming clearer by the second.

I recognized how he was behaving the moment he walked in the room. He hates everything around him and everything he is, but he's been like this so long he can't imagine his life any other way.

Maybe I can imagine it for him.

Her colleagues had sometimes accused her of being unrealistic, too much of a dreamer. They'd pointed out again and again that the problem would always be bigger than she was. No matter how hard she worked, she simply couldn't help every child.

Evanie smiled, blotted a last tear from her cheek, and whispered to the empty air the answer she had always given her naysayers.

"Maybe not . . . but I can help this one."

Opening her eyes and sliding off the bed, she went to investigate the washroom. It proved just as small and grimy as she had feared, but she'd never yet been harmed by dirt, and Peter's semi-coherent chatter in the few moments they'd spent together had given her an idea. After splashing some water on her face and drying it with her sleeve, she went to one knee and put on the gentle smile she used with the youngest children.

"Is there a house-elf around, please?" she said quietly.

Standing at the attic window of number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Alice Longbottom looked out over the rooftops of London and considered insanity. It was a subject with which she had some familiarity.

But this pain comes from within, not from without. I can't escape it by hiding inside my mind. It will only come with me.

So instead of going mad, she was going to go sane. It wouldn't be a pretty kind of sanity, nor would it necessarily be pleasant, but it would do something about the shrieking, howling demon within her soul, and that was all that mattered to her.

My husband is dead. Calmly, rationally, sanely she absorbed that fact, relived the moment of its happening, watched him fall and saw the glee on the face of his murderer. The person who killed him deserves to be punished. I could kill her—if and when we meet again, it is likely to be on a battlefield, and no one would blame me for striking first—but that hardly seems fair. A life for a life is just, yes, but her death will not bring back my husband or my son's father. That pain, we will have to suffer for the rest of our lives.

By the logic of her new brand of sanity, therefore, Alice reasoned, her husband's killer should suffer for the rest of *her* life. And ideally . . .

Ideally, she should have what she wants most for a little while. She should think it will last. She should revel in it, gloat over it, exalt in the glory of it. And then, I will take it all away from her, and leave her dazed and bleeding in the ruins of her dreams.

That, as I see it, is justice for what she has done today.

A smile spread over Alice's lips. It was not a pleasant expression.

How convenient that I was already planning to help do most of that.

Something strange was happening to Percy Weasley. He wasn't sure what it was, which in itself was very odd. Usually his emotions knew their place, staying in line behind his logical thought processes.

But I don't usually witness the premeditated murder of the witch I was planning to marry and an innocent child she was trying to save.

The tears were gone, though he knew they'd be back at some point. In their place was a tightness in his chest, a muted buzzing in his ears, a tense readiness through all his muscles. He found himself hoping one of the Death Eaters came in and tried something. He would show them what it meant to kidnap a Weasley!

"All right?" Grace asked him, and he jumped, whipping around to face her. "No, clearly you're not. What's wrong?"

"I . . . I don't know." Percy ran his hands across his face, trying to trace the troublesome feelings to their source. "I'm so . . . so . . . *angry* ." The word came to him in a rush. "I'm *angry* . And I don't get angry. Ever."

"You haven't before," Grace corrected gently. "Now you are. So what are you going to do with that anger?" She moved close enough to bring her face into full focus, the clear hazel eyes behind her glasses steady and sure. "You can't just wall it in, or it will poison you, but if you learn how to use it and not let it use you, it can be one of the strongest forces for good in the world."

"I don't understand."

Grace laid her hand over his. "Let me teach you, then. It takes time, and we may not have much of that, but you can learn at least the beginnings tonight . . ."

Draco sat in his usual place for serious thinking, the top of the near middle hoop on the Hogwarts Den's Quidditch pitch. Harry would be asleep for another hour or two thanks to his lupus potion,

and Hermione was in the library making sure of a few points about the Trace on underage magic he'd asked her to check.

Specifically, is it only wanded spells that set it off, or does it catch any type of magic?

He had a feeling the question would become more than academic within the next few days.

Harry can't stay here. It's a prison to him now, after those months with Umbridge, more than a day or two and he'll be climbing the walls. But he can't leave without Voldemort being able to get at his mind, and apart from what that'll do to him—as if that weren't enough—he knows a lot about the Order's plans and personnel. We all do, but Harry's the only one with a direct link to the other side. And now with Moony hurt, that link is open and operational.

So we have to find some other place where Voldemort can't invade Harry's mind, and it has to be a place where Harry can stay for a few weeks, until Moony gets well. Assuming he does—no, I'm not going to play that game, the Healers say he will so he will. It's temporary, it's just temporary.

..

Which is going to be the only thing that reconciles Harry to the one place I can think of that fits the criteria.

Well, not quite the only thing. He indulged in a brief, smug grin. One furry little compensation, at your service. But still, it's going to be interesting getting him to agree to this. I'd like to think he'll be sensible after that little scene in the tower, and who knows? He might be. But I'm not about to assume. Let's see now, best way to get Harry to do anything is . . .

Oh, that's right. Try and convince him to do the opposite. Times like this I see why he and Ron are friends.

A brief wave of cool rippled through Draco's pendants as the latter name crossed his mind, and he groaned aloud. "Ron, whatever you're doing," he said between his teeth, "don't."

But he knew it was already far too late for that.

"Cold?" Crystal asked as Ron climbed into the back seat of the Ford Anglia.

Ron shook his head. "Just something I'm wearing," he said, digging his pendants out from their usual place against his skin and dropping them between his T-shirt and his robes. It wasn't a perfect solution, but it would stop the metal from chilling him to the point where he was noticeably shivering. Ginny, beside him, had already done the same, and was now double-checking the pockets of her robes, which she had filled with spare potion cartridges, including one or two brews even the general run of the DA hadn't been given.

Including the one I'm planning on using once we get where we're going.

The pendants cooled again, to the point where Ron could feel them through the T-shirt, and he hissed under his breath. *Look, you're not going to change my mind*, he thought in their general direction. *I know perfectly well I could die doing this, and I'm going to do it anyway, so you may as well stop distracting me. If Ginny or George or Crystal are about to die and I can stop it, let me know. Otherwise, leave me alone.*

The chain went absolutely icy for an instant, then returned to the usual temperature of body-heated metal. Ron rolled his eyes and was about to will the pendants back against his skin, but Ginny elbowed him first. “We’ll need directions once we’re loaded,” she murmured, nodding towards George, who was busily stuffing crates into the car’s boot. “You might as well start it now.”

“Right.” Ron hooked the pendants out and held them up in front of his eyes. *Percy*, he willed once again, concentrating this time on one of the tiny, gleaming red gems. *Show me where he is. Lead me to him. And if you can get us there before the Death Eaters kill him, I'd really appreciate that.*

He could have sworn he heard a reluctant snort of laughter in his mind before the gem flashed with its own internal light.

Danger sat by Remus’ bedside, her hand curled around his. His mind flickered dimly at the edge of her awareness, a bonfire miles away on a foggy night.

And it's about to get farther away than that.

“I love you,” she whispered, bending to kiss his cheek. “I’m sorry for this, but you’d never forgive either of us if Sirius or Letha die and I could have saved them. You know I’ll come home to you, no matter what. Just . . .” She swallowed hard. “You’d better not die while I’m away. You hear me, Remus John Lupin? You are not allowed to die!”

It may be absurd, but it does make me feel better. And for a job like this, that counts for something.

“All right,” she said aloud, tightening her grip on Remus’ hand. “I’m ready.”

The words, as she had expected, were waiting for her, queued up at the back of her mind. “I, Gertrude Granger-Lupin, hereby place my bond with Remus Lupin in temporary abeyance, allowing us freedom of movement as we would have it if we were not so bonded. This state of affairs will last until we next touch skin to skin, and I do understand that its price is a full day taken from the time we may usually spend apart and accept this price freely and willingly. So I speak, so I intend . . .” She paused to swallow again. “And so let it be done.”

So it is done, Alex’s voice responded, formal as he always was in his official persona. **Go in peace, and seek your friends**. His voice lightened to its more casual tone, and Danger got the distinct impression of a wink. **I’ll give you a hand if you like**.

“If you start clapping, I’ll—” Danger broke off. The image of a man’s hand had formed inside her mind, the index finger extended, pointing over her left shoulder. “Wait. Is that—is that the way I

should go? Is that where they are?”

Isn't she a clever widdle Danger, Alex crooned. Isn't she just the smartest widdle fing!

“Isn't somebody going to get himself thrown in the lake the next time I see him.”

I can always take it away if it bothers you . . .

“No, no, that's fine.” Danger quenched her indignation by reminding herself of what and who she was going out to find. “Thank you. This will help me a lot.”

You're welcome. Just a warning, it only works in straight lines, so you may have to go around a few things. Mountains and rivers and such.

Danger blew a kiss to the ceiling. “I'll manage. Thanks again.”

Percy thought he was getting rather good at anger, if he did say so himself.

According to Grace, the first step was to stay in control of the feelings, and that he'd known how to do since before he'd gone to Hogwarts. The second, more bafflingly, was to give in to those same feelings, but only to the point where they fueled your movement towards a goal you had already chosen. He wasn't quite sure he had that one down yet, but he was having no trouble imagining himself committing various types of mayhem on Death Eaters, which seemed like a good sign.

“What's the third step?” he asked, running a hand restlessly back and forth along the stone wall. “What do you do when you're ready?”

“Wait,” Sue answered before Grace could. “Which is the hardest part, especially for someone your age. You haven't had to wait for much in your life, have you?”

Percy shook his head. “Not for anything important. New robes and such, and . . .” He stopped, a memory washing over him. “How strange. I used to be angry with my parents when we couldn't afford things I wanted, because it showed how poor we were, and I thought people would think less of us for it. What was wrong with me?”

“It's called being young.” Sue chuckled dryly. “It's a fault that corrects itself, if you live long enough. When—” She froze before the second word of her sentence could emerge, her hand going to the butt of her potion piece. “On the wall,” she mouthed, pointing to the stones. “Move back.”

Grace edged away from the outer wall of their prison, drawing her own potion piece and checking it to be sure it was set to the yellow cartridge. Percy, for his part, moved in, nerving himself up for a grab. There didn't seem to be much reason why the Death Eaters would come through the wall instead of the door, but neither had there been any reason he could understand why they had attacked Diagon Alley. Until whatever emerged from the stones proved itself a friend, he was

assuming it was a foe.

One of the stone blocks wobbled, then grated inwards and fell to the floor with a dull thud. It was only as thick as Percy's hand, and its upper surface was still steaming slightly from whatever had been used to dissolve most of it away. "All right in there?" a girl's voice called softly through the hole thus created.

Percy opened his mouth and closed it again. He knew who was speaking, but under the circumstances he couldn't be sure whether her arrival was good or bad.

Friend or foe is one thing. What do I do with a sister?

And how am I going to stop Mother from blaming me for her being here?

Sirius knew, better than he wanted to, how dire his situation and Aletha's really was. He had been on the other end of it, in his apprentice days and his first year qualified, and the percentages of people who had been rescued alive from Death Eaters were low. Alive and sane, even lower. Alive, sane, and with all major body parts intact . . .

Yeah, that's not happening. Not unless we get rescued in the next, say, thirty seconds. Twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven—

The Death Eater gripping his arms shoved him to his knees on a stone floor.

Make that zero.

A spell from behind him untied his hands, a second one vanished his blindfold, and he turned and rose in the same motion in time to steady Aletha as she was shoved into the hall behind him. "I've got you," he told her, pulling off her blindfold before the wand-wielder could do it. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Yet." Aletha got her feet back under her but didn't move away from his grip on her now unbound arms.

"Thank you, Captain Optimist."

A clatter on the floor drew both their attention. Sirius looked and felt his eyebrows defy gravity. "What—"

"It's a trap." Aletha slid her foot away from their two wands, lying temptingly between an uneven pair of floor tiles a few inches away. "It has to be."

"A trap?" repeated a cool voice from the end of the room, and the Death Eaters drew back to expose their Master, his own wand hanging loosely in his grasp. "Do you really think so little of me? Would I be that crude? Go on, pick them up." His wand tip made a little circle in their wands'

direction. “They won’t bite.”

Sirius didn’t move, except to tighten his grip on Aletha. She shifted but made no other comment.

“Pick them up, I said.” Voldemort’s wand rose to cover them. “Or must I use the Imperius for even so simple a task as this?”

Slowly, Sirius knelt, keeping his eyes on Voldemort the whole time, never taking his hand off Aletha. He scooped up the wands with his fingertips, cradled them in his right palm, and rose again, handing Aletha hers by feel and swapping his own into his dominant hand, though he took care not to let it point in any particular direction. “I thought giving prisoners back their weapons was against Dark Lord policy,” he said when he was satisfied with its position.

“Usually it is.” Voldemort began to circle them, his thin white lips curving upwards as Aletha turned, tracking his movements. “But today I want you armed. One of you, in any case, but it will do no harm to let both of you enjoy the possession of your wands. One last time.”

I knew it. We’re going to die. Sirius slid his free hand around Aletha, mildly surprised by how calmly he could come to that conclusion. *Maybe it’s because I know it could be worse. At least this way we’ll go together, and the cubs still have Moony and Danger to take care of them. It’ll tear them up, but all the better to blast Death Eaters with. And we get a front-row seat to the rest of the war, with Prongs and Tiger Lily. Yeah, it could be a lot worse.*

“One last time.” Voldemort lingered over the words as though he enjoyed their taste. “After tonight, you see, one of you will no longer have the capacity to use a wand. And one of you will have the capacity, but will not know about it.”

Aletha stiffened against Sirius’ arm. Sirius growled under his breath.

This is one of those days when I didn’t want to be right.

It just got worse.

“Ginny?” Percy sounded as though the stone she’d pushed into the room had hit him on the foot, Ginny thought. “What are you *doing* here?”

“Rescuing you, of course.” Ginny started to outline a large square on the stone wall with her potion piece, set to a red cartridge. “Who’s there with you? Mr. Padfoot and Mrs. Letha, have you seen them, are they all right?”

“No, the Death Eaters took them away, and Miss Meade as well. Sue and Grace—Mrs. Robertson and Mrs. Smythe—they’re here, we’re none of us hurt—” Percy squinted out the tiny hole at her. “Ginny, how did you get here? Who’s with you?”

“We borrowed Dad’s car, and just George and Crystal at the moment. They’re watching to make

sure we're not seen." Ginny reached into her pocket and pulled out something she was glad she'd thought to bring, if only to copy them for Ron. "Here, you might want these. Yours broke, didn't they?"

"Yes, when I fell." Percy took his spare set of glasses from her hand and slid them on. "Thank you, that's much better. What do you mean, at the moment? Did you lose someone?"

"Not lose, exactly. And you might want to move back, this bit of wall is about to fall over." The Semi-Universal Solvent was doing its job perfectly, eating through stone and mortar indiscriminately. "We dropped Ron off through one of the windows. He's our decoy. A little Aging Potion and a pair of fake glasses, and even Mum would think he's you. For once it's useful that Weasleys all look alike. Heads up!"

The section of stone she had outlined rocked in place for a moment, then fell inwards with an echoing boom. The two women Percy had mentioned appeared first, peering with interest at the hovering car, and George popped open the back door and waved them in beside him. Percy came last, and Ginny frowned as she got a good look at his face. "What is it?"

"You made Ron look like me." Percy's voice matched his expression, filled with a suppressed passion Ginny had never associated with him. "To make them think I'd got out. Ginny, *they don't know who I am*. I'd hurt my face, my glasses were lost, so Grace called me her son to try and keep them from taking me with the Blacks. It worked, obviously, I'm here, but they don't know who I am and if they see Ron looking like me—"

Ginny gasped as her pendants turned to ice.

"You may remember Bartemius Crouch." Voldemort finished a circuit of the room and turned to face them, his robes swirling about his ankles. "Junior, though you knew him as Senior. My spy in your ranks for some time—one of my spies, I should say, I do have others—and the one who brought me the tidbit I will be using tonight." His smile thinned, if the word could be used of a thing which was so very thin to begin with. "Such fine irony, that he gave me the means of your downfall several months before you killed him at that Department of Mysteries debacle, Aletha."

"Get to the point," Aletha snapped.

Voldemort tapped his wand against his fingertips. "If you insist. The point is that Bartemius, in his character as his worthy father, attended your magical marriage, and found the vows you took so very touching that he brought me a copy of them." The wand paused against the ring finger. "Do you realize you made a fundamental error in their writing?"

Sirius called up his memory of that day and the vow he'd helped to write, and swore mentally as he spotted the implication Voldemort was making. *Damn it. Damn it. I'd have seen that right away if it were in a story, why the hell didn't I spot it in real life? We forgot to say—*

"You forgot to say, when you promised that you would not use magic against one another, that the

promise held you only if you used that magic of your own free wills.” Voldemort stroked his wand as though he were caressing an animal’s head. “I think it will be amusing to see what results when one of you uses a full-power Memory Charm on the other.”

Antonin Dolohov took a step back and admired his playground. He would have to leave it behind after tonight, he knew, but part of the fun of his favorite game was designing a new arena in which to play it every time. It gave the process the touch of novelty it needed to keep from getting boring, though personally he doubted he would ever tire of hearing the sounds which formed the game’s inherent music.

The screams. The crying. The begging for mercy, the trying to bargain, the bribe attempts—those are the funniest of all. Why would they think I have a use for their money? Money couldn’t buy me these pleasures.

Besides, by the time I’m done with them, I know all their secrets anyway. Including where they keep all their precious money, and how to get at it. When the Dark Lord finally triumphs, I’ll be able to buy as many Muggles as I like to play with. He sighed. It won’t be as much fun as going out and hunting them down myself, but we can’t have progress without losing a bit of the charm of life.

A commotion in the corridor outside drew his attention. Cursing under his breath at the stupidity of underlings who couldn’t comprehend such simple instructions as “do not disturb me until I call you”—Novir and Pierson were new to the ranks, true enough, but Rowle had been a Death Eater for long enough to understand how the system worked—Dolohov stormed to the door, ready to give them a piece of his mind.

Then he saw what they had found, and the piece he was intending to give them changed.

How did we miss that?

The boy the Muggle woman had claimed as her own was dueling both the stubby, balding Novir and the scruffy, gangling Pierson to a standstill, with what Dolohov would have laid money was Rowle’s wand. But what had him smiling as he slipped his hand into his pocket was the clear identity written in every freckle and red hair of the bespectacled brat before him.

We’ve caught ourselves a Weasley. What odds we can use what we get from him to help plan the Ministry job?

After a little preliminary fun, of course. Finder’s privilege.

An Impediment Jinx froze the boy in the act of throwing a Stunner. Dolohov plucked the wand from his hand, tossed it aside, and levitated him into the room, jerking his head to tell Novir and Pierson to follow.

“What about Rowle?” Novir wanted to know, wiping his perpetually running nose on his sleeve.

“We can’t find him anywhere . . . ”

“He’ll keep.” Dolohov hesitated for a moment between two of his favorite sets of restraints, deciding in the end on the classic dungeon-wall look mounted opposite the room’s one window, with the boy’s arms held over his head. The Impediment Jinx wore off just as the second manacle snapped shut, and Pierson jumped back as the boy lunged at him, snarling. Dolohov chuckled. “Feisty one, aren’t you?” he said, chucking the boy’s chin. “And which blood traitor might you be?”

The boy spat an obscenity at him, the eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses seething with fury. There was no trace of fear in them, as there usually was in eyes whose owners had been brought to this point, and that was irritating, but Dolohov thought he knew how to fix it. This was hardly the first Gryffindor he’d dealt with. Glancing around the room for inspiration, he allowed his mock geniality to drop and showed the boy his true smile.

I am a Death Eater. Initiate of the Dark Lord himself, seeker of pleasures too overwhelming for the common man. You are entirely within my power, and once I begin my work on you, you will beg for death . . .

But the eyes never flickered, never wavered, and Dolohov felt an answering fury rising within him. Who did this insignificant brat think he was, to glare at him, Antonin Dolohov, this way? He needed a lesson, one he would never forget, one that would wipe out the overpowering rage in those blue eyes once and for all—

“Divexare Oculi!”

Red obliterated blue, and the boy screamed, convulsing in his restraints. Dolohov hissed in satisfaction, a rush of pleasure coursing through him. *Not so brave now, are you, little Gryffindor?*

A fraction of a second later, the back wall blew in.

Dolohov was thrown to the ground, rolling over in time to see Novir and Pierson both collapsing in the act of getting up, large areas of their robes inexplicably soaking wet. Whatever the liquid might be, it had obviously come from the purple-and-green car hovering outside the huge hole in the masonry, and he even thought he could see the person who had downed Pierson—a fierce-faced girl with blonde hair, leaning out the driver’s window, gripping a small black object in her hand—

The rear door sprang open, and out shot the mirror image of the boy, face distorted by the same snarl, eyes the same blaze of fury. It was strange, though, Dolohov had time to think before the spell forming at the tip of the boy’s wand blasted past his half-summoned defense and slammed him full in the chest. Those eyes had been blue, and these were brown . . .

At this point, he lost interest in most of the outside world, finding a far more fascinating subject in the way his skin was hardening and growing points, and in his newly awakened desire to swim around a coral reef and eat fish. A few words caught in his ears, and hazily he wondered what they

meant.

“His eyes . . . get him home . . . Dark magic . . .”

And then there was nothing.

She was awakened by a foot in her side. A man with a scarred face and a tangle of white-blond hair stared coldly down at her. “Get up,” he ordered. “You can sleep when your work is done.”

She considered objecting, but the way the man was gripping the small rod of wood in his right hand told her it was a weapon, and work wouldn’t hurt her. She could decide what to do about his assumption of rights over her while she was working. “What work do you want me to do, sir?” she asked, getting to her feet.

A brief smirk passed over the man’s face before his expression of disdain returned. “This kitchen is a pigsty. Scrub it out, then make something for yourself to eat. I should be back by then to show you what will be your usual chores.”

Usual chores. So he expects me to stay here a while. A good thing to know. “Yes, sir.” Eyes on the floor, she listened to him start to leave, then stop. “Was there something else, sir?”

“Yes.” His voice had a curious mixture of tones in it, elation, disgust, and something akin to worry. “Your name is Mare. Remember it.”

“Yes, sir.” Mare waited until she heard the door close, then had herself a good long look around. Pigsty was a bit too strong—the kitchen looked as though it had had its last cleaning sometime within the past year, but most of the problem was accumulated dust rather than the grime of use. It wouldn’t take long to make it sparkle again.

And it’s not as if I have anywhere else to go.

Rolling up her sleeves, she started for the sink.

The door banged open behind her. “I almost forgot,” the man announced. “When you make yourself that food, make something suitable for a dog as well. A large one. You’ll be feeding and cleaning up after him daily from now on.”

“Yes, sir.” Mare waited once again until the door closed, her lower lip caught between her teeth.

His face is familiar. It looks too old, though, and it shouldn’t have all those scars. And there’s something about a dog, something important . . . something I ought to remember . . .

There were a great many things she was sure she ought to remember. Doubtless they would come back to her when she was ready. In the meantime, there was work to be done.

Elsewhere in the sprawling manor house, in an alcove hastily fitted with bars, a black dog lay with his head between his paws, two trickles of water running away from his snout across the stone floor.

The broken vow had shown him this one mercy. It had left him magical enough to weep.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 47: Fears and Desires (Year 6)

Harry lay quietly in the red bedroom, his eyes closed, his glasses on the bedside table. He had awakened several minutes before, and the grogginess and odd taste in his mouth that always resulted from one of his potion-induced naps had passed off, but he was still trying to come to terms with a new and strangely disquieting development.

He wasn't afraid.

But no, that's not exactly true. I'm still afraid for Padfoot and Letha, and for Moony, and even Danger, all for their different reasons. I'm just not afraid for me anymore.

He thought it might be because the thing he had been dreading most since he was ten had finally happened. Three of the Pack-parents were gone, and he suspected the fourth one would be leaving soon as well. By right of seniority, that would put him in charge. The burden of final decision for the Pack, whatever that decision might happen to be, would rest squarely on his shoulders.

And that isn't as impossible to handle as I used to think it was.

Or maybe I've grown into it, what with leading the Pride and the DA, and just plain growing up. There's a long, long way between half-past-ten and almost-sixteen.

Whatever the reason, he couldn't help but be grateful. Keeping his siblings out of despondency and away from each other's throats until things improved promised to be a full-time job. Doing so while seriously doubting himself would have been twice as hard.

And what about doing it while keeping Voldemort out of here, hmm? gibed a little voice at the back of his mind. How're you going to manage that one, bright boy? Especially now that he's got two great big buttons he can push whenever he wants to see you react, one labeled "Padfoot" and the other one "Letha"...

Rather than try to argue with himself, Harry opened his eyes and reached for his glasses. "I can always stay here," he said under his breath, testing the idea against his current mental state. "I know he can't reach me in here."

But I also know I don't want to be stuck in here for days and weeks and months again. More importantly, we can't be sure how strong the wards are that keep him out of here. The longer I stay out of his sight, the more likely it is that he'll focus his attention on finding a flaw and breaking through.

So I need another place. Somewhere my mind is protected, but Voldemort can see me and thinks he has me safely stashed until he cares to come pick me up...

The obvious answer came to him, and he groaned and flopped back against the pillows. "No. Not

again. Not another summer with *them* . Please.”

It makes as much sense now as it did last year, pointed out the same little voice, now using a tone of sweet reason. More, really. Last year you didn't know how you were going to keep Voldemort out of your head at all. This year it's just a case of waiting for Moony to recover.

“I'd be abandoning everyone else. Neenie and Fox, Pearl, they need me. Ginny and Ron too, even Luna, and Neville more than anyone. We have to stick together.”

Can you stick together from here? Because that's all the further you're going unless your Occlumency suddenly and miraculously blossoms. And that would be a miracle, considering how much you practice it.

Harry rolled over and stuck his head under the pillow, but the voice wasn't having any. *There's not much difference between being here and being there, except that here you might see the rest of the Pride a few times a week. Until it gets too dangerous to use the Floo Network, which could be any day now.*

“All right,” Harry mumbled. “All right...”

The voice continued, its energy unabated. *You can at least go outside there, and have things to do and people to avoid. It'll keep you from going mad with boredom. Which, let's face it, is something you need to be thinking about—having long conversations with yourself is seldom a good sign...*

“All *right!*” Harry sat up, flinging the pillow across the room at the door.

Which obligingly opened.

Draco caught the pillow an inch shy of his face and raised an eyebrow at Harry.

“Not you,” Harry said shortly. “Thinking.”

“Come up with anything?”

“Maybe. Why, did you?”

“You won't like it.”

“I don't like mine either. Let's have it.”

“If you insist.” Draco came into the room, shut the door, and sat down on the bottom of the bed, tossing the pillow to Harry. “You're probably going to have to go back to—”

“The Dursleys' ,” Harry finished. “I got that far myself. You have anything to add?”

Draco shrugged. “Me.”

“You?”

“I want to come along. Well, ‘want to’ is a bit strong, but as long as you don’t flat out tell me no, I’m going to come along. I’m sure Neenie and I can fake something up to make me look like a cat when we first get there, and after that I’ll just stay out of sight.” Draco scowled momentarily. “I wish we’d finished the year already. The Trace means I can’t transform and neither can you, not without tipping the Ministry off we’re illegal underage Animagi, and we don’t need that kind of trouble on top of everything else...” He trailed off, noticing the way Harry was looking at him. “What?”

You just volunteered to spend an unknown amount of time stuck in a stuffy little room, in a body that isn’t yours, with only one person around who knows what you are, never mind who. That’s what. But I can’t say that, so let me try this.

“Thank you.” Harry swiped two fingers across his cheek and touched them to the back of Draco’s wrist, the part most conveniently within reach. “I’d say you don’t have to, but you know that already, and I’m sure I can’t talk you out of it so I won’t bother trying.”

“Damn right you’re not.” Draco preened briefly, then sobered. “I remember being away from the Pack, that summer I was stuck at the Notts’ for a while. The thing that helped the most, more than the letters or even the dream nights, was having Neenie there with me. And she’d volunteer to go with you in a heartbeat too, but Dursley’s not so thick he won’t spot her for the cat Ron’s been toting around the past two terms. I’d rather he not get any bright ideas about how to get in good with the Dark Snarkers.”

“He has enough of them on his own.” Harry plumped the pillow and set it back in its place. “It’s ‘the Dark Lord’ for him, just like it is all the other Slytherins.”

“Not all,” Draco objected. “There’s Blaise and his crowd, and Selena and hers. Most of them, I’ll grant you, but not all.”

“You know that’s what I meant,” Harry began, but cut off at the warming of his pendants. “Who’s —” He hooked them out with a finger and stared at the glowing carving. “Hermione?”

“Hermione,” Draco confirmed, looking up from his own pendants. “But she’s *here*. What could be so wrong—”

The brothers locked eyes for one second, then scrambled for the door.

Hermione sat cross-legged in the middle of the main room floor, her eyes closed, her Zippophone open in her hand. “Yes, I’ll come as soon as I can,” she was saying as Draco yanked the door open, Harry on his heels. “Thank you for telling me. Goodbye now.” She flipped the Zippo’s lid shut.

“Who was that?” Draco demanded, on top of Harry’s “What’s wrong?”

“It was George.” Hermione’s voice was still outwardly as calm as ever, but Harry could hear the

cracks beginning in the underlayers. “He and Crystal and Ginny and Ron decided to see if they could follow the pendants to find Percy, and maybe the other prisoners the Death Eaters took. They borrowed their dad’s car and went, just went, without telling anyone.” She drew a long, ragged breath, and Draco knelt beside her and slid his arms lightly around her. “Ron Aged himself to look like Percy. To make the Death Eaters think Percy had escaped and chase him. Well, they chased him all right.” Her laugh sounded like shattering glass. “They caught him. They used Dark magic on him. On his eyes. Oh, Harry, he’s *blind!* ”

Harry shut his own eyes and leaned his head against the doorframe. The voice at the back of his head was mercifully silent.

Ginny was trying to keep busy. Keeping busy meant she didn’t have to think, didn’t have to remember, didn’t have to go on seeing it all over again.

He just hung there, limp like he was dead, blood all down his face and soaking into his robes, and his eyes, oh Merlin’s wand, his eyes—

She slapped herself on the back of the hand, breaking out of the memory, and returned to her mental checklist. *Corona volunteered to take Mrs. Robertson home, and Maya should be back any minute from the Smythes’. Percy’s up in the third-floor bathroom, I made sure Dobby got him fresh robes and took away the ones that were stained, and Winky’s gone home to clean up the car...*

A scream like she hadn’t known any boy could produce, least of all her tough and masculine Quidditch-Keeper brother, and George’s snarled command to the crate of fireworks in the boot, reducing the wall around the window to rubble and dust so that they could all see what he had seen —

Enough! Another slap on the hand, this one harder. *Ron knew what he could be letting himself in for, we all did, and going over it won’t change what happened, but it very well could drive you mad! Now stop it right this instant, or I’ll—*

“Yelling at yourself?”

Ginny spun around, her wand in her hand and pointed at the speaker before she recognized Crystal. “Sorry,” she said with a grimace, sliding the wand away again. “But yes. How did you know?”

“Experience.” Crystal pointed towards Ginny’s wand pocket. “Don’t apologize for that, by the way. It’s reflexes like that will keep you alive. In any case, I’ve done my share of shouting inside my own head. Are you to the stage yet where you’re trying to make it out as all your own fault?”

“No, but it probably won’t be long.” Ginny leaned against the wall, her knees beginning to quiver as the successive shocks of the day caught up with her. “If I don’t fall over first.”

“That might not be a bad idea, as long as you do it on a bed or something else suitable for the

purpose. When you do get to the blaming-yourself stage, try and remember that no one made Ron go on this little trip, especially not you.” Crystal came up beside Ginny and slid an arm around her shoulders, giving her a tight, older-sisterly hug. “And we saved three lives by going out there today. That has to count for something. Now I’m off upstairs to tell your big brother—your *other* big brother, the one I didn’t get yet—exactly the same thing. If you see Winky, would you ask if she’ll come up and do me a favor?”

Ginny nodded, and watched with some envy as Crystal mounted the stairs two at a time. *The way I feel right now, I’d be lucky to manage one...*

A soft thump sounded behind her. Ginny whirled once more, only to find herself confronting Luna over a cloth-lined wicker laundry basket. “What’s that for?”

“Lynx delivering.” Luna drew her wand. “Maybe to the Hogwarts Den later, if your mum says you may, but for right now down to the den room so you can rest.”

“I’m your alpha. You can’t boss me around.”

Luna’s tiny smile said *Want to bet?* as clearly as words could have done. Ginny sighed, and a few moments later Lynx was allowing herself to be levitated down the corridor toward the stairs.

I’ll remind her how the Pride hierarchy works some other time.

Not that she’s ever actually cared.

Downstairs, the door from the kitchen creaked, and two pairs of feline feet pattered against the steps leading to the first floor.

Hermione skidded to a halt outside the door of the guest room where her nose told her Ron was. An argument was going on inside.

“—very good idea under normal circumstances, but I can’t condone it today.” The voice, male, slightly pompous, cracking somewhat with age, belonged to Letha’s friend Healer Albertus Young, an expert on curses and the damage they could do. “Dark magic can injure even Healers who attempt to counter it in the usual manner. Your special power is much more intimately tied to your magic as a whole, and to your life. If you meddle with this, you could destroy your Healing abilities, perhaps even kill yourself.”

“But I’ve done curses before!” The half-wail was Meghan, and Meghan well on her way to a full-blown case of precocious-thirteen-year-old-Healer pique. “I know how to talk to them, they’ve never hurt me, just tired me out like Healing always does!”

“That’s just the trouble.” Healer Young sounded tired to Hermione’s human ears as she regained them, tired and old and unhappy with the things he had to say but determined to do his duty. “You have dealt with curses, but this is not a curse. It is a Dark spell. It has no quasi-consciousness that

you can negotiate with, and no price that can be paid. It is simply a shattered maze of mirrors. If you try to fight it, it will suck your magic into itself and reflect it back on you unpredictably. You will do no good, and you may do harm, to both this young man and yourself.”

“You’ve been wrong before,” Meghan spat. “And you’re not the boss of me.”

That sounds like my cue. Hermione pushed the door open and stepped into the room. “Maybe not,” she said, drawing Mrs. Weasley’s eyes away from Ron, who lay motionless on the twin bed, and Healer Young’s and Meghan’s eyes away from each other. “But I am.”

Meghan drew breath for a defiant growl. Hermione favored her little sister with what she hoped was a reasonable facsimile of Letha’s trouble-stopping *look*. Meghan wilted, hiccupped once, and bolted across the room into Hermione’s arms.

What do you know. It worked.

Though Healer Young was too well-trained to do anything so obvious as sag in relief or wipe his brow, Hermione caught the thankful glance he gave her before returning to Ron’s bedside. She would have liked to be there as well, but a wide-awake and crying little sister trumped an unconscious boyfriend. Ron would have to wait.

“Everybody’s leaving me,” Meghan sobbed into Hermione’s robes. “Dadfoot and Mama Letha are gone, Moony’s hurt, Neville’s with his mum and won’t come out, even Danger’s going away now...she has to find them and save them from the Death Eaters, Alex said she was the only one who’d have a chance...and Harry can’t come home until Moony wakes up, and you and Draco have to stay with him...”

“No, we don’t,” Hermione said, making up her mind on the spot. “Harry shouldn’t be alone, but he doesn’t need both of us. I’m not going anywhere.”

Meghan squeaked and hugged Hermione tighter than ever. “Neenie, oh, Neenie, thank you!”

“No crushing ribs, please,” Hermione wheezed, peeling Meghan’s arms loose.

The little giggle that escaped Meghan contrasted oddly with Ron’s quiet groan. Mrs. Weasley gasped and was about to snatch at her son’s hand, but Healer Young touched her shoulder. “Maybe let her handle it,” he suggested, nodding towards Hermione.

Me? But...

Hermione sat on that thought before it could go any farther. Letha had often mentioned that trained and experienced Healers developed a sense for the best ways to speak to their patients, to be sure that their instructions would be heard and followed. Healer Young had been following his profession for more than twice as long as she’d been alive. If he thought she was the right person to talk to Ron, she was willing to give it a try.

But he’s not going to be happy about this, no matter who tells him.

She crossed the room with Meghan clinging to her hand and went to her knees beside Ron's bed. "I'm right here, Ron," she said, sliding her free hand into his. "You're going to be all right."

"Neenie?" Ron turned his head towards her, the white bandage bound lightly over his eyes showing a few spots of blood. "Neenie, no, it's too dangerous...you shouldn't be here..."

"You're back at Headquarters," Hermione interrupted. "Percy made sure you got safely home."

"Percy." Ron's shoulders relaxed. "We found him?"

"Yes, you found him, and two of the Muggle women with him. They're all safe now, and so are you."

"Good." Ron produced a weak parody of his usual rich chuckle. "Would help if someone turned on the lights..."

Hermione swallowed against her protest that surely, surely she was the wrong person to say these words, there had to be somebody else. "No," she said. "It wouldn't."

"Can't tell where I am in the dark, can I?"

You'll have to. From now on, you'll have to. "Ron, I'm sorry. I don't know how to tell you this. The lights are on. They just won't do you any good. Not anymore."

"Not..." Ron stopped and drew his hand out of hers, reaching up to his face. Hermione focused on keeping her breaths slow and even, hiding the painful tightness in her chest. Ron hated crying at any time, and would never forgive her for shedding tears over him.

Fingers found the bandage, ran along its length, formed into a fist, then dropped limply to the pillow beside Ron's head. "Go away," he said, rolling onto his side so that he faced away from Hermione and pulling the sheet over his head.

"Go away?" Mrs. Weasley echoed, reaching for him. "Ron, really—"

Please go away, then! All of you, however many there are! The words had the savage force of an Unforgivable Curse, but Hermione heard what was under them, and that hidden sound had her beckoning urgently to Mrs. Weasley.

"He's going to cry," she mouthed, careful to make no sound, and Mrs. Weasley rose immediately, hand over her own mouth though her eyes were spilling over.

Then again, she only has five other sons. No chance she'd know how boys feel about crying in public, is there?

Healer Young was already at the door. Mrs. Weasley followed him out into the corridor. Meghan was next, pausing as though she wanted to say something, but Hermione's look sent her on her way without a word.

Which is unusual for Pearl at any time. Right now, it's on the order of a miracle.

“I won't be far, Ron,” she said into the silence. “Call if you want me.”

“The only thing I want you to do is *leave me alone* .”

Hermione stepped deliberately past the threshold, shut the door with a thump, and laid a careful charm around it to keep noise from escaping. That done, she laid her forehead against it. When her legs started to shake, she went to one knee, pillowing her head in her arms.

“No, you don't,” she whispered into her right sleeve, the tears getting away from her at last. “But your stupid male pride won't let you say that, will it?”

He had never wanted her so much.

Her soft hand, her quiet voice, were the reassurance he'd been desperate for, that he hadn't been left behind. His brother's frantic hands and furious, frightened voice had been real, not a hallucination brought on by pain and terror. He, the supposed rescuer, had in his turn been rescued.

Five seconds too late. Some timing there.

He knew in a back corner of his mind that his family had come the instant they knew he was in peril, that only bad luck and his own foolhardiness were to blame for this, but the knowledge brought him no comfort. Nothing would ever bring him comfort again. He was useless, worthless, a burden on his family and his Pride, and the war and the world would go on without him.

Harry'll get a new best friend. Someone who can hold his end up in a fight, who knows when to run for it and remembers to look behind him. Hermione'll move on, find somebody else, somebody who's good enough for her this time...

The edges of the red spots on the bandage began to soften and run together.

Why couldn't I just have died?

Why couldn't it have been me?

Percy paced up and down the length of the third-floor hallway, unable to stay still for more than a few seconds. He'd taken a long, hot shower, had changed every piece of clothing he'd been wearing, and still he was sure he could smell the copper-iron tang of blood.

Ron's blood. For one nightmare instant, he was there again, snapping the chains off short with his wand and catching Ron in his arms, cradling him close and running for the car, unable to see more than a few feet around the tears of pure rage in his eyes. *My brother—my little brother—I'm*

supposed to protect him, not the other way around. And it was me they thought they had. Me they thought they were torturing, they were blinding.

I wish it had been.

Two brisk raps from behind him made him jump and turn. Crystal Huley stood on the stairs, regarding him closely, a book in one hand. “All right?” she asked.

“Not really.” Percy returned the regard. He had met Crystal only in passing until today, when Penny had pointed out to him that George’s introduction of his Muggle girlfriend into the magical world had definite implications about the seriousness of the relationship. As a result, he and Penny had dropped by the twins’ shop with the intent of getting to know Crystal better.

And if we hadn’t... no. I refuse to play that game. If we blame one another for what the Death Eaters do, they win, and I will not allow that.

“I didn’t think you would be.” Crystal mounted the last few steps and nodded towards one of the doors. “George says we can use his room. Come talk with me?”

About to refuse, Percy paused. Something about the way Crystal had planted her feet, the set of her shoulders and the direct look in her blue-gray eyes, hinted that she wasn’t prepared to take no for an answer. For his part, he wasn’t in the mood to argue, and what harm could talking do?

Whatever it is she wants, I can always say no.

“If you like,” he said.

“I do like, and thank you.” Crystal pulled open the door she had indicated. Percy followed her into the small, neat bedroom with its stacks of WWW boxes everywhere. She pulled out the desk chair for herself, and he sat on one of the beds. “So. Hell of a day, wasn’t it?”

That... is putting it mildly. “You could say that.”

“I did say that. Thank you for noticing.” Crystal ran her finger along the spine of her book. “I was talking with Mrs. Robertson and Mrs. Smythe, Sue and Grace, on the drive back. They told me a few of the things you discussed while you were together. Nothing personal, but it got me thinking.” Again her eyes swept him head to foot, and seemed not dissatisfied with what they found. “If you’re as angry with the Death Eaters as you seem to be, and—excuse the phrasing, but it’s just what I see—as clueless about what to do with that anger... well, I might have an idea for you. That’s all.”

Percy surprised himself considerably by laughing. It was dry as dust and bore more resemblance to a snort, but it was a genuine, unpremeditated laugh. “Clueless is a good word for it. Any and all suggestions are welcome at this point.”

“Oh, good,” Crystal murmured, smiling sweetly. “I did hope you’d say that.” Standing up, she extended the book to him. “When George told me what his next-older brother was named, this was

the first thing I thought of. I remember reading it when I was ten and being fascinated by it. The idea that someone could hide so much under a mask, could be so different from the person everyone thought he was... I think you'll like it. And I think it might give you the same idea I had. If not, come talk to me again. We can work it out."

Percy accepted the book, nodded in thanks, and watched Crystal out the door, then turned his attention to the little volume in his hand. It was a slender paperback, its edges stained from handling and both covers battered from long use. The cover showed a picture of a small red flower with five petals, and the title, he recalled after a few moments ransacking his memories of first-year Herbology, was that flower's name.

What does a book about plants have to do with Death Eaters?

There was only one way to find out. Transferring himself to the desk chair Crystal had left pulled out and flicking on the room's lights with his wand, Percy settled in and began to read *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

Wormtail unlocked his door, checking behind himself to make sure no one was watching. He'd got sloppy about that the past few months, with the other Death Eaters making it clear that harassing a little vermin like him was beneath them unless they were bored clean out of their skulls. Now that he had something worth taking, he was going to have to become more vigilant.

Though there's a new first stop for any of them who want someone to kick around. It isn't automatically me anymore.

He was glad enough of that fact, but he wasn't certain how he felt about the people whose post that had now become.

All of a sudden I'm not certain of a lot of things. And most of them aren't things it's wise to not be certain about.

I'd better get certain, and fast.

He stepped into his room, shut the door behind himself, and turned around.

His certainty level went into free fall.

Did I unlock the wrong door?

He had left a small, drafty, stone-walled and -floored bed-sitter, furnished only by an iron bedstead and a rickety wooden table and chair, with a pile of dirty clothes in one corner, a stack of dirty dishes in another, and a heap of books and papers in a third. This room was neat and cozy, insulated by draperies in soft shades of red and yellow and a light brown carpet. The bed seemed to have been stretched, nearly doubling its width, and it was covered with a brightly-patterned quilt. Two overstuffed armchairs, upholstered to match the drapes, sat in front of the fireplace

with its cheerful blaze, and the table had sprouted not only a second chair but a tablecloth and a pair of place settings. An armoire stood where the clothes had been, and a business-like desk with a well-loaded bookshelf beside it filled the opposite corner.

Kneeling in front of the fireplace, a teapot on the floor in front of her and a kettle in her towel-swathed hand, was Evanie.

She looked up, saw him, and smiled. “You look tired, Peter,” she said, hanging the kettle back on the hob and swinging it away from the flames. “Come sit by the fire.”

The invitation scrambled what few brain cells Wormtail had working. While he was still trying to decide if there were a hidden meaning in it, his feet began moving forward, and he came back to full awareness as he took a seat in the red armchair. He opened his mouth to ask where all this had come from, how she had obtained it without magic, *why* she had done this—

“Do you take your tea weak or strong?” she said before he could speak.

“Er.” It required thought. No one had asked him that question in a longer time than he cared to remember. “Weak, thank you.”

She poured him out a cup, then one for herself. “Milk, sugar?”

“Yes, please, both. Two lumps.” The ritual of question and answer was returning to him now, giving him a paradoxical sense of understanding what was going on at the same moment it undercut all his sureties. A kidnapped Muggle in the presence of a wizard was supposed to be awed, frightened, perhaps even a little worshipful. There was no place for kind, matter-of-fact competency.

In theory, that is. In practice, I think I like it better this way.

Wormtail hastily took a sip of the tea she handed to him, hoping to drown that particular thought. It was blasphemy, it was heresy, it was against all the principles his life was bound to adhere to.

But, his mind whispered in the barest of tones, it was also true.

“Thank you for telling me about the house-elves.” Evanie set the teapot on the table, then returned with her cup to the yellow chair across from Wormtail’s own. “They are very helpful if you ask them politely. I hardly had to do any of the cleaning myself, and when I asked if there was any furniture around that no one was using, they found all of this for me. They even put the drapes up, and levitated the furniture—and me—while they laid the rug down.” She laughed. “I’ve always dreamed about flying, but I didn’t think it would be on a carpet!” Her face turned inquisitive. “Are there really such things? Flying carpets?”

“Oh yes.” Peter set his cup down in the saucer, to have both his hands free to gesture. “They’re banned in Britain, because they’re Muggle-made and under a major enchantment, but they are real. When we fly, we use broomsticks. I haven’t got one just now, but I can get one to show you,

and maybe we can go out on it sometime so you can see what it's like. I'm not the best flyer in the world, but I promise not to drop you."

Evanie's eyes sparkled. "Thank you for that."

A loud crack signaled the arrival of a house-elf with a basket, its contents mostly covered by a tea towel but delicious-smelling steam escaping through one crack. "Here you be's, miss!" the elf chirped, handing the basket to Evanie. "Be's having nice nights now!"

"Thank you, and you do the same." Evanie folded back the towel as the house-elf vanished again. "How nice, they've sent us up a selection. Cinnamon, blueberry, and plain. What would you like?"

"Blueberry, please." Peter held out his right hand, and Evanie deposited a blueberry scone in his silver palm.

What he had hitherto considered the prudent, sensible portion of his brain went into screaming overload at the sight. *Don't you see what she's doing? She's corrupting you, leading you astray, eroding your faithfulness to the Dark Lord! He can see into your mind, he can watch you anywhere he wants to, he'll find out about this and—*

And what? asked another voice, quiet but nonetheless insistent. *He'll find out that the woman he gave me for my reward is obedient, pliable, and devoted to me. That she makes my life comfortable without even needing to be prompted. She isn't trying to change my loyalties or stop me from following my Master's commands. She's simply doing what she was brought here for. That hardly makes her a threat.*

The flashing thoughts took only a fraction of a second. He was able to set the scone down on his saucer and say his "Thank you" before Evanie had noticed any hesitation on his part.

I have nothing to fear from her. He watched as she chose a cinnamon scone for herself. *And neither of us has anything to fear from the truth.*

She covered the scones with the towel again, set the basket aside, and looked up at him. "What happened while you were gone?" she asked quietly.

His stomach clenched. *I always did have a genius for being wrong. How am I supposed to tell her what I saw today without—*

"I'll be more upset by trying to imagine it than by knowing the truth, whatever it is," her voice broke into his thoughts. "And you look like you need to tell someone about it. Please, Peter?"

Damn it. Damn her. How can she know me this well already? "It isn't pretty," he began haltingly. "Not fit for—"

"For me to hear?" Evanie shook her head with a smile. "There isn't much I haven't heard at one point or another. I promise I won't faint or scream, if that's what you're worried about."

What I'm worried about? What I'm worried about is that this will end. That you'll wake up from this dream you've somehow fallen into, and see the real me and how much less than all of this I'm worth, and everything will go back to the way it was. That's what I'm worried about.

“I can't promise not to be angry about what I hear,” Evanie added. “But I can promise to hear you out, and to try to be fair about it. Will you give me a chance?”

A chance. Peter nodded slowly. *I can do that.*

I hope.

“I saw you with Sirius,” he said aloud. “How well do you know him?”

“Hardly at all. He was kind enough to open the entrance to Diagon Alley for me and Annette.” A flash of pain crossed Evanie's face. “Annette was the little girl I was bringing to get her school supplies. She died in the attack. But that's not important now. I saw Sirius again when we were both prisoners, a little while before I saw you first. We exchanged names, but not much more than that.” She broke a small piece off her scone and began to crumble it into her saucer. “I think you might know him better.”

“We knew each other at school.” *Before I made the worst choice of my life, and left him to take the blame for it.* “Aletha, his wife, was a year below us. They used to row terribly, every chance they got, but it was just their way of flirting. They were married a few years out of school...” *After I'd done my best to wreck their lives, that is.* “...but Sirius comes from an old pureblood family, and they never accepted Aletha because she's Muggleborn—her parents didn't have magic. So they argued that because the marriage ceremony hadn't been magical, it didn't count, and Sirius could still marry a ‘proper pureblood girl’.”

Evanie grinned. “I didn't see much of them, but I can't imagine they'd take kindly to that. They seemed very devoted.”

“They are. To each other and their children—they have a daughter, she'd be about thirteen by now, and Sirius' godson will be sixteen soon.” A flash of Sirius in dress robes, holding Meghan on one hip and Harry standing by his side, crossed Peter's mind and was gone. “So to shut the purebloods up, they were married again magically last summer. They wrote their own vows, and one of the things they promised was that they would never use magic against each other, on the penalty of losing it themselves.” He swallowed, surprised by how tight his chest had become. “But they forgot to say that they had to use it against each other *freely*. So when my—the Dark Lord captured them, he thought it would be funny to force Sirius to use magic against Aletha.”

Nothing says I have to call him my Master, even if he is.

Evanie's eyes were fixed on the slowly dying flames in the fireplace. “What kind of magic was it?”

“What's called a Memory Charm. It's often used on Muggles who've seen magic, to make them

forget, because it will affect their lives badly if they know magic exists and they can't have it. But the Dark Lord told Sirius to use the strongest version of it, the kind that would destroy all Aletha's memories, everything that makes her who she is." He rubbed his left hand in small circles on the arm of the chair. "And if he said no, the Dark Lord was going to put him under Imperius, magical compulsion, and make him do it anyway."

"I see." Evanie reached for another piece of scone and slid out of her chair onto the floor, folding her legs under her and tossing crumbs into the fire rhythmically. "Did he? Sirius, I mean?"

"It was strange." Peter joined her on the floor, watching her hands move. "He was about to say no, that the Dark Lord would have to force him to do it, but Aletha stopped him. She told him to do it, that it was all right. And then she started to hum, and to... dance, I suppose. It was a spinning step, around and around the room, and all the time she was humming, always on the same note, like this." He hummed a few times, varying the lengths but never the pitch. "Finally, she stopped, right in front of Sirius, and looked at him like she was expecting him to finish whatever she was doing. She put her hand up against her chest, then touched his cheek, and..."

"Yes. 'And.'" Evanie flicked her last few crumbs into the fire. "He must love her very much, to do that to her because she asked him to."

"He does." Peter drew a knee up to his chest and laced his fingers on top of it. "He always did. I envied him that, him and James—another school friend, who married a girl from our year. They both had what they wanted right there beside them, and all they had to do was reach out and take it. Even Remus, our other friend, he found someone just a few years out of school, but I..."

Alarmed, he bit down on the words, but his thoughts rushed forward to complete the sentence anyway.

I was so afraid for my life that I made it barely worth living.

What would have happened if, back when I was in school, before any of this began...

He shook off that line of thought before it could go into dangerous territory. *It didn't happen, and now it never can. I am what I am, and so is she.*

"What happened to them?" Evanie asked, so softly that Peter barely heard her. "Sirius and Aletha. Afterwards."

"They're still here." Peter stood up, brushing a bit of soot off his robes. "Sirius is an Animagus, he can take the form of an animal when he wants to, so after his magic left him the Dark Lord changed him into his other form and caged him up like that. Aletha is down in one of the secondary kitchens. She'll be serving a few of the inner circle who think house-elves aren't much to look at."

And who also think you can't take liberties of a certain sort with house-elves.

He found himself hoping that Sirius had neglected to wipe that section of Aletha's memory which dealt with her training as a Beater.

"Enough talking for one night," he said, both to Evanie and himself, and jerked his head towards the other side of the room. "Let's get to bed."

Evanie flinched. It was a tiny motion, quickly camouflaged under her leaning forward to get to her feet, but Peter was sure he hadn't been mistaken. *Now why would she...*

One possible reason came quickly to mind, given what he had just been thinking about Aletha.

She's been hurt before.

The last thing I want to do is hurt her, especially now that I've seen what she does without prompting, but how can I make sure she knows that?

"You can have the bathroom first," he said, waving a lordly hand in that direction. "Just don't take too long about it."

"Of course not." Evanie didn't look up from her hands once as she unhooked the door of the armoire, collected a nightdress from one of the drawers, and vanished into the bathroom with it.

"Where did she get..." Peter wondered aloud, then shook his head. "House-elves. I should have known."

Drawing his wand, he strolled over to the bed. It looked a good deal thicker than he remembered it, and there were definitely more blankets on it. Sliding his free hand under the quilt, he whistled quietly at the feel of the sheets against his skin, and spent one moment wondering where his old bedclothes had gone before returning to the task at hand.

She's done so much to make me comfortable.

Let me see if I can't do something for her.

Evanie fastened the last button of her nightdress with trembling fingers.

I agreed to this. That means I have to take what comes.

At least Peter looks like he'll be gentle.

Straightening her hair one more time, she stepped out.

"Oh, there you are." Peter straightened up from where he'd been bending over the bed. "Pick a side. I'll put the light out when I finish."

Evanie nodded. "Second drawer, left side," she said quietly as he headed for the armoire.

“Is that—ah.” He pulled a pair of striped pajamas from the named drawer and turned to smile at her. “You think of everything, don’t you, Evanie? Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She watched him into the bathroom, then steeled herself and turned to look at the bed.

Her hand went to her mouth as she stared at what Peter had done. A raised partition ran down the exact center of the bed, marking it off into two separate halves. The sheets and blankets had stretched to accommodate, tucking themselves in neatly around it.

This means... it must be...

She sat down limply on the bed as the full meaning of it dawned on her. Peter *knew*. He had seen her fear, and had given her the clearest possible reassurance that it was groundless. She might not sleep easily here, but she would sleep in peace.

“Thank you, Peter,” she whispered, and blew a kiss towards the bathroom door before crawling over the partition to take her place on the far side of the bed. “Good night.”

And may all your dreams be pleasant ones.

In a nook under a curving staircase, Mare regarded what she had made and found it good.

A small greenish-brown creature had delivered her a pile of ragged bedding after her request for such to the white-blond man, and she had chosen this spot after discovering that one of the “blankets” was actually a curtain, rings and all. Once she had trimmed it to fit, it looked as though it had been hanging under the stairs since the manor was built. No one was likely to pull it aside and discover the cozy nest she had constructed for herself.

At least, I hope not.

I would hate to have to hurt anyone.

Yawning, she lay down on the thickest part of the bedding and pulled a stained sheet over herself. *It’ll do for now, but when the weather starts to get cold, I might freeze. I wonder if they’d let me bring the dog along, just for warmth? He likes me, if the way he kept looking at me while he was eating is any indication...*

It was an interesting set of thoughts to chase into sleep, and into dreams.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 48: Bind Up the Brokenhearted (Year 6)

Albus Dumbledore stood at one of the shelves in his office, carefully layering spells around a small model house. He had worked these spells twice before with this house or one very like it, and his task had never been harder than it was at this moment.

I did my best, but I can only be in so many places, and Harry was necessarily a higher priority than his cousin. By all accounts, Dudley Dursley has long since succumbed to the temptations of his daily society, and will have been cultivating and altering his parents' fear of wizards until they trust only him, and fear their nephew and his companions above all else. I consider us lucky to have received their consent for Harry to live in their house for one more summer, however grudgingly it was given. Their distrust does make it more difficult to reinstate the wards, but it can be done.

He glanced at the fireplace, where was hidden the passage to the current location of the young man on whose behalf he was working. *Danger will have passed through already, either last night or this morning, to say her farewells and be on her way. I wish her all the best, but I must admit that I am grateful Draco will be staying with Harry while she is gone. All four Pack-cubs loose in Headquarters, troubled and unhappy, without the moderating influence of their parents...*

Before he could think of an adequate simile to describe the destruction that would ensue, the staircase hummed to life. A few moments later, the office door opened with the controlled violence Dumbledore associated with only one man.

“Good morning, Severus,” he said without looking around. “Have a seat? I will be finished here in a moment.” *Or at a stopping place, at least.*

“Thank you, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore raised a hidden eyebrow at the sullen anger in Severus' voice. *Whatever he witnessed, he did not care for it. And he likes still less having to report it to me.* His wand looped the miniature house twice, sketched a rune in midair, and came to rest. *There. The first two layers are in place, and the last can wait until I have heard this.*

Even if, as I suspect, I would rather not know it.

“I had expected you last night,” he said, taking a seat behind his desk. “Were you kept late?”

“I stayed the night at my own home.” Severus was glaring holes in what Dumbledore had thought a very inoffensive carpet. “It seemed wisest, after I suspected that I might be followed. No watcher would go unnoticed there.”

True enough, but also a delaying tactic. “I assume you were able to evade your trailer. You would hardly be here otherwise.”

“I was.” Severus let the silence stretch. Dumbledore set his fingertips together and waited.

“The Dark Lord used their marriage vows against them,” said Severus at last, never lifting his eyes from the carpet. “Aletha lost her memories at her husband’s hand. He is without magic, and locked into his alternate form. They plan to use her as a scrubwoman, among other things, and force him either to watch or to know about it all.”

“I see.” Dumbledore closed his eyes for a moment and allowed the pain of his friends’ injuries, ever familiar, ever new, to sweep through him.

Death might have been kinder to them than this. The cubs will be devastated, Meghan especially so. The one saving grace of the situation is that through his own and his siblings’ quick responses, Harry was not forced to see it happen, as I have no doubt was Tom’s original intention.

The person who had seen it happen, he noted, was abnormally silent. There had been a time when even a mild misfortune befalling Sirius would have caused Severus unholy glee. A downfall of this magnitude, by the rules which had applied up until now, should be bringing rejoicing and celebration in its wake. Instead...

“The old hatreds bring no comfort, do they, Severus?” he said quietly.

Severus thrust himself to his feet, turning away, and stalked to the door without answering. His hand resting on the knob, he stopped. The set of his shoulders indicated he was battling with himself. Dumbledore wondered whether he were winning or losing.

“They never did.”

The words had barely stopped echoing when the door slammed behind their speaker.

Bernie, the elflets behind her, tiptoed down the first-floor hallway. They had to be very, very quiet here because Ron was sleeping. Or wasn’t sleeping. Bernie wasn’t quite clear on what exactly her brother’s friend’s sister’s boyfriend was doing, but she didn’t think he was sleeping. People who said the kinds of words she wasn’t supposed to hear, over and over again, usually weren’t asleep. But Ron’s mum and Neenie both said Ron was sleeping, so she wasn’t going to pry. Prying was rude.

But maybe Cissus or Echo could look in on him. House-elves are supposed to go in and out of rooms so quiet nobody knows they’re there...

Behind her, Cissus tripped on a warped floorboard and fell flat on his face. Echo tripped over her brother and squealed as she went down.

Or maybe not.

“Shh,” Bernie hissed at her friends, helping them up. “We’ll get in trouble!”

“We already in trouble,” Echo said primly, brushing off her dress. “Trouble when you do what your mummy and daddy say not, even if you not get caught.”

“*Don’t* get caught,” Bernie corrected automatically. Her own mum was very particular about proper English. “And our mums and dads didn’t say not to go see Meghan. They just said not to bother Ron, and we’re not.” She glanced doubtfully at the door behind which she’d heard the bad words. “I don’t think.”

“Then let’s go see Meghan,” said Cissus, pointing to the door of the Pride-girls’ bedroom. “She’s in there.”

Bernie swallowed and led the way.

She had tried to imagine, ever since Graham had sat down with her two hours before and explained why Meghan’s face had looked like that when she got done talking with Professor Dumbledore, what it would be like to have her mum not remember her. It was a hard thing to imagine. Mum was... well, she was *Mum*. Without her, the day didn’t start. And she knew Mrs. Letha was just that kind of mum to Meghan and Harry and Draco and Neenie.

I hate those Death Eaters. I hate them even worse than when they took Graham away. Bernie clenched her fists, and raised one of them to knock on Meghan’s bedroom door. *I’d like to take away everything they remember and see how they like it!*

“Who is it?” Meghan’s voice from inside the room sounded choky, like she’d been crying. Bernie’s throat closed in sympathy, and she grimaced at Echo and Cissus for help.

“It us—*it’s* us,” Echo corrected herself this time. “Cissus and Bernie and Echo. Can we come in, please?”

“May we,” Cissus prompted in a loud whisper.

“*May* we come in, please?” Echo stuck out her tongue at her brother.

“If you want to.”

Bernie opened the door, and the elflets piled in past her, running to Meghan, who was curled up on the floor near the window. Echo jumped into her lap, and Cissus plopped down beside her. Bernie followed her friends and took a seat on the floor a little ways away from Meghan. “Is it very sad?” she asked hesitantly.

“Mm-hmm.” Meghan cuddled Echo against her chest, staring out the window with her big grey eyes all filled with tears that didn’t seem to want to spill out. “And it hurts more because it isn’t all the way over. They might still come back. So I have to wait, and wait, and wait. But if they do come back, Dadfoot can’t fight anymore, and Mama Letha won’t know me at all. She might say, ‘Oh, that little girl looks a lot like me,’ but she won’t know why unless somebody tells her.” A deep, shaky breath. “She won’t ever call me her Pearl-girl again, or make me fall asleep singing

‘Stay Awake’, or play the fine lady game with Dadfoot’s stories at den-night...”

Bernie latched onto the second mention of Meghan’s father and coupled it with something she had been discovering during the past day and a half. “That isn’t true, about your dad. Even if he doesn’t have his magic, he can still fight. Muggles can fight. Crystal fights, Mrs. Robertson and Mrs. Smythe fought, and they never had any magic at all.”

“Yes, but they’ve always been Muggles, they learned how to fight as Muggles! Dadfoot only knows how to fight the magic way, and without his magic, how can he do that?” Meghan was starting to shiver, and her eyes were threatening to overflow. “He can’t ever be an Auror again, and that’s what made him happy, making the world safer for good people like us...”

Cissus tugged at Meghan’s sleeve until she looked down. “Was he a Auror when you were little like us?” he asked, then noticed Bernie’s headshake. “Sorry. An Auror. Was he?”

“N-no.” Meghan started to wipe her eyes on her sleeve, but Echo glared at her until she stopped, then at Cissus, sending him to fetch the box of tissues from the nightstand. “But that was a long time ago, when we were hiding, and he had his stories...” She stopped with a tissue against one corner of her eye. “His stories. He had his stories. He still can have his stories, can’t he? Muggles write stories all the time—not as good of stories as my Dadfoot, but they write them!”

Bernie nodded eagerly. “I like his stories. Mum read us some of them. They make me feel like I went on a trip to the place he told the story about, and met the people and talked to them and everything.”

Meghan turned her head to look at Bernie, then set Echo aside gently. “Excuse me,” she said to the elflet. An instant later, Bernie was engulfed in the tightest hug she had ever encountered. She hugged back, a little bewildered but happy that some of the terrified loneliness in Meghan’s eyes was going away. Even if it did mean she was getting all her ribs squashed.

“Good stories make you feel like you know the people in them,” Meghan repeated softly when she let Bernie go. “And Dadfoot’s stories were always about us. The Pack. He gave us different names and faces and put us different places and times, but we were always there. If Mama Letha reads his stories...”

“She’ll know you again!” Cissus bounced to his feet. “There are some of his books downstairs, in the library, I saw them! Let’s go get them right now!”

“Wait for me?” said a voice from the hallway.

“Graham!” Bernie scrambled up and claimed a first hug from her brother, then stepped aside so that he could sit down with Meghan and put his hand over hers.

I almost wish there wasn’t any Neville, so Meghan would be my for-real sister someday... but that’s a mean thing to wish. Neville’s nice. And I like Natalie too. Someday maybe she and Graham will have a Pack like Meghan’s mum and dad, and I can be the other grown-up witch. But

then there'd have to be another grown-up wizard too. She made a discreet face behind her hand. Yuck. Maybe we can just have a Pack with two mums and a dad instead of two of each...

Cissus scuttled backwards until he was sitting right beside her. "You okay?" he whispered.

"Fine," Bernie whispered back. "Shh."

"...can make his books the start of a memory box," Graham was saying to Meghan. "If you want."

"A memory box?"

"Like you keep for Marcus." Graham squeezed Meghan's hand a little. "Or like Bernie and I made two years ago, when our gran on Mum's side died. It's usually for somebody who's gone, to help you remember them. Yours will be a little different, because it's for somebody who needs help remembering herself. But the idea is the same. You put things inside it that give you strong memories. Things that make you think of the person you want to remember."

"Mum says smells are important for remembering," Echo chimed in. "She uses different-smelling soaps to do everybody's wash and that's how she remembers who wants it done what way."

"Smells. Hmm." Meghan was smiling. It was wobbly and a little lopsided, and it looked like she was having a hard time hanging onto it every now and again, but it was a real smile for all of that. "Mama Letha always liked rosemary. And—oh." She covered her mouth, a sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob getting away from her. "'Rosemary, that's for remembrance.' So maybe it will help her remember after all."

"It's a good way to start." Graham drew his legs up under him. "What else? Are there pictures you could put into the box, or maybe some of the music she likes to play?"

"There's the song she wrote for Harry, and the one for me when I was born." Meghan hummed a soft, slow tune, designed to hush a fretful baby. "Maybe one of Draco's songs, the ones he wrote, for him. Because he wouldn't have his music if it weren't for her..."

Bernie leaned back on her hands, well satisfied with the work she'd begun.

Wolf lay on the floor of the Hogwarts Den's main room, his nose buried in the two items he'd requested from Headquarters after Professor Dumbledore had told him and Draco the news. The Pride-girls were supposed to come and visit in a few hours, to say goodbye before he returned to the wonderful world of Dursley, but until then he had the memories invoked by the scents in the baggy cardigan and the stained smock all to himself.

It doesn't help much knowing Voldemort intended me to see it and I got away, not when I can imagine it just fine.

He knew how Padfoot's eyes would have blazed with fury, how Letha would have lifted her chin,

daring Voldemort to do his worst. He could see, as clearly as though he really had been there, Letha raising her hand to scent-touch Padfoot in a last goodbye. The Death Eaters might have expected them to break down, to cry or beg for mercy, but Harry knew his Pack-parents better than that. Whether it was the need to hide from the world or the resumption of a war that had killed some of their best friends, Padfoot and Letha had never been the type to whinge about the inevitable. What happened, happened, and it was up to them to make the best of it.

Only it's hard to see a best in this. Unless Padfoot's magic comes back twice as strong as before and that means he can reverse the Memory Charm on Letha and blow Voldemort to Mars so I don't have to...

The mental image sparked a snorting Wolf-laugh, and Harry sat up human, folding up Padfoot's writing cardigan and Letha's potion-brewing smock so Draco wouldn't see the tiny wet spots on them. It was time for him to prove that he was worthy of the people who'd raised him. They might be far away, in one case they might not even know who he was any longer, but he would not make them ashamed of him. He, too, could accept what had to be, and make the best of it without complaining.

Well. Without complaining too much. If I didn't complain at all, the girls would think I was sick. And Meghan's brewing those potions of hers extra strong these days...

An hour or two later, Harry and Ginny sat in the music room, sharing the piano bench and picking out bits of melody, one after another. They had already shared several heartfelt kisses, and Ginny had her head on Harry's shoulder, her hair tickling the side of his neck. "I wish you didn't have to go," she murmured. "We need you."

"You want me," Harry corrected. "You'll manage without."

"Not well." Ginny sighed. "Harry, I'm worried about Ron. He won't even eat, and you *know* that's bad. Nothing puts Ron off food. But this... I don't know what to tell him. How to break him out of it. He's gone inside himself and I think he likes it there."

"He'll come out sometime." *I hope.* "It's a big thing to get used to. And he's probably angry at himself for not being perfect and for messing up your plan. What was he supposed to do when they caught up with him, anyway?"

"Dive out a window and make them think Percy'd preferred dying on his own terms, then catch us up as Redwing." Ginny squirmed a little closer to Harry. "Why did we think we could go out and play heroes like that? Did we really not know, after everything we've seen, we can get hurt just like anybody else?"

"You knew." Harry pulled back enough to force Ginny into eye contact, tapping her once under the chin, a gentle warning. "You just didn't accept. It was your heads that understood it, not your hearts. And if you hadn't gone—"

“I know, I know, if we hadn’t gone it would have been Percy, and two women who never did anything wrong.” Ginny struck a moody discord on the piano. “It doesn’t help. Maybe it will someday, but right now it doesn’t.”

“Welcome to my life,” muttered Harry, getting a reluctant half-giggle out of Ginny. “Hearts and heads again, Gin. Your head knows you did a good thing, whether or not Ron got hurt, but your heart isn’t having any.”

Ginny batted herself on the chest. “Bad heart. Stop that.” Her hand rose to her own cheek, then to Harry’s. “My heart may be bad that way,” she whispered. “But I know one way it’s as good as it can be.”

Harry returned the scent-touch, and dropped a last kiss on Ginny’s lips for good measure. “I’ll write every day,” he promised. “You too? It’ll be the only fun I’m likely to have between chores and dodging Dursleys.”

“I know I will, and Luna will to Draco, and Meghan and Hermione said they’d switch off days to both of you. We might even convince Neville to write a few lines, whenever we see him again.”

“Make sure and tell me what’s happening with him, and with Ron.” Harry stood up, motioning for Ginny to fix her hair. “I’m worried about them. And if you hear anything about the Pack-parents, anything at all...”

“You’ll have it as fast as Pigwidgeon can fly,” Ginny promised, kissing her fingers and sketching an X over her heart. “Faster, if I can get someone to send you a Patronus. Take good care of Draco.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be the other way around?”

In the dim twilight of the attics, he practiced.

Masked wizard, swinging up a wand. *Fire*. Muggle child bending to pick a flower. *Hold*. House-elf, hands raised in spellcasting motions. *Fire*. Teenage girl with braided hair, eyes glinting disconcertingly as they focused on him—

Neville lowered his potion piece and blinked a few times, coming out of his targeting trance. “Meghan,” he said, acknowledging her presence without granting its right.

“Hello, Neville.” Meghan’s day robes hung open over jeans and a plain blue shirt, showing the leather belt fastened around her waist with her dagger on one side and her potion piece on the other, her hand resting on the antidote patch on its grip to keep her awake against the fumes in the attic. Neville knew her wand would be up her sleeve, secured in the arm holster her father had bought her. He made a mental note to see if one could be altered to hold a miniature piece, for desperate situations.

“Did you want something?” he asked, drawing his own wand and resetting one of the random target generating spells his mother had put into place for him. He didn’t understand why she’d insisted there be two, but she tended to have reasons for what she did, so he’d been using them turn and turn about.

Which is what I do, too. They pop up all around me, just like real enemies could, and I have to stay alert and get them before they get me.

Not doing that is how Aurors die.

“Just to see what you were doing. You haven’t been downstairs for a while.”

“I’m practicing.” Neville indicated the splotches of potion on the walls, the floor, the ceiling. “Practicing spotting my targets, making sure they’re the right ones, hitting them before they hit me.”

“Are you going to teach us how to do it?”

The question so innocently phrased brought a rush of memory. The Auror target range, the target eaten away by the red setting, his father’s proud smile and a hand on his shoulder—

“No!”

Meghan reared back, startled. “You don’t have to shout. I’m right here.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t shouting at you.” Neville shook his head, trying to clear his mind. “Meghan, thank you for coming up here, but I really would rather do this alone. It isn’t safe.”

You aren’t safe. You aren’t safe around me, and neither am I safe around you. Already the detachment his mother’s plan had given him, the layer of numbing ice around his heart, was wearing away from the heat of her presence. If she stayed much longer, she would thaw it completely, and he didn’t know what would happen then, but he was sure it couldn’t be good.

“All right.” Meghan lowered her eyes, turning back towards the stairs. “If you don’t want me, I’ll go. But your mum said—”

“Mum said?” Blinking again, Neville holstered his piece. “Meghan, did she send you up here?”

“Mm-hmm.” Even that small a sound had the unmistakable ring of tears in it. “She said something about her not wanting you to be the way she was, and how she thought we could help each other because we’ve got some of the same troubles...”

The ice shattered. Neville took three steps forward and drew Meghan into his arms. “Tell me what happened,” he said, sitting down on the floor with her cradled against him. “Tell me everything.”

Everything didn’t take long to tell. It never did, Neville thought. The things that changed lives forever were over in a single heartbeat, while the little unimportant everyday things dragged on

and on.

But this is one 'little unimportant everyday thing' that's going to give us both what we need today. And tomorrow, and the day after, and every day until things get better.

He no longer had any trouble understanding the two targeting spells. Practice, the endless and exhausting practice needed to master any physical skill, would do more for Meghan now than any soothing words or gestures. It had certainly worked for him.

I only miss Dad enough for ten of me when I'm practicing, instead of enough for twenty.

"You take that one," he told Meghan, pointing out the spell's activator, high on a rafter. "I'll take this one. Back to back, only shoot the threatening ones, and keep going until there's nothing left."

"I can do that." Meghan drew her wand and pointed it at the activator. "Tell me when."

"On three." Neville pulled his own and aimed it. "One, two, three."

Two Starting Spells flew straight and true, two wands were rapidly re-holstered, two potion pieces were drawn and armed. The spells whirred to life, and targets began to appear, leaping out of the shadows or materializing as though Apparating in. Neville's world narrowed once again, and he was aware only of his targets, his aim, and the steady breathing of his partner against his back.

Together, they could never be taken by surprise.

Harry climbed out of the Weasleys' car in front of number seventeen, Privet Drive, with a distinct feeling of déjà vu. Crystal waved to him from the driver's seat and Charlie and Tonks from the back, as George stuck his head out the window. "The Healers said Fred should be able to leave hospital within the next couple days," he said. "We'll keep you posted, on him and everybody else."

"Thanks." Harry shouldered his bag, mindful of a particular lump at the bottom. The plan to disguise Draco as a cat had been scrapped when Hermione had pointed out, somewhat scornfully, that Dursley went to school with them and would know Harry didn't have a cat. Instead, Snow Fox had wrapped himself up in the Invisibility Cloak, which apparently counted to the Cloak's magic as being worn, because it had obligingly gone invisible.

And that means Dursley won't spot it even if he paws through my bag when I get in there, unless he turns everything out onto the floor. Which he might do, but I'm through playing meek and mild. I won't give them an excuse to send me away, but I'm not going to let him play dominance games with me.

Inside his mind, Wolf growled and pawed at the ground. Harry took a deep breath, trying to calm both his human and animal selves, and almost coughed in surprise.

What's up? Fox asked through Harry's chain, which had been turned intangible to the layers of fabric between its two wearers.

Complicated. Harry shared the scent wafting from the house, where a twitching curtain was now visible. **We knew they were scared of me, we knew they were proud of their ickle Duddikins...** He paused to allow Fox to finish making gagging noises. **Agreed. But what's that third part? Almost smells like April Fool's...**

They think they have the upper hand, Fox said grimly. **They've got something planned that they know you won't like, and they like it that way. Are we still going in?**

Do I have a choice? Harry sent an image of himself facing Voldemort, and accompanied it with the acid green touch of Voldemort's magic within his mind. **Whatever they've got in there, it can't be worse than facing him.**

I wish you wouldn't say things like that, grumbled Fox, rearranging himself in the bottom of the bag as Harry rang the doorbell.

"Hello, Aunt Petunia," he said politely when the door opened. His aunt nodded jerkily towards him, then beckoned him to come inside past her, shrinking back against the door as though she were afraid of contamination. Harry kept his physical face straight only by treating Fox to a mental grimace.

"Uncle Vernon," he said when his eyes had adjusted to the comparative dimness inside the house. "Dudley."

"Upstairs," Uncle Vernon grunted, jerking a thumb that way. "End of the hall."

"Yes, sir." Harry started to climb. **The end of the hall? That isn't where they had me the last time...**

What is it? Fox asked, sticking his nose out of the bag as they passed out of sight.

I think it's the master bedroom. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia's. Why would they put me... Harry stopped, both mentally and physically. The door at the end of the hall had just come into view.

Fox growled low in his throat. **Has its own bathroom, doesn't it? They must really be scared of—heads up!**

Harry had heard the footsteps on the stairs behind him for himself, and only hoped Fox had pulled his nose back into the bag in time. For one second, he considered turning around and trying to bluff Dudley into taking back whatever he'd said that had pushed Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia to this extreme, but he knew that would only fuel the flames of his relatives' fear.

And that's one kind of fire I can't control.

Instead, he put on his best impassive expression, finished mounting the stairs, and walked down the corridor as though he had noticed nothing unusual about his aunt and uncle's bedroom —*former bedroom* —door.

As though it didn't have three brand-new locks mounted to its outside, and a cat flap installed in its lower panel.

Bet you're glad you brought your reasonable facsimile of a cat, aren't you?

Harry snorted. **I already said thank you for coming, you can stop polishing your own wand now.**

I beg your pardon!

Rather than respond to this, Harry tossed his bag onto the queen-sized bed. **We won't be crowded, anyway.**

Who is this "we" you speak of? I brought the makings for a proper me-sized den. And dens, as you may know, belong on the floor.

Suit yourself. Harry winced as the door slammed behind him. **That can't be good for the fittings.**

They're not worried about the fittings. Fox emerged from the bag with several folded cloths held daintily in his teeth. **They're worried about you, the big bad nasty wizard, trying to escape. Hear that?**

Harry knelt beside the door and listened. The sound of locks hastily being snapped shut was competing for prominence with his aunt's sobbing voice, which drifted in and out of coherency. Among the phrases he could pick out were "dear Dudders," "marvelous idea," "horrible old man," and "wicked, evil boy."

That being you and Dumbledore, in reverse order, obviously. Fox was rooting in the bag for his second load. **Have you been being wicked and evil without me again? And me your own brother. I'd think you'd share the fun with me first of all.**

As soon as I know where there's fun, I'll tell you. Harry sat down with his back against the door as his relatives' voices receded down the hall. "This is going to be a lot of no fun at all," he said aloud, leaning his head back. "What do you say we keep it to ourselves until it's over?"

I agree in theory, but in practice that would be entirely up to you. Fox squirmed out from under the bed and wagged a paw at Harry. **It may have escaped your notice, but in this form, I can't write.**

"Sorry. Didn't mean to rub it in."

No worries. Fox sat down, wrapping his tail around his paws. **Did you see the window?**

Harry looked up and wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh or groan. "Bars. They put bars on it. What *did* Dursley tell them about me?"

Probably that you eat Muggle babies for breakfast and feed their parents to your giant venomous snake that can kill you with its eyes.

"Which has just enough truth in it that I can't call the whole thing a lie." Harry stroked his hand along the wooden floor, wishing it were a scaled back. "I miss Sangre. We'll have to go out and see her when we get back to school."

If, said Fox darkly. **If we get back to school.**

Harry got his feet under him and pounced.

Fox tried to dart under the bed one second too late.

Mare backed down one of the endless stone-flagged corridors of the manor on her hands and knees, scrubbing as she went, and let her mind wander.

So much to see, so much to learn. Has it really been only four days since I woke up here? Wizards and house-elves and dogs, oh my. Except the dog doesn't seem to have a name, or not one any of them use around me. I've heard them calling him something when I'm a little ways away, but by the time I get there they've always left.

And by the time she got there, the dog was always looking directly at her, as though he could see through walls to find out which way she was coming.

There's no need to make things more fantastical than they already are, she scolded herself gently. He's a dog. He can hear you and smell you. That's all. He doesn't necessarily have to be a magical dog just because everyone and everything else around here is magical.

Still, she couldn't help but notice that the dog did seem different from the way her half-conscious memories told her a dog should behave. He perked up when she spoke to him and wilted when she had to leave, that was normal enough, but the way he would whimper when she talked about her frustration with the endless and pointless work, her exhaustion at the end of the day, her usually fruitless attempts to remember her very colorful dreams...

He could be picking up on the way my scent changes when I get upset. Dogs are pack animals—they respond to the cues of the other creatures around them. It doesn't have to be magic.

She scrubbed her way around a corner, and there he was, sitting up against the bars, tongue lolling out and grey eyes shining with welcome.

But it very well could be.

Setting aside her cloth and bucket for the moment, Mare eased herself off her knees, letting out a sigh of relief. “There, that’s better. And how are you this fine afternoon?”

The dog whuffed quietly and moved his front paws in what Mare thought could be the canine equivalent of a shrug. *Same old, same old*, he seemed to be saying. *And you?*

“I’m well enough. Sore, but I’m getting used to that. A bit perplexed about how to handle the house-elves, though. I’m saving them work. You’d think they’d be grateful. Instead, they’re acting positively miffed!”

The dog snickered, as though to say, *That’s house-elves for you. Perverse little buggers.*

“Ah well, it’s not my place to tell them what to feel.” Mare rolled her shoulders, groaning with pleasure as her spine popped. “Ahh. That had been bothering me for a while. Now, for dinner. I think they had a roast upstairs last night, because there’s a nice pile of cold beef in the icebox. Would you like some of that?”

The dog’s tail thumped twice on the floor, and he nodded.

“Excellent, I’ll...” Mare stopped, looking closely at the dog. “You *do* understand me,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. “Don’t you?”

Another nod, this one firm and distinct.

“So...” Mare thought over what she knew of fairy tales. “Are you just a magical dog, or are you a human in disguise?”

The dog gave her a weary look, and she realized her mistake. “Sorry. Are you just a magical dog?”

A sniff greeted this, giving Mare the impression of *I’ll have you know there’s no such thing as just a magical dog*, but her friend also shook his head, answering her question in the way she had already decided was most likely.

“So a human in disguise.” She dipped her scrub rag idly into her bucket and wrung it out as she thought. “An enchanted prince, maybe?”

The dog cocked his head, thinking it over. *Enchanted prince. I like that.* His tongue began to loll again. *Doesn’t the princess usually have to—*

“Now you stop that.” Mare gave him a gentle slap with the wet rag. “If you’re a man, behave like one. Or *is* this what you consider behaving like one?”

An eager nod, this one accompanied by exaggerated panting.

“I should have known,” Mare muttered. “All right, so I suppose I have to go on as I’ve begun. Is there anything I can do to—”

Voices sounded in the distance. Mare froze, then dunked her rag into the bucket again and quickly swiped down the stones in front of the dog's cage. "I'll be back with your dinner later," she whispered. "We'll talk more then." She grinned briefly. "Prince."

She could hear his tail pounding the ground all the way down the next corridor.

Hermione sank wearily onto her own bed, her head pounding in time with her heart.

So much to do, so much to keep together. Has it really been only three days since Harry left? Even when he was at Hogwarts, he was still here, but now he's away and everyone can feel it. Nothing's right.

Of course, nothing was right about this to start with.

She let herself fall backwards, her mind seething back and forth with troubles and worries. Moony just lies there. I'd think he was dead if I couldn't see him breathing, slow, so slow, but he is. Danger must be all right, the pendants haven't told us anything, but then, they only tell us what we need to know anymore, don't they? And Padfoot and Letha...

She shook her head, trying not to think of them. It would only make her cry, and she didn't want to cry, because once she started she wasn't sure when she would stop.

Meghan is doing better. She seized on the thought as on a lifeline. She and Neville both. They pulled each other out of the slump like always, with the Pritchards to help Meghan too, so that's one thing that's still working. And Luna's trotting around humming, doing whatever needs to be done around the house, writing those long letters of hers to Draco, and Ginny's doing the same with Harry, and if they've been crying they've kept it to themselves...

So that just leaves me.

Me and Ron.

And there it was, the other line of thought she'd been trying to avoid, already off and running through her consciousness. He won't wake up, or he won't tell anyone he's awake, which is practically the same thing, Meghan's had to give him nutrition potions while he's asleep to keep him alive, and even when we can tell by his breathing he's awake, he won't answer anyone, he won't do anything, he just lies there with his face towards the wall, and didn't that once upon a time mean you'd given up on life? And after he did so much for me, there isn't anything I can do for him, because he won't listen to me...

The tears would no longer be denied. Hermione rolled over and tried to muffle her face in her pillow, but the spasms of weeping left her curled up on her side, shaking. "Don't do this to me," she sobbed between bouts. "You can't do this to me. You can't leave me like this. Please, Ron, please don't leave me like this..."

In the corridor outside, a hand wielding a wand traced its tip along a doorframe, then withdrew.

It was high time for a certain young man to stop feeling sorry for himself.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 49: What Once Was Lost (Year 6)

One second, it was silent in his room. The next, it was not.

Someone was crying.

Only snatches of words were audible between the sobs, but those snatches were enough to bring him out of bed, fumbling for his shoes, swearing under his breath when they weren't where he expected.

He knew who was crying, and he had to get to her.

The shoes refused to come to his groping hand. Snarling something moderately kinky about what he'd do with them after he found them, he headed for the area where he thought the door was most likely to be. It wasn't like he had to go far. If the strength of the crying was any indicator, there weren't even stairs involved.

His fingers encountered a hard substance, and he swore again. *No stairs, maybe, but there will be walls. Still, walls mean doors. Right, right, right—ah-ha, panels. Which means about midway down, there should be—*

Wrenching the doorknob around, he stumbled into the corridor. The crying was louder here. He turned to the right, following the sound, feeling his way along the far wall until he barked his fingers on the edge of another doorframe. This time he didn't bother to curse. Instead he found the knob and shoved the door open.

"Hermione," he demanded, "what's wrong?"

"E-everything," came the faltering answer. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—*Ron!*"

"Not expecting me?" Ron grinned in the general direction of her voice. "Where are you? Help me out here."

"I—yes, of course—come forward. Three steps. That's good. Now turn left and take just a small step—there, that's my bed, I'm right—oh!" Hermione broke off with a little squeak as Ron caught her hand in his and pulled her up against him. Her hair tickled in the same place it always did, against the side of his chin, and her breath was warm against his collarbone just the way it ought to be.

But it's still catching in her throat there. And I think— He slid a hand up her shoulder to her face and brushed it across her cheek. *Sure enough. Tears.*

"What's wrong?" he asked again, cradling her against him and turning carefully around so that they could both sit on the bed. "You're crying. You never cry. What is it?"

Hermione didn't answer right away, instead turning her face into his chest and wrapping her arms around him, and a nasty suspicion crept over Ron. "Hermione," he said, tilting his head so that his cheek rested on her hair. "It's not—you're not crying over *me*, are you?"

"Some." Hermione sniffled once. "Some of it is for everyone else, and some is just for being alone, but a lot of it is for you—and why shouldn't it be?" Her arms released their grip, and hands clamped onto his shoulders. "Why shouldn't I be crying for you? You haven't spoken to anyone in days, you've barely even moved! I knew you were awake, I knew you could hear me, but you wouldn't answer me, you didn't respond at all! I thought you were going to *die*, Ron, so I think I deserve to cry a little over that!"

"You thought—" Ron abandoned words in favor of tightening his arms around Hermione until she squeaked. "No," he said, trying for the firm and unquestionable tone he'd heard his dad use on his mum once or twice. "I'm right here, I'm not going anywhere, and you're not going to cry over me any more, Neenie, you understand that? I'm not having it."

"You made me." Hermione sniffled again. "Lying there like you were just going to give up. Like you were going to let the Death Eaters win."

Ron assigned the Death Eaters' winning to the same category as his shoes, earning a light slap to the back of the head and a shaky giggle from Hermione. "I never thought I'd be happy to hear you swearing again."

"Me neither." Ron tangled his fingers in her hair. "But I mean it, Neenie. I don't want you crying over me. You've got enough else to cry about right now. I know what's going on with Harry and Fox, and with your parents—I *was* listening all those times you came in to talk to me, I just couldn't..." He broke off, unable to find words that would explain the turbulent mix of emotions that had held him hostage inside his own mind for the past few days.

"You were scared and you didn't know what to do," Hermione supplied for him, laying her head against his shoulder again. "You've had something taken away from you, something important, something you never imagined living without."

"This is why I like having you around. You know what I mean even when I don't." Ron felt to one side, ascertaining that they were far enough up on the bed for what he had in mind, then scooted back and turned, bringing his legs up onto the mattress. One of Hermione's knees touched the inside of his right thigh, and he hoped he wouldn't embarrass himself in front of her.

What the hell, she's got brothers. She's seen it before.

Besides, the topic of conversation was sufficiently unpleasant that he thought he could contain himself.

"I still don't know what I'm going to do," he admitted, beginning to work through the snarls in his handful of hair. "Meghan can't heal it, or she would have already, wouldn't she?"

“She wanted to.” Hermione sighed. “She wanted to try, so much. But the spell they used was Dark, Ron, very Dark, and Healer Young said her magic would have unpredictable effects, it could even backlash and hurt her.”

“That’s out, then. And regular Healing magic isn’t much good against Dark spells.” For a second, Ron wanted to turn away, wanted to lie back down and tell the world to leave him alone again, but Hermione’s breathing against his chest still wasn’t quite even and he could feel the cooler spots on his T-shirt where her tears had soaked through the cloth.

I’m not doing that to her again. She’s not meant to cry. It isn’t right. I can’t fix all the rest of what’s wrong, but I can keep from adding to it.

“You miss everybody, don’t you?” he asked, gathering another handful of hair. “Harry and Draco, Mr. Padfoot and Mrs. Letha, Mrs. Danger, even Mr. Moony—his being around, I mean?”

“Only like I’d miss breathing air.” Hermione’s tone was dry enough to evaporate the Hogwarts lake, but Ron had done enough bulwarking against tears to recognize it when he heard it. “Oh, Ron, I want them back so much—but then, I wanted you back too, and here you are.” Her hand rested against the side of his face, her skin soft and cool to the touch. “Thank you. I can’t tell you what a difference it makes to have you here with me.”

Ron felt an unfamiliar sensation on his face, a twitching upward at the corners of his mouth. It took him a few seconds to realize what had happened. He was smiling.

I didn’t want to be useless—here’s something I can do right here. And it doesn’t matter one bit whether or not I can see. Neenie wants me around, so I’ll be around. If she has to lead me places, so what? She let me carry her all over the castle last year, as my furry little scarf...

“I wonder how well that would work,” he murmured aloud.

“How well what would work?”

“If you sat on my shoulders like we used to do and told me which way to go.” Ron mimed the placement of cat-Neenie around his neck with one hand. “Through the pendants, or...” He broke off as an idea struck him. “Wait, do you think—”

“Only one way to find out.” Hermione seemed to have had the same idea at the same moment, as her voice had suddenly gone breathless with excitement. “Hold still. I’ll change right now.”

The weight within Ron’s arms vanished, and a lighter one on his left shoulder replaced it. Claws dug in for a second, then retracted at his wince, and a cold nose pressed against his neck, nuzzling at his pendant chain.

“Here, let me do that.” Ron scooped the chain off the back of his neck and held it out, feeling a furry ear brush his hand as Neenie thrust her head through it. “Thumbs, you know.”

Yes, they’re very useful. Neenie trod daintily across his shoulders and settled herself into her

accustomed place. **Now then, let me see. If I do *this* and *that* , and open to you *here* and *there***
...

Ron sucked in his breath, and his hands tightened into fists on the bedclothes.

Are you okay? Did I get it right?

“Better than okay,” Ron breathed. “Spot on, Neenie, first try.” He held up a hand and felt a thrill he’d never imagined getting from such an everyday activity.

He could see.

Everything’s either green, blue, or gray, but who cares? I can see it. I don’t have to feel my way around anymore. People won’t have to do everything for me. I won’t be a burden, I can live like normal—

Jubilant, he reached up to pluck Neenie down and hug her.

You might not want to do that, Neenie warned him, and the world tilted as he felt her shift her weight. **Remember, they’re *my* eyes. I have to stay where I am if you want to keep borrowing them.**

“Right. Never mind me.” Ron stroked between her ears instead, his mood deflating somewhat. *I should’ve known there’d be a catch.*

Don’t worry, I never do. Neenie began to purr. **And don’t start fussing, either. We’ve got one solution to the problem, which is better than the none we started out with. We’ll find others. You can’t be the first person who’s been... I mean, that this has happened to.**

“You can say it, you know. I won’t melt hearing it.” But he’d been avoiding so much as thinking it, Ron realized. He had to say it himself first. “I’m not the first person who’s been...” He swallowed hard and forced it out. “Blinded.”

That’s right, you’re not. Neenie’s purr increased, and she gave his ear a few gentle licks. **So we’ll do some research, check into what treatments have been devised for the people who’ve gone before you.** Her thoughts turned wicked. **We could always talk to Professor Moody. I’m sure he’d be glad to help.**

Ron caught the image accompanying the thought and started to laugh. “Bloody hell, Hermione, you want me scaring the Muggles, don’t you?” He took over the image—his own face, featuring a pair of eyes like the one which had given Mad-Eye Moody his nickname—and made them both stare off to the side, then started spinning them in opposite directions.

Neenie dissolved into mental giggles. **It would be useful having someone around who could see through walls. And doors, and desks, and Invisibility Cloaks.**

The idea was tempting, but Ron shook his head. “Not unless there isn’t any other option. And

definitely not two of them.”

Two does seem excessive, but we'll put it on the list as a possibility. So. Do you want to root around in the library for a while and see what else we can find out, or shall we go down to the kitchen and show this off to everyone?

“By ‘everyone’ you mean Mum.”

I was thinking of starting with her, yes, since she's been worried about you and since the fuss she's likely to raise over you will bring everyone else running.

“I hate it when she fusses,” Ron grumbled, standing up. “And she *knows* I hate it, and she still does it. Always has.”

She's a mother. It's what they do. And there is one thing you don't have to worry about from her ever again.

“What?” Ron asked warily.

Neenie snickered. **You'll never be able to tell if she got you maroon anything. Cats can't see purple.**

“Forgive me if I'm not jumping for joy.”

But he was smiling again, Ron had to admit. Even the certainty of his mother's tears and hysterics over him hadn't taken that away. There was a buoyancy in his chest, like a balloon filled with hot air, that made his breathing feel easier and his steps lighter.

It's called hope, Neenie said quietly. You'd lost yours. Now you have it back.

“You gave it to me.” Ron reached up to rub the side of her jaw. “Thanks for that.”

Anytime.

Together, cat and human left the room on their way to the basement kitchen.

Evania looked around the featureless intersection of stone-walled corridors, just like the last hundred she'd passed, and admitted it to herself with a little sigh. She was lost.

I shouldn't even be out here, I know, but what Peter doesn't know won't hurt him... I hope.

The house-elves, she had learned just today, could take passengers on their noisy comings and goings, if politely asked and if not expressly forbidden. Since the only standing order about Muggle prisoners was that they not be allowed to escape the manor, her friends could take her anywhere within its boundaries, and she had asked to see daylight again. Even in only three days—or was it four?—she'd missed the sun.

Maybe, when Peter and I know each other a little better, he will take me on that flying outing he mentioned. I'd like that a lot. But it won't happen if he doesn't trust me, and he won't trust me if I'm not where he left me. So I'd better get back.

Still, she couldn't stop herself from pouting slightly as she went to one knee, preparing to call a house-elf to take her back to Peter's rooms. She had so wanted to find her way back to the little chamber from which she'd looked out over the woods and the river, and see if the gray dot she'd sighted in the distance had resolved itself into anything more solid...

“Well, well. What have we here?”

Evanie froze, her throat clamping shut in terror. A heavysset man had just rounded the corner and stood facing her, a leer spreading across his brutish face.

I have to get up—I have to run—I have to—

“If it isn't Wormtail's little Muggle, out all by herself.” The man strode up to her and lifted her chin towards him. “Tired of playing with the animals already, sweetheart? You weren't what I came down here for, but you'll do—or no, I'll bring you along and let you both play, how's that?” His hand closed around her wrist and dragged her upright. “You'll like this game. All the girls do, once they learn how to play it right. Come on, now, keep up...”

Tiny, gasping whimpers escaped Evanie as she stumbled in her captor's wake. Her childhood nightmares, the ones that were the worst of all because they had once been true, were waking and rearing their ugly heads again. Worse still, this time what her long-ago tormentor had told her was true. This time it really would be her own fault.

I should have stayed where I was. Peter would have taken me out if I'd just asked. But no, I had to go out on my own, I had to see the sun for myself, and now... and now...

One corner of her mind refused to take hold of the “and now.” There could still be a rescue, it babbled. The unthinkable hadn't happened yet. She'd had one miracle, in Peter—why not two?

Because the world doesn't work that way. She almost lost her footing and saved herself only by grabbing hold of a vertical bar, part of a set caging off a deep alcove in one wall of the corridor. Because people who're foolish enough to throw away their miracles deserve what they get from it...

Well, finally.

Danger plopped down on her stomach under a handy bush and let her aching paws throb in time with her heartbeat. She had never traveled so far in wolf form before, and her pads weren't as tough as they should have been.

Not a mistake I will make again, trust me.

The journey to this spot, wherever it might be—she suspected it was Unplottable, like Headquarters and Hogwarts were—had been filled with frustrating detours and pauses. As Alex had warned her, the pointer in her mind showed her only the current direction in which Sirius and Aletha were located, and took no obstacles into account. At first, she had tried Apparating past these obstacles, but after she frightened a pair of fishermen into jumping out of their boat by appearing on the bank of the river beside them, she'd stuck to foot travel.

Besides, Apparating isn't much good when the only coordinates you've got are "the other side of this bloody lump of rock in my way." But I'm here now, and I can get started on figuring out how to get in there as soon as I get my breath back.

"There" was a rambling manor house, built up along the outer wall to resemble a fortress and warded with some nasty spells, one of which made her sure of why Alex had told her to come alone. She was going to have enough trouble convincing the Gubraithian Fire Charm not to tell its master about the unburnable object it had encountered without having to try to sneak someone else through it as well.

But at least I'm here. She closed her eyes, letting the birdsong and the sunny afternoon soothe her. *I'll get through the wards and find a permanent place to hide, or better still two of them, once I'm rested. And once I've set up a certain pair of messages...*

Harry was frowning over an essay for History of Magic ("Name three breaches of the Statute of Secrecy and use them to support an argument either that the Statute is necessary and should be maintained or that it is wrongheaded and should be abandoned") when a muffled yip from under the bed broke his concentration. **You all right?** he sent via pendant chain.

Just fine. Great, actually. Fox emerged and shook his head hard, flapping his ears. **I heard from Danger. She was going to leave a dream-message for me, but I happened to be dreaming at the same time so we got to talk face-to-face. So to speak. She's made it to the place where Padfoot and Letha are.**

Grinning, Harry punched the air. "I don't suppose there's any chance she could call in a strike by the rest of the Order?" he asked, leaning back in his chair to stretch.

She wishes. Fox sat down and scratched the back of his neck with a hind foot. **But you know the security on these pureblood manors. Paranoid lot, our ancestors were.**

"They had plenty to be paranoid about." Harry tapped the book he was referencing. "Muggles would mob them on even the suspicion they had magic, and other wizards saw them as competition. Families would get wiped out, or nearly so, from witch hunts, and then the rest of the wizarding world would claim the survivors had been asking for trouble and lock them up for the rest of their lives."

Somehow I have more sympathy for them than I used to. Trotting over to the desk, Fox looked up at Harry. **You're getting itchy too, right? It's not just me?**

“It’s not just you.” Harry let his essay roll up and set it aside for the moment. “I’m sorry I got you into this. You ought to be—oi!” He pulled his ankle out of the way just in time as gleaming teeth snapped near it. “All right, point taken. None of us knew what we know now, it isn’t my fault we’re stuck in here, and you don’t want me apologizing for it.”

Fox leapt into Harry’s lap, and from there to the desktop. **Amazing how you can read my mind that way. And all from a little chomp.** He pulled his lips back from his teeth in a Fox-grin. **Honestly, Harry, who’d have expected this? I know I never thought Dursley had the brains for it. One of the other Slytherins must have fed him his lines.**

“Potter wants to tear the walls between us down, get the worlds mixed up more than they already are,” Harry muttered, quoting what they’d heard through the heat register on their first night in the Dursleys’ master bedroom. “Freaks everywhere, magic in the streets, happening right under everyone’s nose. My Master wants to build those walls back up, to keep the worlds separate, the way they’re supposed to be...”

It’s like the lie about you and Sangre. Just enough truth in it to make it impossible to refute in one word, or even ten. Fox scratched idly at a dried spot of ink on the desktop. **We want to encourage mixing, to some extent, but we don’t want to shove magic in anyone’s face if we can help it. As for Voldemort, I’m sure he’d rather have the Muggles as ignorant as possible—there’s nothing as scary as the unknown.**

“Until he’s ready to put his final plan into action, anyway.” Harry ran his finger around the edge of his textbook’s page, moving it in further and further with every circuit. “Box off a few enclaves of Muggles and cast confusion spells on them to make them think the rest of the world is still the same as it ever was, just for the entertainment factor. Snatch one or two of them every once in a while to watch the others panic.” His finger traced the smallest possible circle at the center of the paper. “All the rest... slaves, animals even. Livestock. Good for experiments, for grunt work, and for a few other things he doesn’t do himself but he knows some of the Death Eaters like...”

Grey eyes flicked a sidelong look at Harry. **Please tell me you’re making this up.**

“Wish I was.”

Another dream?

Harry didn’t bother answering.

Damn it, Wolf! I thought you said you’d wake me if you had another one of those! Fox thumped Harry on the shoulder with his muzzle. **There might be something I could do about it, you know, *dreams*, I have a little experience with them—**

“Not with this you don’t,” Harry snapped, keeping his voice low with an effort. “And by the time I can tell you what’s going on, it’s already over. Unless you’re planning on monitoring all my dreams, which would wear you out and might let Voldemort know we have someone here who can do that for me, there isn’t anything you can do, so lay off, all right?” He plucked Fox off the desk

and lofted him across the room to the center of the bed. “Go do your reading for Transfiguration or something. Merlin knows you always need three more times through it than anybody else to get it down.”

Fox bared his teeth again before disappearing under the bed. **Next time**, his mental voice floated back, **I won't miss.**

Harry sighed and laid his head down on the open book.

All I wanted was one quiet summer...

As Hermione had expected, the fuss made over Ron's descent from his silent exile was greater than that which had greeted Fred when he'd returned from St. Mungo's, but it was over now, and Ginny had taken her brother back upstairs to the Pride's den to read him Harry and Draco's letters from Privet Drive. Hermione had intended to go along, but Mrs. Weasley had asked her with a hand motion to stay, and she had made her excuses to Ron and was now sitting across from the older witch at the table.

Mrs. Weasley reached over and covered Hermione's hand with her own. “I owe you an apology,” she said softly. “I've been holding back from you these last few days. Partly because I didn't want to push in where I wasn't wanted, but also, I'm afraid, partly to bring you to the point I heard you at earlier.”

Hermione stiffened, but held her temper in check. “You... wanted me to cry?”

Her eyes beginning to brim, Mrs. Weasley nodded. “It was wrong of me, I know,” she said, her voice unsteady. “But I couldn't bear to see Ron the way he was any longer, and I knew if anything could break through his barriers, it would be you needing him. So I waited until I knew you were about to cry it out, and then I took down the Silencing Charm on his door. I do hope you can forgive me, but if you need to be angry, I understand.”

Whether or not she needed to be angry, Hermione thought, she was.

She manipulated me. She used me. How is that any different than the Death Eaters and the way they just take people away from their lives and put them anywhere they want them and—

Unasked, a saying of Moony's slipped into Hermione's mind, breaking off the flow of her furious thoughts.

“Sometimes anger is right. Sometimes it's the only proper answer to what's going on. But a lot of times, it's the equivalent of saying, ‘I already know what I think, how dare you confuse me with a lot of stupid facts!’ Always make sure of what kind you've got before you let yourself go.”

“I wish you'd told me what you were doing,” she said out loud, trying to keep her tone calm, factual, adult. “I thought you were just too busy to see I was upset.”

“Never.” Mrs. Weasley squeezed her hand tightly. “Especially not now, with your own parents all gone. I should have trusted you, I know, and told you what I wanted to do, but I was afraid it wouldn’t work if it were contrived.”

Hermione thought over Ron’s likely reaction to discovering the distress he’d dragged himself out of his bed to comfort had been fake. *And he would have found it out sooner or later. There’s nothing the matter with his ears, and secrets get out.*

“I don’t know what to say,” she admitted. “Except that I wish I weren’t angry, but I am, still, some.”

“I thought you might be.” One more squeeze, and Mrs. Weasley let her hand go. “If you ever find out you’re not and you need help with anything, my door is always open to you. Always.”

“Thank you.” Hermione stood up and left the kitchen, getting herself back under control before she went upstairs to link up with Ron once again.

She did what she thought was necessary, and it did work. Ron’s up, he’s fighting back, he’s not letting this drag him down anymore. I just wish she hadn’t used me to do it with...

But then, she was certain Mrs. Weasley wished the same thing.

And she did it anyway, because she knew it was the only way to bring Ron around.

I wonder, will I ever be that strong? Or that ruthless?

It disturbed her slightly that she couldn’t decide which of the two possible answers she preferred.

Inside the alcove which had brought Evanie and her captor to a halt, a shaggy shape sat up. A low growl brought her captor’s head around, and the thunderous series of barks that followed it made him swear. “Shut up!” he bellowed, yanking out his wand and firing a spell which cut off the dog’s last bark in a yelping howl. “Stupid mutt, never could keep his nose out of things that don’t concern him...”

Evanie was still trying to work out how a dog could be concerned with anything when her captor hauled her through a swinging door into a kitchen, and one look at the woman who knelt beside the fire made everything plain. *Aletha. But Aletha without her memories, so she won’t know me, and she doesn’t know Sirius—that’s who the dog must be, Peter said he had an alternate form—*

“Hello, lovely,” her captor crooned, strutting across the floor towards Aletha. “You must be tired, all this work to do. What say you leave the rest and come back to my rooms with me and this little girlie here?” He yanked on Evanie’s arm, wringing a gasp from her, and reached for Aletha’s hand. “We can play some nice games together, and I’ll square it up with your masters later—”

His skin made contact with Aletha’s.

Evanie screamed.

Harry had no idea how long he'd been napping on his textbook, but it was long enough that his neck was sore and his back aching when Hedwig's impatient hoot roused him. She was hovering just outside the barred window, letter in one talon.

"Coming," Harry said, shoving back the chair and crossing the room to her. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make you wait. I know hovering's hard, Ron's told me so..." He trailed off, plucking the letter free rather than let that train of thought leave the station. Ron hurt, Ron blinded, was outside of his experience, and he'd hoped it would stay there.

Well, maybe this is good news. Hedwig hooted a goodbye and winged off, and Harry tore open the envelope, addressed to him in Ginny's writing. *Her usual letter came by Pigwidgeon this morning, so it must be something big...*

He read the few lines contained within the note three times, then dropped down onto the bed and reached under it. His fingers contacted fur, and he tweaked. **Wake up.**

Not 'sleep, that hurt, go 'way, told you I'd bite you next time and I will soon's I—wait, what? Fox's mental voice moved from a grouchy mumble to his usual clear tones with the last two words. **You feel different. What happened?**

"Good news." Harry waved the parchment in the air. "Want to hear it?"

Always. What is it? Moldywarts self-destructed and we can all go home now?

"Not quite that good, but close. Ron's up and about again, borrowing Neenie's eyes for the time being, thinking of getting an eye like Moody's for the longer term."

Oh, huzzah, just what I wanted to hear. Ron Weasley, able to see through walls.

"You don't fool me." Harry poked the parchment under the bed so that Fox could see it for himself. "You two haven't had a serious fight in years. You just think it's fun to poke at each other and get Hermione all riled up about it."

Well, it is. The parchment rustled, once, twice, and then reappeared, clamped in Fox's mouth. **Sorry for being pushy,** he said, depositing the letter on top of the bed and jumping up beside it himself. **I worry about you, is all.**

"I know you do, but I wish you wouldn't. It's annoying, especially when there's nothing you can —"

Ssh! Fox accompanied the command with a mental image of finger on lips, and Harry clamped his shut immediately. **Someone's outside... I think. They could be in one of the other bedrooms, I can't be sure. Wish we could see through walls.**

Harry pushed his glasses up his nose reflexively, then stopped with his finger still on them. An idea had started to blossom in a back corner of his mind.

Fox worries about me, I worry about Ron, Hermione worries about everyone, and we all need to keep busy or we'll go barking mad, but especially Ron, especially right now. Seeing better, seeing through walls, seeing at a distance, they could all be the difference between life and death for us in this war... and Ron's always been our builder, our tinkerer, even Fred and George come to him when they can't figure out the problem in one of their gadgets...

Maybe we can, he said. Care to help me start tomorrow's letter home?

Padfoot lay with his nose resting on one paw, trying to get the stitch in his side to go away. He was quickly becoming an expert on how to recover from the Cruciatus, especially when one had no magic of one's own to call on.

Fortunately for me, this pair of magic hands comes along every so often and scratches me, and all my aches and pains disappear. Really quite nice. Not something your average Auror can count on, though.

Her scent wafted into his nose, cutting through the leftover self-satisfied stink of Rabastan Lestrangle and the stark terror Evanie had been exuding. He sat up, craning his neck anxiously. *I hope Letha handled him all right—I tried to give her a heads-up, she doesn't smell hurt—*

But she did smell different, he realized. She smelled... *smug* was the wrong word, but it wasn't far off. Gratified, perhaps, or even relieved, though he didn't know what she'd been worrying about.

Other than being alone in a house filled with Death Eaters, with no way to know who she is or where she came from, and being stuck doing scut work, of course. But if any of that has changed, I'd like to know about it. Especially that middle bit...

“Thanks for the warning, Prince.” Aletha stepped around the corner, carrying the bowl of meat she'd promised him and a fresh bowl of water. “How did you know he was coming after me, though?”

Padfoot shrugged, unwilling to try pantomiming “Because I know Rabastan Lestrangle and his favorite weakness, and besides, the only things any of them come down here for are to hurt me or go after you” with fresh Cruciatus aches.

Aletha slid the meat and water through the slot in the bars designed for bowls. “In any case, I sent *Mr. Lestrangle* back to his bedroom with a headache, or rather the house-elves did it for me. They assure me *Mr. Lestrangle* often has a headache when he awakens, due to gross overindulgence in various vices, and shouldn't know the difference between tomorrow morning and any other.”

She may not remember who she is, but her sarcasm's still right on target. Padfoot panted his appreciation. *Wonder what she did to Rabastan, though. Bashed his head in with a mop?*

“And the girl, Evanie, they took her back where she belongs too, but she shouldn’t have a headache.” The not-quite-smug smell redoubled. “Neither should you, you handsome Prince you. Come over here and let me make sure of it. That’s if you’re not starving, and I hardly think you would be after that...”

Padfoot thrust his head under her reaching hands. *You’re so right, love. Cruciatus always leaves me queasy. Food’ll still be there when I wake up, and right now what I want is one of your magic head rubs and a nap.*

“That’s a good Prince,” Aletha crooned. “What a good boy. You go to sleep, now, and when you wake up and my work’s done, we’ll have that talk and see if we can’t figure out some better way for you to get your points across than just nodding your head at me.”

If I could just get you to pull your pendants out for me... later, we’ll try that one later. Padfoot let the probing fingers dig deep into his skull, pull out the aches, move down to his shoulders and start to work away the pain in his spine and ribs. The stitch unkinked, and he moaned with pleasure, then opened one eye to get a last look at Aletha before he slid into sleep.

The other eye shot open in shock.

“Oh, you like this?” Aletha chuckled, stopping what she was doing for a moment to hold up her hands for his approval. “I’ve just found it out. It’s part of the reason I need to find a better way to talk with you. I have a feeling you know a lot more about it than I do, and I want to know everything, if only so I don’t try to use it all wrong and hurt somebody who doesn’t deserve it. But that can wait until you’re feeling better, and for that you need to sleep.”

The hell with sleep, I have to talk to you! Padfoot strained to keep his eyes open, but the hands returned to their relentless massage, and he felt himself drifting away. *No, you don’t understand... this answers so many questions, you have to know what it means, I’ve got to...*

“...got to tell you who you really are...”

Sirius stopped, startled at the sound of his own voice. At the sight of his own body, human again and standing in the middle of the backyard at the Marauders’ Den. “What the—”

“Hey there, stranger,” said a different voice from behind him. “Nice of you to drop by.”

“*Danger!*” Sirius snatched his baby sister into the tightest hug he could manage, hauling her up off the ground and spinning her around, not bothering to hide the tears that had gathered in his eyes. “What’s going—no, never mind, I get it. Letha sent me off to sleep, and you caught me on the edge of dreaming, didn’t you?”

“Right first time.” Danger pecked him on the cheek as he set her back on her feet. “As for real life, I found a nice hollow tree on the grounds of whoever’s manor it is they’ve got you two locked up in. And you would not believe what I’ve been through finding it, but that’s a story for another day. Who are you trying to tell who they really are? Letha? We heard what happened, I’m so sorry,

Sirius...”

“No, it’s not that.” Sirius shook his head irritably. “I mean, it is that, of course it’s that, but it’s bigger than that. It’s something none of us ever knew, we never understood, but we should have, we should have seen it a long time ago...”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Meghan. Meghan, and which side she gets her Healing powers on.” Sirius snapped his left wrist, calling up his wand, and painted an image of Aletha as he’d last seen her on the air. Danger gaped at it, and Sirius couldn’t blame her.

Aletha’s hands were glowing. His dog’s eyes hadn’t been able to see a color in the pale light shining from them, but Sirius would have bet his last Galleon it was blue.

“We all thought it was me, but it’s not, Danger, it never was.” He reached up a hand to lay it opposite the image’s. “It’s Letha. Letha’s the Heir of Ravenclaw. And do you know why she can Heal now when she never could before?” The laugh hurt his throat getting out. “Because of me. Because she’s lost all her memories and she doesn’t know she shouldn’t be able to. That’s why.”

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Facing Danger

Chapter 50: What Now Is Found (Year 6)

Mare turned slowly to take in her surroundings, contrasting them with what she'd last experienced. The thick quiet of the manor house at night had been replaced with the cheerful chatter of birds and the soft rush of breeze through leaves. Instead of the cozy walls and ceiling of her nest, she saw open fields and meadows, with a few groves of trees scattered about and a line of them in the middle distance she thought might indicate a river. And directly behind her as she'd first become aware of this scene, now directly in front of her, was a house.

Not a terribly big house, but not a little cottage either. Mock-Tudor, I think they call the style. Dark wood and white plaster. She looked down at herself, discovering without surprise that she wore blue trousers and an off-white blouse rather than the black work robes in which she'd last seen herself. *And I'm standing in the middle of the road in front of it. I should move if I don't want to be hit by the next car that comes along.*

"But which way do I move?" she wondered aloud. "Towards it, or away?"

Inside the house, a woman began to sing a bouncy little song, bragging about her good looks in a newly acquired piece of clothing. Mare stepped off the road to listen before she knew what she was doing.

I suppose that means it's towards.

Swallowing her sudden attack of nerves, she walked briskly up the path to the front door and knocked.

The singer broke off in the middle of listing the various shades and tints of her latest garment, and footsteps heralded the opening of the door. Mare looked down at a woman about her own age, wooden spoon in her right hand and a smear of flour on the end of her nose, matching the streak of it across the side of her wild brown hair.

And why she makes me think of my "master," I haven't the foggiest.

"Welcome to the Marauders' Den," the other woman said with a smile. "I've been expecting you. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you." Mare set her foot gingerly across the threshold, then followed it with the other when nothing trembled, fell over, or blew up. "I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but I'd like to know exactly where I am. 'The Marauders' Den' isn't very reassuring, and I have work to do tomorrow."

"Don't worry about that." The other woman looked unaccountably sad for a moment. "You'll be back there in plenty of time. I'm Danger, by the way."

“Mare. Is this your home, then?”

“Yes, it is.” Danger led the way down the hall into the kitchen. “Is that Mare short for Mary, or just plain Mare?”

“Just plain, I suppose.” Mare took a seat at the kitchen table as Danger returned to what looked like a piecrust she’d been rolling out. “Did you bring me here?”

“I did.”

“So you have magic.”

“I do.” Danger produced a wand from some hidden pocket and used it to levitate her piecrust into the waiting pan. “Not that it’s terribly strong, except where it needs to be. But that’s beside the point.”

“No, I think it’s very much to the point.” Mare got to her feet. Something about this house and this woman bothered her, like an itch inside her head. “Obviously your magic is strong enough to take me away from where I ought to be and bring me here. Which means it’s strong enough to put me back again. And I’d like it if you’d do that now.”

“May I finish my pie first?” Danger exhibited the crust, now with its edges trimmed to a neat inch past the rim of the pan. “It won’t take me long, and I’m certain to forget how much cinnamon I used on the apples if I stop now. I will take you back where you ought to be as soon as I’m finished, I promise.” Again that strange flash of sadness across her features. “Since it’s what you want.”

“Thank you.” Mare sat down again, ordering her skin to stop prickling as though she were being watched. “It seems like an odd name for a woman,” she said for lack of any other conversational topic. “Danger, I mean.” Belatedly her tone struck her as rude. “No offense intended.”

“None taken, though I hope you won’t mind my saying it’s no odder than Mare.” Danger skillfully poured sliced apples from a mixing bowl into the piecrust. “It was given to me at the age of eight by a friend, after a roller-skating accident.”

Mare smiled in spite of herself. “What did you do, fall down and knock over three other girls?”

“Onto a gravel driveway, no less.” Danger’s eyes left her pie and fixed onto Mare’s face, intent and brown. “My friend made up a rhyme about it, a silly little jingle, and since I’d always hated my given name—”

“That’s wrong,” Mare murmured.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your eyes. They’re wrong.” Closing her own, Mare summoned up the sense she’d discovered earlier in the day, while experimenting with the power she’d used first on her kitchen invaders,

then later on Prince. *If there's something the matter with her eyes, her sight, I might be able to find out what it is and help her...*

Proud of herself for the thought, she opened her eyes, focused them on Danger.

And barely managed to stop the scream.

“What in the world?” Danger dropped the scraper she'd been using to get the last of the apple juices out of her mixing bowl and hurried around the end of the counter. “Uh—Mare, what is it?”

“What's wrong with you?” Mare held up a hand to stop Danger where she was, unsure if it was so she could keep looking at the impossible damage to the other woman or so that she wouldn't have to touch it. “What could do that to you? What have you done to yourself?”

“Can you tell me what you see?”

“Your... self. Your soul, I suppose you'd call it. It's *torn*. There are pieces of it, pieces of *you*, just gone. Missing. One here...” Mare touched the side of her own head. “And one here...” The hand moved down to her chest, in the approximate location of her heart. “And two more. Here and there.” She tapped her right hand with her left, then pointed to her left foot. “I'm sorry to make a fuss, but it was...”

“Startling?” Danger suggested. “Unexpected?”

“To say the least.” Mare blinked her eyes twice, returning them to normal sight and Danger to her non-mutilated condition. “Is it anything you can explain? A soul-eating monster of some kind, or a near-death experience?”

“Nothing quite so dramatic.” Danger ran her hand along the edge of the kitchen table. “I'm married, and my husband and I share a special bond, one that links our minds and souls. It also means I fall ill if I'm away from him for more than a day, but I never want to be, so that usually works out well. But a few days ago, he was badly hurt, and two of my dearest friends in the world were kidnapped. I had a chance of finding them, but only if I suspended my bond with my husband so that I could be away for the time required. I love my friends dearly, and I want them back more than anything in the world except to have him well again, so...”

“So you went for it.” Mare nodded. “Is that what I'm seeing, then? The suspension of that bond?”

“I think it must be. Head for mind, chest for heart, and hand and foot because that's what it feels like I'm missing, not having him with me.” Danger pressed her fingers against the inside corners of her eyes. “Expecting twenty, thirty, fifty times a day to hear his voice inside my head, and having to remember every time that I won't, that I can't until this job is done and I can go home to him.”

“It sounds a bit invasive to me,” Mare said frankly. “Having someone else inside your mind all the time.”

“It could be. It probably should be. But when it first started...” Danger shook her head, not in negation but in wonder. “We were both in mourning—more than just ordinary sadness, our whole worlds had fallen apart. His dearest friends had died only a few months ago, and I had lost my parents a few months before that, so neither of us had anyone left to turn to. It was such a relief to have someone again that we didn’t care how strange it was to have it happen that way. Our souls really were torn then, I think, ripped apart with pain and grief and anger, and when the torn places came together...”

“They mended one another.” Mare looked around for a box of tissues, spotted one on a bookshelf behind her, and rather than get up reached into her pocket. A slender rod of rosewood met her fingers, and she pulled it out and waved it casually at the tissues. They lifted off from the bookshelf, soared over her head, and landed on the table beside Danger with a muffled thump.

“Thanks.” Danger extracted a tissue from the box and blew her nose. “And yes, that is what I think happened. Because we were both still wounded, still torn apart, when we came together, we healed as one, not two. Which makes it sound like a horror movie, like Dr. Frankenstein—”

“Frawn-kun-steen,” Mare corrected under her breath, then frowned. *Where is this coming from? This isn’t me. I don’t like it.*

“However you say it.” Danger laughed weakly. “It isn’t like that at all. I can see how it could be, how someone could use it to take advantage or to play some very nasty games, but when we’re so close, anything that hurts one of us hurts the other one as well, so we learned early on how to give and take, how to respect privacy and deal with problems. We’re far from perfect, but it works.”

“Good to know.” Mare discovered that she was still running the rosewood—*wand, it’s a wand, I might as well call it one*—through her fingers, and set it down firmly on the table. The warmth and tingling in her hand faded as she let it go, and she exhaled what she told herself was a sigh of relief, not of regret.

Any magic I’ve got is tied up in healing. And occasionally in hurting. A little thrill ran through her at the knowledge that she could defend herself now, could defend Prince, from the casual cruelties of the wizards at the manor. I’ll have to learn to regulate it better, maybe see if I can do it from a distance, but it’s my own magic and it doesn’t need any special tools. I don’t know how to use a wand, and I don’t see any reason I’d want to.

Her hand started to inch back towards the wand. She pressed it against her side and started around the table to offer Danger another tissue. “I don’t want to push you,” she said as the other woman took it, “but could I help you finish that pie by any chance? You did say you’d take me...” The word she’d intended to use stuck in her throat. “Back, afterwards.”

“Of course, I’m so sorry.” Danger tucked the tissue into her pocket and went to the sink to wash her hands. “Do you really want to help, or were you just trying to find a less rude way to say ‘would you mind getting moving on that blasted pastry of yours?’”

“More the second than the first,” Mare admitted. “I may work in a kitchen, but I’m no cook. I can

reheat what the house-elves bring down, and that's about it."

"Understood, and there's not much for you to do at this point anyway. It's mostly just..." Danger reached for the rolling pin sitting beside her marble cutting board and knocked over a small dish of flour with her sleeve. "Botheration! No, don't get up, I'll do it," she added, waving Mare back into a seat. "It's my kitchen, I can clean up my own messes... oh!" As she started to go to one knee, her foot skidded on a patch of the spilled flour, and she landed hard on her stomach, turning her head enough that her cheek rather than her chin impacted the floor.

Mare's first instinct was to leap to her feet, to check Danger for possible injuries, to make certain she hadn't been badly hurt, and she was halfway up when she saw something that almost made her fall in her turn, saving herself at the last second by a clutch at the edge of the table.

Spilling out the open collar of Danger's warm red blouse were the fine links of a gold chain, one with four engraved pendants hanging from it, each with a tiny gem winking from near its top.

Danger sat up laughing, brushing flour off her front. "How very graceful. No wonder every man at the ball asks me to dance..." Her face went still as she saw Mare's. "Looking at these?" she asked in a carefully casual tone, hooking both sides of her chain on a finger so that the pendants dangled free. "They were a gift of sorts. Given to me, and to several other people I'm... involved with. Marvelous little toys." She tugged at a section of the chain, and Mare stared as it grew longer between the floury hands. "And that's just one of the things they do. If we both wore mine right now, we could speak silently, mind to mind. But there's no need for that, since we're the only ones here. And I should finish that pie."

"Will that work on anyone?" Mare blurted. "The silent speech. Can anybody wear your chain with you and talk to you inside your head, the way you say you and your husband can all the time?"

"Yes, it will." Danger had her head bent over the second half of her piecrust, rolling it out with sure, firm strokes. "Anyone who'll stand still long enough to let you get it over their head, you can talk with. No words required, just a human mind, or human-equivalent, since you mentioned you know some house-elves."

"Good to know." Mare caught herself reaching for the collar of her own shirt and laced her fingers together in her lap. There was no reason for her to give away her own secrets, no matter how friendly Danger seemed.

The second piecrust, rolled into a neat circle, flopped into its place atop the apples. The edges were trimmed, crimped together, and fluted with the same sureness Danger had used with her rolling pin, and a knife darted in and out of the crust, poking holes to allow steam to escape. Scooping the pie up in one hand, Danger opened the oven with the other and slid it inside, shutting the door with a hip as she reached up to the stove's hood to set the timer there.

This is her place.

It was Mare's first clear thought since her shock over the pendants, and she fixed on it gratefully.

Her place. Her home, but more than that, her domain, her center of gravity. The room in the house where she rules supreme, and others come only on her sufferance.

The conclusion had come to her full-fledged, but the pieces of evidence she had subconsciously collected showed themselves without fuss. *All the equipment is placed where she can reach it easily from one place, or only a step or two away. She didn't have to look around to open the oven door, or to get the towel after she'd washed up. The tools fit her hands, and she uses them like she's been doing it for thirty years and expects to do it for forty or fifty more...*

She looked down at her own hands. One of them was halfway across the tabletop, inching its way towards the rosewood wand.

That will be quite enough of that, thank you very much. Stifling a laugh at the ridiculousness of it all, she grasped the wayward hand by its wrist and returned it to her lap as though it were a naughty child. *Whoever's wand that is, she wouldn't thank me for playing around with it—*

“You can have it if you want.”

Mare whirled in her chair, both hands against her chest. Danger backed up two rapid steps, smiling sheepishly. “Sorry, didn't mean to startle you. But I mean it. If the wand's calling you, take it.”

“It isn't mine. I can't.”

“I know the owner.” The sadness rippled across Danger's face once more, stronger than ever. “Trust me, she'd want you to have it. Please?”

Curse the woman, she does puppy eyes better than Prince. “If you insist.” Mare got to her feet, stepped around the end of the table, and picked up the wand. This time she couldn't lie to herself—the little sigh that escaped was one of relief and comfort, and the warmth that spread through her hand and up her arm was welcome instead of worrying. Clearly some part of her liked this wand and wanted to keep it.

I'll have to hide it well, but I don't suppose there could be any harm in it. Prince might even be able to use it after I find out how to disenchant him.

Or he might teach me how to use it...

She tucked that thought away for further exploration at another time. Anything which made her feel excited and queasy in equal measure needed more study.

“So, my pie's in the oven and I can take you back now if you want to go.” Danger brushed a last streak of flour out of her hair. “But if you'd care to stick around a little while, explore the house some, maybe get the guided tour... I brew a nice cup of tea, if I do say so myself, and pie is for sharing.”

Mare cast a dubious look out the back door, where the shadows were starting to lengthen. “I really should get back before I'm missed.”

“You won’t be.” Danger said it with such utter confidence that Mare found herself nodding before she knew what she was doing. “Would you like to start on this floor or upstairs?”

So I get a tour of a house. How can it hurt? “Upstairs makes more sense. Then we’ll come back here in time for pie.”

“An important consideration.” Danger waved her hand towards the tiled hallway. “After you, m’lady.”

Sweeping a grand curtsy and winning a giggle for it, Mare preceded her hostess through the hall and up the carpeted stairs. “So do you live here with your husband?”

“Yes, and with those friends I mentioned. It’s a long story, but the short version is we came together through circumstance and discovered we liked it. So we’ve kept it up, for our own sakes and for the c—kids.”

Was she just going to say something else there? “You have children?”

“We do, two boys and two girls. They came to us by varied and devious routes, but they’re every one of them ours now...”

Stories of trickery and jokes, of parties and games, kept both women laughing through the tour of the upstairs, until the last room into which Danger ushered Mare. It looked as though it had once been an unfinished attic, but had at some point been cleaned up and transformed into a cozy study. Bookshelves lined the walls, and a desk sat in one corner with an old-fashioned typewriter at its center, piles of typed papers on either side.

“My brother’s workroom,” Danger began, then chuckled once. “My friend, I suppose I should say, we’re not actually related, but we’ve been through so much together, and I miss him so much...”

Mare stopped listening in favor of moving deeper into the room, brushing a finger across the wheeled leather chair, the little spray of glass flowers that decorated one shelf, the dustless keys of the typewriter. This room gave her the same feeling as Danger’s kitchen, that of one presence, one person to whom it belonged, but even had Danger not mentioned her “brother” Mare thought she would have known the room was a man’s. Even the scent lingering in the air was masculine and subtly seductive, earth and musk and clean sweat—

And familiar.

Who do I know well enough to know his smell? And what is it still doing here if he’s been gone long enough that she misses him? She glanced uneasily at Danger, who stood in the doorway with one hand on the frame. *There are things she’s not telling me. I don’t like it.*

But two can play at the game of secrets.

“You must be proud to have a writer in the family,” she said, starting for the door. “Or does he prefer being called an author?”

“Either will do.” Danger tipped her head back and sniffed. “That’s starting to smell wonderful, which means we have another few minutes. Shall we head downstairs?”

A quick swing through the living room, then a small and fairly bare room Danger described as “what would be our formal dining room if we ever dined formally, which we don’t,” and they were back in the kitchen. Danger peeked into the oven and nodded in satisfaction. “We have just enough time to see the music room,” she said, gesturing towards the other corridor leading from the kitchen. “Do you play anything, or sing?”

“I... haven’t,” Mare temporized. “Not for a while.”

It sounds so much better than “I don’t know.”

“Well, if you’d care to try one of ours, feel free. No one’s used them...” Danger smiled. “For a while.”

I deserved that.

The short corridor gave way to the tall-ceilinged room, with its French window leading into the back yard, the fireplace in the far wall, and the grand piano in one corner with a violin sitting on its top. Mare let out her breath in a quiet hum of pleasure and started for the piano. She could almost feel the smooth, glossy surface under her fingers, ready to respond to her pressure, to make the sounds reverberating in her mind a reality—

Halfway there, she stopped, her eye caught by another aspect of the room.

“Where does that door go?”

“Door? Oh, that door.” Danger looked as though she’d like to edge in front of the door, but Mare gave her credit for having enough sense not to try it. “I don’t know if you want to go in there. It’s not always safe.”

“What is it, if you don’t mind?” Mare repeated, holding back her temper. *You were quick enough to show me everything else in your house, you’ve almost shoved it into my face, and now you’re balking at one little add-on room?*

“It’s—my sister uses it. She brews potions there. I don’t know if she’s left anything we shouldn’t disturb, or if she’ll be upset that we went in without her permission—”

“If your brother doesn’t mind us coming in where he writes, I don’t think your sister will mind that we look at her cauldron and ingredients.”

“Well, all right. If you’re sure you have to go in there, don’t let me stop you.” Danger stepped back from the door, her gaze on the floor, a small smile on her face that ought to have been demure and instead had Mare worried. What if this were a set-up? What if there really was something in that room she shouldn’t see? What if—

What if you waste all your time on stupid what-ifs and miss your chance to find out what's in there that's so interesting to you? Go open the door already.

She strode across the room and twisted the knob. The door swung open.

The space beyond was almost painfully neat, a squat iron cauldron hanging in the center, shelves of bottled and jarred ingredients lining the walls. Once more the sense of *presence* swept Mare, but this one shook her as neither of the others had. Whoever Danger's mysterious "sister" might be, she was not a person Mare thought she wanted to cross.

Once she knows what she wants, she won't stop until she has it. She can't always see how to overcome obstacles in her way, but that's why she has her friends to help her. For their sake, for their children's sake, there's nothing she wouldn't do. Even give up—

She pulled herself out of the reverie with a shiver and looked down. Her feet had planted themselves beside the cauldron, and the fire in the brazier below it had sprung to life in response. In her right palm she held a silvery stirring stick, and her left hand was reaching towards a particular shelf. A shelf, she noticed with impossible calm, that was within her easy reach when she stood in this spot. As was every shelf in the room.

"No," she whispered. "No." Gently, deliberately, she set down the stirring stick on one of the countertops, then reached into her pocket and did the same with the wand. "This is yours too, isn't it? I can't take it."

You can't? murmured something, something which might as easily have been the presence in the room as it might have been her own thoughts. *Not even if it's—*

"No." Mare took a step back, lacing her fingers behind her back. "I appreciate the thought, but even if I can't remember most of my own life, I won't take another person's. Thank you, but no."

"As you like," Danger said from behind her, making her jump. "That pie should be done. Would you still care for a piece, or do you need to get back?"

"I think I should go." Mare left the little room as quickly as she could manage without making it look like she was running. "No offense intended to your baking or you, but this isn't where I belong, and I'd rather be where I do."

"None taken." Danger picked up a small ornamental rock, drew her wand, and tapped it, mumbling a word Mare didn't catch. "Here. This will take you back."

"Thank you." Mare held out her hand. "For everything."

"You're welcome." Danger dropped the rock into her palm. "Until next time."

Mare opened her mouth to say that there wasn't likely to be a next time—

And discovered herself flat on her back, staring at the shelving ceiling of her nest.

Was it just another dream, then?

She reached inside the neck of her robes and drew out a gold chain, identical at first glance to the one Danger had worn. Though the light was too dim to show her details, she knew the gems on the pendants differed. Danger's had a full rainbow of colors, red, green, blue, and yellow. Her own gems were three blue and one red.

But that may not make a difference for what I want...

Closing her hands around two pieces of chain, she tugged, and directed a thought at it. *Grow.*

The chain stretched like a lump of clay, and stayed stretched even when she let it go.

Well then. Mare smiled to herself, tucking the extra length back inside her robes and rolling over on her side. *Assuming the rest of it holds true, I may have a way to talk with Prince after all.*

But as nice a girl as Danger seems, I don't think I'll be going there again.

It would be far too easy to fall into that trap.

Alone in the music room of the dream-Den, Danger sank to her knees, then closed her eyes. "Oh, love," she whispered, reaching out her hands in front of her. "If you were only here. If you only knew. You could have done something, you could have helped bring her back to us..."

But how? I heard her say it myself, she won't take what she considers another person's life. I should have expected as much, with her sense of honor. The more she wants it, the more she'll fight against it, because she wouldn't think it was right.

And she'll never believe me if I try to tell her this life is already hers.

A solitary tear escaped her left eye, burning hot in its first inch and cold thereafter. She sniffled once and blotted it away with her sleeve. Tears wouldn't help her now.

I have to think. I have to figure out what to do next. I have to... yawn, apparently. The sleeve moved over to cover her gaping mouth. *What's wrong with—oh. I didn't think of that.*

She opened her eyes, reluctantly. "It took energy to send the dreams without being linked up. Energy I'm not sure I had in the first place. And now..." Another yawn interrupted her.

Now I have to wake up in order to go to sleep.

If I have ever been in a more mixed-up situation than this, I can't remember it.

Oh wait. That would be my entire life.

"Please let them come back to me soon," she whispered, mentally instructing the dream-Den to

return to this moment when she came back to it. “Those crazy, mixed-up, wonderful people called my Pack.”

Because without them, I don't see any point in having a life.

One last longing look around, and Danger pushed herself out of the dream. She surfaced for one instant in her wolf body, long enough to notice that full night had fallen around her, then plummeted back towards sleep.

I hope I'm hidden well enough, was her last, hazy thought. I hope no one finds me...

Then there was nothing.

Padfoot—or *should that be Prince now?*—couldn't get back to sleep. He'd awakened restless after Danger had finished dreaming with him, and his mind was busily constructing scenarios where her goal of contacting Aletha next didn't work, or backfired in some horrible way.

I only wiped out Letha's memories. What if Danger's trying to dream with her accidentally blasts her mind? It could happen. If she's not ready to accept shared dreams, not willing to believe that's possible, it could conceivably—

He rolled over with a loud groan. *I have to stop this. It's going to drive me mad even faster than being stuck as a dog and cooped up in a little cage is doing it. Yes, bad things could happen, but bad things already have happened, and look, I'm still alive, relatively healthy, and in possession of all my limbs and senses. Certain people are not so lucky...*

Danger had brought him the latest news from home (and, to his disgust, from the Dursleys'), as relayed through her brief dreams with Hermione and Draco. He was glad to hear Ron was back up and about, curious to find out what had Percy huddling in rooms with his twin brothers, and agreed with Danger that Draco wasn't telling her everything about his and Harry's situation.

But what can we do about it? Nothing, from here. Except think of them and hope things turn out well. He growled under his breath. *And plan bloody, painful, satisfying fates for the people who got us here...*

“Chasing cats in your sleep, Prince, or does that noise mean you're awake?”

He shot upright and let his tongue dangle in a broad, happy dog-grin. *Who could sleep through so much beauty coming to see them? And she's got something in her hand—Merlin's pointy black hat, has she figured out—*

“I had the strangest dream, all about a girl named Danger,” Aletha said, sitting down beside the bars that divided them. “Some parts of it I'm not sure I cared for, but there was one very important thing I learned.” She allowed several loops of pendant chain to spill from her hand. “Do you know what this does?”

Oh, don't I just. Put it on me, sweetheart, and—

The part of Sirius Black that had, however reluctantly, grown up in the last fifteen years chose this moment to assert itself.

Hold on a second. She said there were things in her dream with Danger that she didn't care for. That means you aren't going to be able to just tell her the truth and have her leap into your arms with a glad cry. Apart from the fact that you don't have arms at the moment, there's something else going on here. So play it cool. Keep it low-key. And for heaven's sake don't scare her off!

So instead of shoving his head through the bars or standing up on his hind legs, he nodded in response to Aletha's question, then scratched at his own neck with a hind leg. *I know what they do just fine. Used to have a set of my own.*

Aletha slid her hand between the bars and took over the scratching duties, making him moan with pleasure. "That would make sense, for you to have them," she mused aloud. "You could fit in that room she showed me, if you're anything like I imagine you." She chuckled, the low throaty sound that always made him melt a little inside. "And why am I sitting here imagining what you're like, when I can find out for real with this? If you'll let me, of course."

In that moment, the master plan formed itself inside Sirius' mind. It would have made, he thought, an excellent novel, and might still make one after this was all over.

With Letha's permission, of course.

His first courtship with his wife had been tumultuous, full of wrong turns and roadblocks, the kinds of things two stupid kids did when they weren't sure what they wanted out of themselves or their own lives, never mind another person. That they had eventually ended up together anyway, and lasted this long, he knew was due far more to Aletha's forbearance and Remus and Danger's mediation than to any contribution of his own.

But I'm older now. I'm smarter, I'm saner, and I'm a whole lot sneakier. And I know how to play all kinds of games. Especially the game called love.

He was going to court Aletha, or Mare if that was what she wanted to be called now, all over again, and do it right this time. He would turn his handicaps into advantages, using everything he knew about men and women in general and himself and her in particular, and he would win her heart starting from scratch. And when she was well and truly won over, he would reveal the truth, and then...

Then, I hope, we all live happily ever after.

He whuffed once in assent and stuck out his neck for the pendant chain.

Such strange things we do for friendship's sake. Even relatively new friends.

Though it's not like I have any older ones to compare it with.

Mare held the glowing basket of crystals one of the house-elves had given her a little higher, trying to see where she was going. The manor house had only a small clearing behind it, with the trees coming up quite close.

Perfect ground for Prince's—no, no, Sirius', I have to remember that—Sirius' friend to hide in.

As she had suspected he would be, her “enchanted prince,” Sirius Black as he had introduced himself in the first few moments of their mental conversation, was both charming and witty. He had made her laugh a dozen times during their brief chat, joking about himself, her, the Death Eaters, the house-elves, and everything else under the sun. Once they had both settled down somewhat from the first flush of successful communication, though, he'd had a request for her.

I have a friend out there, in the woods behind the house, his mind-voice said hesitantly in her memories. She's going to be in the shape of a wolf, like me with the dog, and she's... she isn't well. She needs care. Not nursing, she isn't ill or anything like that, but she's sleeping and she'll be hungry and thirsty when she wakes up. I want to make sure she has water and food nearby, and that she's well enough hidden that no one can find her on a casual walk in the woods.

Naturally, Mare had agreed to go out and find the wolf, to leave her a pan of water and a bowl of meat like the one she brought to Sirius every day. But inwardly, in the part of her mind she didn't allow to show through the chain's connection, she was putting pieces together, and she wasn't sure if she liked the total she was coming up with.

Sirius is Danger's brother, there's no doubt about it. The room she showed me fits him perfectly, down to the scent I get from touching his mind, and he told me himself he writes for a living. So that's solved. But Danger's sister...

She angled the light to one side, straining her eyes. *I saw every bedroom in that house, and only the ones for the children had two beds in them. Ergo, the two people she called her brother and sister are actually married. Which, as she made it clear they're simply her very good friends, isn't as disgusting as it could have been.*

A sleek line caught her eye, and she turned to her left and picked her way through the underbrush. *But I've heard bits and pieces from the Death Eaters about what happened to Sirius. How he was left stranded in his dog form, without the magic to change back. I know he was forced to do something to his wife, and that violated his marriage vow and lost him his magic. I just don't know what that something was, or where his wife is now.*

She went to her knees beside the curled-up form of a shaggy, tan-coated wolf.

But I think I can guess.

“You're very lucky, you know,” she said conversationally, pulling the two metal pans out of the

basket she carried on her shoulder and opening the canteen she'd filled with water in the kitchen. "He seems like a wonderful man. Probably a troublemaker when he was younger, but he's grown up well. Thoughtful, caring, funny... everything an enchanted prince should be, really. If he weren't already taken, I'd fall for him myself. But as it is..."

She dumped the bag of meat scraps into the second pan and laid the covers over both pans, twisting them to lock them on. A human in wolf form would notice the arrow she'd drawn on the covers pointing towards the release button on the side, and be intelligent enough to push that button with a paw, popping the covers off again.

"As it is," she repeated, laying a hand on the wolf's side and feeling it rise and fall, "I'll take good care of him for you, and for Danger. You both deserve to get him back safe and sound. Sleep well, and I'll see you in the morning."

Standing up, she started back to the manor house.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 51: Foretelling and Retelling (Year 6)

Fox lay beside the closed door of what had been Vernon and Petunia Dursley's bedroom with his head pillowed on his paws, trying to remember the proper mental pronunciation for a spell Moony had shown him the day before the attack on Diagon Alley. *What syllable did that accent go on? The "vi" or the "cor"? I think it's the "cor," but I could be wrong...*

Harry was still asleep, probably enjoying the story-dream Danger had given him the night before as a joint birthday present from her and the Founders. The party at the Founders' Castle had gone forward as it usually did, though with two fewer attendees than the year before and several sets of wet eyes throughout the night. Meghan, especially, had been spotted sniffing, but that hadn't stopped her from clinging to her Dadfoot like a goblin with a pile of treasure.

Nice to be human again, even just for the night. Ron enjoyed seeing everybody, and getting back into the air. I wonder if he can still play Quidditch? Hermione doesn't much care for flying.

It wasn't his problem, Fox reminded himself, so he wasn't going to try to solve it. He would stick with the problems that involved him directly.

Like keeping myself from cowering on the floor and whimpering in terror every time a holiday passes, because I know it's my last one...

His birthday the week before had been especially bad. The phrase "Many happy returns," usually as generic a well-wish as "Happy Christmas," bit deep when the person hearing it knew he wasn't going to get even one more.

And here we go on the downward spiral. Fox took himself firmly by the mental scruff of the neck and administered a short, brisk shake. None of that now. Remember what Moony helped you come up with for times like this?

Yes, muttered himself sulkily.

Well, let's hear it then.

Himself pouted but started dutifully reciting. *Dwelling on the future is the same as dwelling on the past or a might-have-been. It means you're not living in the now, which is what we're supposed to do. Besides, everyone's days are numbered. Most people just don't know the number and arbitrarily assume it's high, so they squander their days and throw them away. You won't do that, because you have few enough that every one of them is precious to you now. Enjoy them while they last, and know that your Pack will be with you no matter what happens or where you go.*

The act of recitation broke through the moment of panic, and the ideas contained within it did the rest. Fox sighed, opened his eyes, and shook himself all over. *A course of anti-dementor tablets seems appropriate. After that, I'll see about rousting Harry out of wherever he is and asking if*

he'll share...

He was just about to burrow under the bed in search of Harry's bag and the stash of chocolate contained within when a slight scraping noise from the hallway caught his ear. Cautiously, he poked a paw against the catflap, pushing it outwards a fraction of an inch and applying his eye to the crack.

What he saw had him cursing mentally, both to himself and through the pendant chain. Harry's sense went from "elsewhere" to "here" in a fraction of a second, and from there to "seriously annoyed" within another breath. **This had better be good. I was just about to beat the—**

Dursley's out there with some kind of tube and a handful of sharp pointy things, Fox interrupted. **I don't think he's going to invite us to play jacks with him, or whistle us a happy tune.**

Sorry for snapping. That's more than good enough. Harry grabbed his glasses off the nightstand. **Thoughts?**

Duck? Fox suggested. **He'll be aiming blind, and it should be pretty easy to avoid his shots now that we know he's there.**

True, but I'd rather he not try this again. You might not catch it the next time. Harry slid quietly out of bed and reached underneath it for his bag. **Thoughts on discouraging him?**

Fox licked his chops and looked hopeful. **I think better when I'm fed...**

Harry rolled his eyes and dug out a bar of Honeydukes, snapping a palm-sized piece off and setting it down on a bit of wrapper. Fox trotted over and bit off a chunk, chewing thoughtfully. *How do you tell someone without words that his sharp pointy attentions are unwelcome?*

Here's a thought, Harry said, taking a bite of chocolate for himself. **He'll have the other end of that tube in his mouth, won't he, to blow through it?**

That's how it's done the last time I looked, Fox agreed.

Grinning, Harry pointed towards the chair on which he had hung his day clothes. **Things can go both ways down a tube...**

Dudley Dursley smirked as he prepared his tiny projectiles. The wizard who had given them to him had called them caltrops, and had gone into a long-winded explanation of how they had once been used in warfare to cripple the enemy. Dudley was only interested in the way he was going to use them himself.

They've got a point no matter what way they lie, or fly. And every one of their points has a different potion on it. So depending on which side hits Potter, or if I get him with more than one,

he'll have all these things going wrong with him. Thickening hair, wobbly knees, bits of his body swelling up... The smirk became a grin. *And because he'll be the only one affected by the magic, it'll get him in trouble and not me!*

He loaded the first caltrop into his peashooter, poked it through the catflap, and put his mouth around it.

An instant later, he was coughing and gagging. A blast of sweet liquid had hit him square in the tonsils. "Damn you, Potter!" he sputtered, wheezing in a breath. "I hate—"

He blinked. "No, I don't," he said, beginning to smile. "I don't hate you at all. Why should I hate you? You're my cousin! We're family! I love you!"

Downstairs, a door slammed. "Dudley?" called a man's voice. "Where are you, son?"

"Up here, Daddy!" Dudley beamed and scrambled to his feet, his caltrops flying out of his head. "I'll be right down!"

I can't wait to show my daddy how much I love him, and my mummy—and then I'll go out and show the entire world how much I love them too! Muggles, wizards, I don't care, I love everybody...

Inside the bedroom, Harry had his face muffled in three layers of bedsheet, with only a high keening noise like Wolf in pain emerging. Fox's jaws ached from holding them shut, but he didn't dare let go. **Do we know how soon that pink potion wears off?** he sent instead.

We only ever tested it for skin contact and breathing the fumes, Harry answered, lowering the sheet enough for Fox to see his overly bright eyes. **We didn't check it for swallowing the stuff...**

Fox groaned silently. **You mean we could have to put up with this for the rest of the time we're here?**

You're the Potions expert. You tell me.

Snape's lesson on different ways to administer potions ran through Fox's mind at high speed. **In my expert and professional opinion...**

Yes? Harry lowered the sheet a bit more.

We're doomed.

The sheet came back up immediately.

Mare looked around from her dishes at the soft clearing of a throat. "Yes, are you looking for someone?" she asked the young woman standing in the doorway. *I've seen her before... of course,*

this is Evanie. She looks different when she's not scared out of her wits.

"Only you." Evanie advanced into the kitchen, letting the door close behind her. "I wanted to thank you for what you did for me the other day. I shouldn't have been where I was, and you saved me from the consequences of that."

"Those particular consequences would have been much too harsh for the offence." Mare shook dishwater from her hands and reached for her towel. "Would you care to sit for a minute, or do you need to get back?"

"I'm not on any particular timetable. Peter won't be in until late." Evanie pulled a chair out from the wall and took her seat. "I... have a problem, I don't know what I should do about it, and you're the only person I know here besides Peter. And since the problem involves him, I can't very well ask him to help me."

"Men, as a rule, are not the people to ask for help with problems," Mare said dryly, making Evanie giggle a bit. "So what's the problem? Or is part of it that you don't know what it is, exactly?"

"You do understand. I thought you might." Evanie leaned back in her chair, some of the tension going out of her shoulders. "I know it's to do with Peter, and with magic, and with what happened to me and what's happening now. Being here, I mean, and not back where I came from. The other teachers and the matron at the Home must think I've run off with Annette..."

A few gentle questions and a handkerchief later, Mare was in possession of the story of Evanie's immediate past, and more of the girl's background than she thought Evanie was aware she'd revealed. *Someone hurt her, very badly, when she was young, and she feels like she's done the same now, like she's responsible for that little girl's death. She'll have to come to terms with that on her own, I can't change it, but I can find out what else is troubling her.*

"So he claimed you, and you went with him willingly because you thought he might be salvageable," she said at the end of Evanie's explanation about herself and Peter. "Has he done anything to change your mind?"

"No, not at all. Everything's going so well. Which is what has me worried." Evanie shook her head. "Why couldn't I trust him enough to ask if he would take me outside? Why did I have to go on my own, and nearly get..." A brief shudder cut off the last word. "What's the matter with me?"

"What's the matter with you?" Mare laughed aloud. "I'd be asking what was the matter with you if you *had* trusted him that much! You've only known him a few days, and you know next to nothing about him or his life, except that he's a follower of a nasty evil wizard, however unwilling he may seem to be! You're having a perfectly natural reaction, wanting to take care of yourself, so don't you dare start casting blame. Look for ways to fix that lack of knowledge, maybe, but get it out of your head right now that it's a lack in you."

"I'll try." Evanie drew a deep breath, let it out, and allowed the smallest of smiles to creep onto her face, though it slid away as she began to speak again. "But how am I supposed to get to know him

better without asking him? No one around here who knows him would talk to me, and they all think he's beneath their notice anyway. Except..." A speculative look blossomed in her eyes. "That dog, the one who barked to tell you someone was coming..."

"He's not a dog, or he wasn't always," Mare corrected. "His name is Sirius, Sirius Black, and he's a man under that fur. We've been talking, he and I."

"So you have a way to talk to him? For him to talk back, I mean, you could always talk to him, but does he have some way to answer you now?" Evanie sat up straighter. "He knew Peter a long time ago, Peter said so himself. Maybe he would talk to me, tell me more about Peter and what happened to him. Why he is the way he is."

"He might." Mare checked the clock hanging on the wall. Its hands were still pointing to *All quiet on the downstairs front*, which told her no Death Eaters were within walking distance. "Come with me. We'll ask him together."

After I talk to him first.

I have a few ground rules I'm going to lay down.

Padfoot was rolling on one of the rougher spots on his floor, trying to scratch a persistent itch on the top of his head, when he heard the footsteps coming. Aletha's were as familiar to him as her voice, and the other, lighter set he identified by the scent wafting in front of them as little Evanie Meade.

With Wormtail's stink all over her. He growled under his breath. *You'd better be treating her well, you scummy rat...*

Aletha rounded the corner, and Padfoot shook off the momentary bad mood that thinking about Wormtail always produced in him. For these few seconds, while she greeted him, he could pretend that nothing had changed, that they were playing a game together and could end it at any time they chose, that they would stroll out of here when they decided they were through and Apparate home to Headquarters, that Meghan would be waiting impatiently at the door and the other cubs would tear themselves away from their absorbing pursuits to come claim their own hugs...

It's going to happen. He filed the mental image away under I for "inspiring" and angled his head for better scratching position. *I have to believe that it's going to happen for us, or I'll lose all my faith in everything. So it's going to happen, and I'm going to take things one step at a time until it does.*

"I understand you and Evanie have already met," Aletha said, breaking into Sirius' thoughts. "She wants to ask you about a... mutual friend. Will you excuse us for just a moment, Evanie? I want to make sure I understand how to extend the chain far enough to include you."

Evanie looked slightly puzzled, but nodded, stepping around the corner and out of sight.

Aletha leaned in close to Sirius and tossed her chain over his furry head. **She wants to know about Peter Pettigrew**, she said without preamble. **About his life, his past, what makes him the way he is. Are you going to be able to talk to her without prejudice?**

Sirius blinked several times. **Come again?**

Don't lie to her, but don't let whatever that nasty taste is in your mind color everything you tell her either. Aletha's eyes were fixed on his. **I don't care if he wrecked your life or if he's personally responsible for everything bad that ever happened to you. Give her the truth, without spinning it either way, up or down. Weren't you friends with him once?**

Once. A long time ago. Sirius bared his teeth at the memory. **And he *did* wreck my life—or tried to, anyway. You want me to whitewash him, is that it? Well, the answer's no. I'm not going to do it.**

Good, because that's not what I asked you! Aletha rapped him on the top of the head with her open hand. **What I said, which you would have heard if you had been listening instead of just reacting to a name, was to *tell her the truth* . It's what she wants, and it's what she deserves. All I'm asking you to do is not to color it. Tell her what he did, and when, and how. If she asks you why, either admit you don't know or take your best guess. Do *not* say "Because he's a gutless little bastard and I hope he rots in hell for it." Which is what's in the back of your mind, unless I'm very much mistaken.**

You're not, Sirius admitted. **But how am I supposed to take myself out of what happened to me, what's still happening?**

Aren't you the great writer, the one who can make the story come out any way he wants? Aletha's mental tone teased and scolded in equal measure. **Pretend this is one of your stories. It isn't real, it's happening to people in your imagination, and you have to get inside all their heads in turn to make the story work right. Well, it's Peter Pettigrew's turn to have the spotlight. Can you give it to him without tinting it any particular color?**

Sirius closed off a section of his mind and had a small, private tantrum. *No, I can't, and even if I could, I won't! He is personally responsible for everything that's happened to me, he's not one bit sorry about any of it, and now you want me to praise him to the skies to this innocent little Muggle girl and make her happy that he's claimed her, like a piece of luggage he'd lost? I won't be responsible for something like that, I just won't...*

I can try, he answered with the other part of his mind. **Send her over.**

Stories are my business. More than ever, since I'm out of Auroring for good unless a miracle happens. He let his tail brush back and forth across the stones as Evanie reappeared. *And if anyone around here ought to have a rewrite from the word "go," it's Wormtail. He's done plenty of things wrong, but he isn't exactly a free agent these days, and maybe he never was. Even if he did make that first choice by himself, to join up with the Death Munchers and get the snazzy tattoo, I can't believe he really understood what would be involved. Not the way somebody like Bella or Lucius*

did. And once he was in, there was no way out.

He watched Evanie take her seat on the floor, accept the handful of chain Aletha offered her, and slide it over her head. *They lied to him, threatened him, manipulated him, and he fell for it. He always was a credulous little son of... whatever you call a female rat. There is no excuse for what he did, and I'm never going to like him again. But I can tell the truth about him, to myself, to Evanie, maybe even to him someday.*

I owe us all that much.

So you want to know about little Petie, do you? he began, and saw the shock and amazement on Evanie's face fade into a delighted smile that told him he had made the right decision. **Let me tell you, the first time I laid eyes on him—opening day of school, it was—you never saw a scareder-looking kid, nor one so eager to please absolutely everybody around him...**

Ron bent over the workbench his dad had helped him erect in the Pride's den, peering through Neenie's eyes at the object he was disassembling. The birthday party at the Founders' Castle had given his spirits a boost at the same time as it had depressed him. He hadn't known that was possible.

Emotions are complicated things, Neenie said, kneading his shoulder for a moment, her claws extending just enough to touch his skin before withdrawing. **You had fun seeing everyone, and seeing in general, but now we're back to everyday life and you're wondering if you'll ever have that again.**

"Pretty much." Ron pulled free a section of the object and set it aside. "I hate taking up all your time like this. You must have better things to do than sit here and be my eyes..."

A paw smacked him on the upper half of the ear, claws fully extended this time.

"Ow! All right, all right, I get it, you don't like me saying that." Ron rubbed at the point of impact and grumbled in his throat when his fingers came away damp. "That doesn't stop it being true. You've got a life, Hermione, and it isn't all about me. I'm in there, but I can't be the only thing in it or you'll go mad and so will I. Any genius ideas yet about what else we could do?"

Nothing yet. Neenie sighed. **Mostly I keep wishing Letha was here. Especially now that we know she has the Ravenclaw gift. She might be able to work around that mirror-maze Healer Young was talking about, or even bypass it somehow, come up with a completely different way of handling the problem. And since the hidden message in all of that is that I don't have any new ideas, why don't we talk about something else for a while? What are you doing?**

"Taking apart Harry's Omnioculars." Ron removed another portion of gold casing and piled it atop the first. "He asked me to in his last letter, you remember. Thought I might be able to work out how they do all the things they do."

Yes, but I don't quite understand why he wants to know it. Does he want you to make him his own personalized pair, maybe smaller so he can carry them more easily for DA missions?

"Yes and no. He does want them smaller, and personalized, but he won't just be carrying them for DA stuff." Ron grinned to himself. "Smart girl like you, I'm surprised you haven't figured it out already..."

Neenie growled. **Stop teasing and just tell me.**

"He wants to find out how much of this I can put into his glasses." A tiny silver ball vibrated with magic when Ron ran a finger across it. He drew his wand to remove it without destroying the charms. "If he could have dials on his earpiece to pause what he's seeing, slow it down or play it back. Maybe even see through walls like Moody's eye, or see at night like you and Wolf do. The more I can get in there without changing the way his glasses look now, the better."

Because everyone knows Harry wears glasses, so they won't think anything of it if he plays with them, and he'll have those abilities on hand at all times. Ron, that's fantastic!

"Oi!" Ron exaggerated his shiver as Neenie pressed her cool nose against his neck. "I didn't think it up, I'm just working on it. Save the hero-worship for the bloody Chosen One, hmm?"

You know he'll hex you upside down if he catches you calling him that, eyes or no eyes. And your "just working on it" might save his life one day. The furry body pressed against his shoulders began to vibrate, unknotting muscles kinked with work and worry. **I'm allowed to be grateful for the good work you do, aren't I?**

"At least wait until we see if I can actually make it happen," Ron muttered. "Do you know if he's got a spare set of glasses around anywhere? If all the magical drivers are the same size as this one, I might be able to get everything in and still have room to come up with something for the night vision..."

Fortunately for Harry and Fox's aching sides, the love potion wore off Dudley within half an hour, but they had to avoid one another's eyes for the rest of the day. Even while they were both doing homework, Harry at the desk finishing his History of Magic essay, Fox curled up on the bed with his Care of Magical Creatures text, it was hard to keep straight faces. Finally, the sun sank below the horizon, the air cooled down enough to make sleep a viable possibility, and both boys put away their books and started preparing for bed. Harry, who needed the bathroom for longer, got it first, and Fox was reciting the different breeds of winged horse to himself when he heard a familiar scraping sound from the hallway.

Company, he sing-songed mentally, and dove under the bed as the catflap rattled.

"Yes?" Harry called from the bathroom, sounding like he had a mouthful of soapsuds—*which he may, if he's in the middle of brushing his teeth.*

"You think you're funny, Potter." The whisper was colder than anything so impersonal should be. "You think you can do that to me and get away with it."

Harry spat into the sink. "It's called defending myself," he said, filling a glass of water from the tap. "Leave me alone and we won't have any more problems."

"Leave you alone?" Dursley snorted, the catflap bouncing with his breath. "I could leave you all the way alone if I wanted to. Talk my precious mummy and daddy into a long holiday, far away from here. Tell them you'll take care of yourself, magic up food and such. Only you can't, can you? You can't make food out of magic, and you wouldn't dare in any case, because they'll expel you from Hogwarts for underage wizardry."

Rinsing his mouth, Harry spat again. "Finished?" he asked, stepping out of the bathroom and taking a seat on the bottom of the bed. "I was hoping to get to sleep at some point tonight."

Dursley laughed. "You go on and sleep, Potter. See what you wake up with. Or if you wake up at all."

Fox thrust his nose forward, inhaling, and flattened himself against the floor as he caught Dursley's scent. **Keep him talking about that**, he sent urgently to Harry. **We've got to know more.**

"Why wouldn't I wake up?" Harry asked coolly. "Because of you? You haven't got the stones for killing. Cheap little nasty tricks, that's all you're good for."

"Fat lot you know." Dursley achieved an audible smirk. "Anniversary of my first kill's tomorrow. One year."

Two mental voices blended on the same expletive.

"We already knew Dursley was a lying Slytherin," Ron said in the Pride's den the next day, amusing himself by building a maze out of dominoes for his chessmen to run through. "Now we know he's a lying, murdering Slytherin. What's the difference? He knows he can't get away with doing Harry, not with letters going back and forth every day, and he doesn't even know Fox is there."

"The difference is, he *killed* somebody." Ginny reached over and flicked her brother's ear where it was still red and raw from Neenie's claws. "He slipped some poor woman a dose of poison last summer, and made it look like she grieved herself to death over her favorite dog. We can't let him get away with that."

"We won't." Neville didn't look up from the book he was sharing with Meghan, but his voice held the flat finality of someone stating an established fact. "We may have to wait until Harry and Draco get home, just to be sure he doesn't try to take it out on them, but Mum has already started the proceedings with the Enforcers to check into that death. If Dursley was the woman's only

contact with the wizarding world, and they find she was killed with a magical poison..."

Ron brought his hands together with a loud smack. "Got him."

"Only they won't."

Five heads turned to focus on Luna. "Who won't what?" Meghan asked, closing the book on her finger. "Do you mean they won't find the poison?"

Luna shook her head. "They may find it," she said. "But by then, it will be too late." Her eyes were unfocused, her breathing shallow and rapid. "The blood, the blood, everything circles back to the blood. Blood that protects, blood that stains, blood that marks, blood shed by blood, blood bred by blood..."

Ginny stopped the recitation by clapping a hand over Luna's mouth. "Calm down," she ordered, taking Luna's hand in her free one. "Breathe, and get it into order. Help us understand it."

"Yes." Luna nodded, her eyes beginning to clear. "Yes, order will help."

"Get her something to drink," Ginny mouthed at Neenie, and Ron set his dominoes aside and started for the door. "You're going to be all right, Luna. We're here. That sounded like a rough one."

"It was." Luna smiled at Meghan as the younger girl slid a finger across Luna's forehead. "Thank you, that does feel better. I haven't had anything that ugly, or that harsh, in a long time. It caught me up and I couldn't stop saying what I saw..."

"Sounds like what you saw was pretty gruesome, too," said Ron, coming back into the room with a tray of cold drinks in his hands. "Winky sent these up. Lemon squashes and water, and snacks to follow when we want them."

"You mean you don't right now?" Meghan widened her eyes in mock innocence, until Neville touched her shoulder and she subsided. "Sorry."

"It's fine." Ron held up his lemon squash so that Neenie could lap a few mouthfuls. "Hearing about blood, blood, blood, isn't going to make me all that hungry."

Meghan grimaced and nodded, choosing water for both herself and Neville. Ginny took a lemon squash for herself and handed Luna a glass of water, sitting down beside her friend with her legs folded under her. "We're all listening," she said. "Take your time."

"It wasn't very nice." Luna sipped at her water. "Dursley thinks a lot about blood. About bloodlines, and blood purity, and if there could be some way to make himself more accepted by the people he wants to be more like. The purebloods, the ones who think that's the most important thing about them."

"The Death Eaters." Neville set down his glass. "Is he hoping if he kills enough Muggles, they'll

overlook his parents being Muggles themselves?"

"Yes and no." Luna frowned. "I didn't understand it all. What did I say, does anyone remember?"

Neenie slid down from Ron's shoulders and retransformed. "'Blood that protects,'" she recited. "'Blood that stains, blood that marks.' And then there was 'blood shed by blood,' and then 'blood bred by blood.'"

"And then Ginny stopped me." Luna half-closed her eyes. "The blood that protects is Harry's mother's, and her relations', with the blood wards. Blood that stains is on Dursley's hands, because he's killed already and wants to do it again. But his blood marks him, sets him aside from the place he wants to be. So he wants to..."

"Yes?" Ron prompted when Luna didn't continue. "He wants to what?"

"I don't know. But I know it isn't good and we won't like it when it happens." Luna smiled wanly. "I'm sorry it isn't clearer. And the one thing that is clear about it, I don't like."

"What's that?" asked Meghan when it was clear no one else would.

Luna stared into her glass. "I don't know how or why," she said, tracing a finger through the condensation on its outside. "But Dudley Dursley will never stand trial for what he's done."

If only life could stay the way it's been the past few days, I would be a happy woman.

Mare bent backwards, stretching against her aches, then straightened with a sigh. I get my work out of the way in the mornings. After that, Evanie comes to visit with me and give me the news of the world as relayed by her Peter, and then we both go to see Sirius and listen to his stories...

Sirius might have been bragging a trifle when he had told her about his writing, Mare thought, but his skills in storytelling more than lived up to his boasts. He had made Evanie—and me too, since it's my chain they have to use to talk with—see the proud towers of Hogwarts, the still waters of the lake, the darkness of the Forbidden Forest, the shabby and secretive Shrieking Shack.

But even more than the places, it's the people. He makes them come to life for you, until you think you might meet them around the next corner. Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, Sprout and Flitwick and Hagrid... James, Lily, Remus, Peter, and...

She stopped, frowning. There always seemed to be a gap in Sirius' stories of long ago, a missing person or figure, a name he never mentioned. She had her own suspicions as to who that was, and why.

It has to be his wife. There's no one else whose absence would cause him that much pain. If it were someone he'd lost back then, he would have worked through some of that grief by now, the way he has for the Potters. No, this is a fresh loss, and I think I could put my hand on the person.

If that's the right word for her these days.

Picking up a bowl of meat similar to the one she'd brought Sirius earlier, she set out through the twisting corridors towards the back door. Her other canine friend would be waiting for her in the woods.

I've tried to get my chain on her, but she just backs away. Either she doesn't want to talk to me or she's lost more of her human mind than Sirius did. Mare smiled as her plans for later in the night bubbled to the surface of her thoughts. *Still, there's no doubt she understands me when I talk to her, and I think she'll like hearing about what I'm going to do tonight...*

Stepping out the back door into the golden light of sunset, she shaded her eyes with her free hand and peered around. "Princess," she called. "Where are you?"

A low whuff answered her, and the shaggy-coated wolf bounded out of hiding behind a bush and romped up to her, circling her playfully three times while sniffing at the bowl.

Sirius was my prince, so why not extend the idea? It's not like I know her real name or anything.

"Here you are," Mare said, setting the bowl down. "Would you like to hear something funny?"

Princess snapped up the first chunk of meat and twitched an ear in what Mare took for assent.

"All right. Tonight, I'm going out visiting." Mare sat down on the edge of the old-fashioned stone well which graced the clearing beside the kitchen door. "I've been getting the house-elves to show me bits and pieces of the house, and now I have a few important bedrooms located. Such as the room in which one Lucius Malfoy, otherwise known as my 'master,' takes his repose."

Big brown eyes fixed on Mare in astonishment.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not going to murder him in his sleep or anything. Though I'm sure he deserves it, if I only knew everything he's done." Mare drew one knee up to her chest, enjoying this. "No, I'm going to do something far worse to him. I'm going to be *nice* to him. To do something that will make him happy, and leave him wondering who did it—and why."

Tail waving idly to and fro, Princess sat down. Her cocked head was as good as a banner shouting *Tell me more!*

"Well, I know from Sirius' stories and what I've heard around the house that Mr. Malfoy has always been very vain." Mare pretended to examine herself in a mirror, frowning and brushing at a bit of imaginary dirt on her face. "So what he minds most about being a werewolf isn't the transforming or the pain or the social ostracism. It's that while he was transforming uncontrolled, when there was nothing else there for him to attack, he attacked himself, and being a prisoner in Azkaban at the time, his wounds were never treated. Which means his face is terribly scarred."

Princess' tongue was starting to loll in what Mare had learned to read as a canine expression of good humor. Her tail thumped against the ground, raising dust in the early August heat.

"Tonight, I plan to use my powers for good." Mare waggled her fingers towards Princess. "Lucius Malfoy will wake up tomorrow morning without a scar on him." She stopped, reconsidering. "Or no, maybe I'll leave him one, to point up how good he looks without them. How about... right here." She laid a finger on her own face, beneath her left eye. "A little mark straight up and down, an inch long or thereabouts. What do you think?"

Emitting a high-pitched whine of glee, Princess flopped over and began to roll in the dust, her paws wagging ecstatically. Mare laughed aloud and reached down to scratch the wolf's belly. "I'm glad you approve."

And I wish there were more I could do for you. Absently, she extended her powers into Princess' body. I wish I could make you human again, get you back to your husband, make Sirius as happy as he deserves to be...

With a little yip, Princess squirmed out from under Mare's hands, scrambled to her feet, and bolted into the woods.

"Did I hurt you?" Mare asked aloud, blinking after the disappearing wolf. "Or..."

Or is it that whatever spell you're under doesn't want to be lifted?

Her eyes narrowed in speculation.

It's time I got a few answers around here.

First thing tomorrow, I'm asking Sirius what exactly they made him do to the woman he loves.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 52: Reversals (Year 6)

Danger skidded to a halt in her hiding place and flopped down on her side, panting. Her thoughts ran in circles in her mind, frightened rabbits without a hole in sight.

She almost had me. She was much too close to sensing who I was. Just another few seconds and she would have known.

Do I dare go back? Will she talk to me again? Will she be too angry? Will she care at all?

All of which added up to the sixty-four thousand Galleon question: *What am I supposed to do now?*

She'd never thought of herself as a weak person. Not particularly strong, perhaps, but able to keep going through most things. Losing her parents and being left to raise Hermione alone, discovering she was a true-dreamer and magic was real, falling in love and plotting a double abduction in a whirlwind two days, none of it had ever done what her current isolation and uncertainty was threatening to do.

It's cut my feet out from under me. I can't stand back up and keep going this time, because I don't know which way to go. Even if I can get into the manor, find Sirius and let him loose, change him back to human and give him one of the cubs' potion pieces so he can fight, he won't leave without Aletha. And Aletha won't leave with us, because she doesn't remember who she is or where she belongs.

We could make her come along...

The thought had no sooner occurred to Danger than she rejected it. *That's a perfect way to gain her trust again, isn't it? Ambush her, kidnap her, force her into something she doesn't want. No, if she's going to come with us, it has to be open and willing. Nothing underhanded.*

She closed her eyes wearily, letting out a long sigh. *Oh, Remus, this is why I need you. You understand people so much better than I do. You would know the perfect way to get at Aletha—or should I call her Mare? You could make her trust you, make her listen when you told her the truth, make her... not fall into your arms, maybe, but at least be willing to take your hand!*

A patch of fur just below Danger's eye went several shades darker with moisture.

I need you. We need you. Please, come back to us soon...

In a small, neat bedroom at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Remus Lupin stirred, his fingers twitching, then relaxed once again into unconsciousness. By the time Meghan and Madam Pomfrey arrived at a run, there was no sign he had moved, but Madam Pomfrey announced the

monitoring spells were working perfectly.

"Have a look for yourself," she told Meghan. "Look only, no touching, but go on and do it."

Meghan closed her eyes for a second, whispered a few words to herself, and opened them with an extra sparkle added to the silver. "He did move," she murmured, reaching for her wand. Madam Pomfrey moved to stop her, and Meghan made an indignant noise. "Not on *him!* Just on the bed!"

"All right, but no accidentally-on-purpose missing, now."

A sniff greeted this. "*Revelio caloris* ."

The duvet lying over Remus gained two or three spots of dull red, including one, just beside his hand, clearly shaped like two fingers pressed together.

"It's showing us where it's warmer than the rest, you see?" Meghan bounced on her toes. "His hand was on that one spot, it warmed it up, and now it's not there anymore so he must have moved!"

"Yes, he must have." Madam Pomfrey smiled despite herself. Meghan's enthusiasm was infectious. "And what else do you see?"

Meghan reeled off the proper Healers' technical terms for what her powers were telling her, then turned the full power of her pleading eyes on Madam Pomfrey. "So he's starting to get well?"

Madam Pomfrey hesitated. She had dealt with recoveries from Dark spells before, and the only thing certain about them was uncertainty. Sometimes the victims recovered completely, sometimes they didn't, and sometimes, without warning, they died. Often, that happened when it looked as though recovery had begun, the Dark wizard's last little joke on the victim's family and friends.

But I know those spells. I know their symptoms, their tell-tales. This is not one of them.

I know it could be a new one, a new variant, an old one brought back into use...

She looked down at the eyes turned up to hers, begging silently for this scrap of good news after more pain than any thirteen-year-old girl should have to deal with, Healer apprentice or not.

"Yes," she said. "He's starting to get well."

Take note, whoever you were that cast this spell. If you make me into a liar, I will find you, and I will illustrate to you why you do not ever want anyone trained in Healing angry with you.

When we know how you go together, we also know how you come apart.

Dudley was grateful his face was hidden under his white mask. A combination of the heat and his recurring thoughts about the way his cousin had forced his prank to backfire on him had turned his

skin what he was sure was an unattractive shade of magenta.

He'll pay for it soon, he reminded himself. Potter will pay. I've made sure of it. Potter will pay, and I'll get everything I want, all at the same time...

The business of the meeting went on unnoticed as he began to fantasize about the life he would lead after it was over. As the one who had made it possible for the Dark Lord to destroy Harry Potter, he would, of course, become fabulously rich and powerful. Pureblood witches would fling themselves at him, begging him to be their partner in the all-important work of replenishing the wizarding population, and when he was tired of them, he'd take his pick from the blood traitors, Mudbloods, and Muggles. No matter what he wanted, he could have it.

And no one will ever dare say no to me, ever again.

It was the fulfillment of his childhood wish, and all he'd have to do to obtain it were two very simple things. Two obstacles stood between him and what he wanted, and he was going to be practical, right-thinking, and Slytherin about that.

He was going to remove them.

"Dudley?" the Dark Lord's voice cut into his thoughts. "Is everything prepared for your part of our little exercise?"

"Perfectly, my lord." Dudley didn't bother to muffle his laugh the way he would have done at home. "They'd go to Australia if I told them to. Going to the end of the street won't bother them. When their tiny Muggle brains finally work out what's happening to them, it'll be too late."

"Excellent." The Dark Lord smiled, thin and cruel. "By this time tomorrow, Harry Potter will be unprotected, and the way finally clear for my triumph..."

Harry jerked awake to find his sheets soaked with sweat and Fox standing over him, jaws open. "Gah!"

Sorry, don't—

Thud.

Oops? Fox peered off the edge of the bed at Harry, now lying on the floor and swearing under his breath. **I swear I wasn't trying to scare you. Just trying to work out how to get you out of—**

It's tomorrow.

Beg pardon?

Tomorrow. Harry rolled onto his side, rubbed his shoulder with a wince, and sat up. **He's got something planned to break the blood wards, get in here and take me, and he's got it planned**

for tomorrow. We have to be ready to run.

Oh, joy. My favorite thing. Fox leapt down from the bed and shook his head hard. **Back to the Hogwarts Den?**

Unless Moony unexpectedly comes out of it, yes. Harry glanced towards the desk, where Meghan's hurriedly-written note rested. **Which is a little more possible than it seemed yesterday, but still not all that likely. So yes.**

Ah, sweet humanity. Or Wolfiness, for you. And being able to see more people than just the two of us, and the others in an occasional dream. Fox thumped his tail against the floor as Padfoot might, trying for a cheerful tone. **And—this isn't helping, is it?**

What was your first clue? Harry balled his hand into a fist and drove it into the side of the mattress. "I hate this," he muttered aloud, his voice thick with anger. "I hate every bloody second of it. What was the point? What was the point of any of it? Of sticking us away out here, and making you stay as Fox for nearly two weeks, and everything else we've done? What good did it do? None, that's what. No good at all. We'll end up back where we started, less one spot to run to, and where do we go after he gets in there? Where are we supposed to go when—"

How's your Occlumency coming? Fox interrupted.

"My—what?"

Occlumency. You know, the whole clear your mind, focus on one thing, make it your shield bit. How're you doing with it?

Harry suggested something unpleasant-sounding Fox could do with Occlumency, and it with him.

No thanks. But I think you'd feel better if you tried it right now. Call it a hunch. Don't actually call up any fire or we'll get tagged for underage, but see what happens if you shield...

The look on Harry's face had Fox biting down on his courage so as not to back away, but the green eyes closed and the mental feel went from "angry" to "preoccupied". Fox crossed his back paws—*closest thing I have to fingers at the moment*—and concentrated on leaving his own power open along the Pride-bond, in case Harry needed extra.

With what I think he's fighting, he'll need all the help he can get.

A few moments later, Harry's mind cleared in a rush, and he leaned back against the nightstand. "I'm an idiot," he said without opening his eyes. "He was still here, wasn't he?"

Not exactly, I don't think. Fox stood on his hind legs and picked up Harry's glasses by one earpiece, dropping them neatly into his brother's hand. **He can't get into your head on purpose here, remember. But you were still linked up with him residually from seeing into his mind, and that wasn't helping your mood any.**

"Not that it needed helping at all. I was just woken up at midnight—" Harry opened his eyes and craned his neck to see the alarm clock. "No, two in the morning, so much better. At two in the morning by finding out an evil maniac wants me dead and thinks he can manage it by tomorrow night. Why would that bother me?"

Can't imagine. I'd think you ought to be used to it by now.

Harry flicked Fox on the back of the head. "Shut it. So tomorrow, we finish our homework, pack, and go over how we're getting out of here without breaking too many laws."

Can we break the house?

"I doubt we'll be back, so go for it."

Fox cackled with glee and rubbed his front paws together. **Destruction... mwahahahaha...**

"All right, now you're scaring me."

Ginny opened her eyes, confused. The small, repetitive noise was much too quiet to be her alarm, but it had pulled her out of sleep anyway. What could it be—

Her brain cleared enough for the exact nature of the sound to register, and she was out of bed in an instant, snagging the box of tissues off the nightstand as she went and tossing a hairbrush across the room at Meghan. "Luna," she said urgently, grabbing her friend's shoulder and shaking her, interrupting the small, choked sobs. "Luna, wake up. You're dreaming."

Meghan sat up, rubbing her elbow and glaring at Ginny. Ginny glared back, indicated the white-faced and trembling Luna, and jerked her head towards the door. "Get her dad," she mouthed, and Meghan, after one more scowl for form, shoved her feet into her slippers and darted off.

"Bad dream?" Ginny asked, helping Luna sit up and holding the tissues where her friend could see them.

"Yes." Luna wiped her eyes clear and inspected her hand closely. "It's clean. It looks clean. But it wasn't clean then. It was covered. My hands, my mouth, all over me, Ginny, it was everywhere." She shuddered. "I could *taste* it. I still can."

Ginny dug in the pocket of her dressing gown for her wand, then Summoned a glass from the bathroom and filled it with water. Luna drank a few sips and set the rest aside. "Thank you," she said. "It helps."

"You're welcome." Ginny weighed her options and decided knowing was the lesser evil. "What could you taste, Luna? What was it all over you?"

Luna smiled faintly. "What do you think?" She held up her hands as though they were still

dripping. "Blood, Ginny. It all comes back to blood. I don't know when I'll shed it, but I know I will. And I don't know who will die today, or where, or why, but I know they will..."

Fox lay on the tile floor of the bathroom, it being the coolest place available to him, and went over his mental map of the Dursleys' house, constructed through repeated nighttime forays out the catflap. He had been in and out of Dudley's room several times, often "borrowing" from the other boy's massive stash of junk food to keep himself and Harry in sweets, and had sniffed around the guest room Vernon and Petunia were using for the time being but hadn't left any signs of his presence behind.

No sense in tipping our hand.

Downstairs was the kitchen, the other logical choice for food raids, though it was filled with healthy food and was therefore lower on Fox's personal list. Still, tempting as it was, man and fox could not live on Cauldron Cakes and Chocolate Frogs alone, and the kitchen had suffered losses almost as regularly as Dudley's stash. Downstairs was also the greenhouse and the small toolbench inside it, including a coil of rope, which figured in one of the three escape plans the brothers had put together.

Very originally titled Plans A, B, and C, but originality takes a twig seat to staying alive in situations like this. "There is no Plan B" makes for great jokes... not so funny when you're the one who won't be seeing his family again.

His background panic chose this moment to try to rise up. Ruthlessly he shoved it down. *Can't think about you just now. Bit busy surviving today. Worry about next June once I'm human and hugging Hermione.*

The fear subsided, and Fox returned to his plans. *All three Dursleys are going out this afternoon. Dudley spotted a new car in a driveway two streets back... or so he said. I wouldn't trust him further than I can throw him, with me as Fox and him human, but I can't exactly warn his dad and mum off him when they think he hung the moon. So that gets them out of the way while the Death Eaters move in and try to break the wards...*

Or does it? Irritated, he rolled over and thumped his head against the floor. *I'm missing something. A step somewhere. And I can't— thump—think —thump—what —thump—it is!*

Harry pushed the door open and peered in. "All right in here?"

Fine. Seeing if pounding my head will loosen up the thought blockages.

"Any luck?"

Not yet. I'll keep trying.

"Don't damage the floor. Aunt Petunia wouldn't like it."

Fox snorted. **Yes, and I give a rat's behind what she likes why?**

"You don't have to. I do. She isn't all bad." Harry shrugged. "Let me know what you come up with. I've got Potions still to finish, though I don't know why I'm bothering. It's not like I got that O Snape insists on, unlike *some* people..."

What can I say? Fox exhibited his toothiest upside-down grin. **The cauldron loves me.**

"My cauldron's going to love your head in a minute..." Harry grumbled himself back to his desk, leaving Fox snickering.

For that one moment, he thought, everything had been normal. The strange surroundings, the mounting tension, none of it mattered. They were just brothers teasing each other about the different things they did well, secure in their knowledge that life would go on after today.

So let's go over those plans one more time and make sure it does.

Closing his eyes, he slipped himself into a dream-set of Plan A. *We hear them coming in. I slip out and hide in the room at the top of the stairs to warn Harry how many, so he knows how long a burst of the knockout potion to use...*

Sirius paced back and forth in his tiny space, unable to stay still. The Death Eaters' headquarters was humming like a disturbed cluster of billywigs, and had been since that morning. He knew something was up, and had a nasty suspicion based on what he'd been hearing from Evanie that it involved Harry, but other than that he was in the dark.

Not that there's anything I could do about it even if I had their engraved battle plans signed by Lord Oldy-Fart himself. Other than maybe try and convince Aletha to go out and let Danger know about it, and get her to send a message back...

Constructing possibilities along these lines kept him sufficiently busy that sudden footsteps one corridor away startled him considerably. *Who is that? It's not Evanie or Letha, they're much quieter, but it's not any of my usual visitors either...*

He sniffed a few times and sneezed hard, backing up involuntarily until he hit the far wall and swearing mentally in every language he had ever heard. *I don't know who, but I know what they're here for. They've had blood and they want more. And did I just hear—*

Shoving his fear into a far corner of his mind, he listened hard.

"—not allowed to finish the job yet. The Dark Lord wants to be there himself."

"Why?"

"So Potter can see it all, dimwand. It's why we have to wait to finish, because Potter can't be there

until the wards fall and the wards can't fall without our big man here, can they?" Laughter, of the nasty-drunk variety. "So we get warmed up down here on Black, head back up for the opening act, and come back for act two. Big finish later tonight out in the Muggle world..."

Fear, this time more for Harry than himself, came flooding back. Sirius was about to treat it as he had the first batch when an idea came to him. If he wasn't going to survive today, which seemed awfully likely at this point, he could at least deny Voldemort the rare treat of forcing Harry to watch his murder.

And if this works like I think it will, I might get to take one of the little bastards with me...

Letting the fear have momentary rein, he cowered along the back wall of his cage, whimpering.

That's right, I'm so scared. See how scared I am. I won't be any fun, no fun at all, not unless you make me be.

"Merlin's arse, I thought he was supposed to be an Auror," said one of the speakers, appearing around the corner. There were four of them, all very young, none masked. One in particular had Sirius biting back a growl.

I knew there was something wrong with him, I just knew it, and Harry's in his house, thinking it's safe, thinking nothing can get him there...

"Look at him now!" The boy stuck out his chest and swaggered. "Who's a good doggy, then? Who's going to do tricks for us if he doesn't want to go under Imperius and do them anyway?"

"Not Imperius, that's no fun," objected another boy. "Just hit him with a Cruciatus or two, he'll roll over. They all do in the end." He drew his wand ran his fingers suggestively along its length. "After we've got him trained, why not go see what his Mudblood wife's got hiding in her pantries?"

I would pay money to see you try, boy. Sirius ducked his head between his legs to hide his snort of laughter. She will painshock your sorry bollocks so hard they'll climb back up inside you and never come out.

"First things first." Dudley Dursley pushed between the other boys to stand in front of the bars separating them and Sirius. "Let's teach him who's boss. Not so smart now, are you, blood traitor? Not so ready to decide we're all the same, we should all be friends, let's all hold hands and sing?"

Sirius hunched his shoulders and whimpered, hoping the boy would mistake the bafflement in his eyes for fear. *You're a Muggleborn, you little brat. Why are you with these people? Don't you know what they'll do to you the first chance they get? Or do you get an in because you're bringing them Harry? That would do it if anything would...*

"See, here's the difference between you and me." Dursley crouched, clutching the bars and pushing his fat forehead against them. "You were born magical, best blood around, and you pissed it away.

I was born Muggle, but I'm rising above it. Going beyond it. Taking care of it." His hands tightened expressively on the bars. "Myself. My very own self."

Or that could be it. Sirius spared one instant of pity for the Dursleys—he'd spent years hating them for what they'd done to Harry, but no one deserved what was going to happen to them tonight—then returned his attention to his own situation. There was just a chance he could stop everything if he made the right moves here and now.

Come on, you little upstart, come on. He flattened his ears and stared at Dursley, willing the boy to take his challenge. *You know you want me. You want to see me hurt, want to see me bleed, and doing it at wandpoint's too standoffish for you. It has to be up close and personal, but you can't do it like that from way over there...*

"You never did learn proper respect, did you?" Dursley asked softly. "I think you need to learn it right now. Come here."

Sirius set his paws and braced himself. *Make me.*

"Come here, I said!" The other Death Eaters were starting to snicker. "Come here or—or—"

Or what? Sirius sniffed disdainfully. *Some magical overlord you make. Can't even remember to have your wand out when you're making threats.*

"Or I'll come in there after you!" Dursley snatched out his wand and flicked it at the bars. They disappeared, and Sirius had to control his instant urge to leap. Dursley's buddies would only attack him if he did that.

But if they think I'm totally cowed, so terrified of them that I won't even fight back when they're open to me...

"Get out here!" Dursley stormed across the former dividing line, wand still in hand, and made a grab for the scruff of Sirius' neck. "We'll see how stupid you make me look when you're—"

With a defiant bark, Sirius lunged.

Dursley had time for one short scream.

Mare was through the kitchen door before the first batch of sounds had a chance to die away. Shrieking, spellfire, and snarls had no place in her afternoon, especially not before she'd talked to Sirius and found out what he was hiding. Mopping the floor had been her last job for the day, and she had been planning to go see him immediately thereafter.

Not this immediately, though. She glanced down at the length of wood in her hand, topped with fluffy white rags. *And definitely not while still carrying the mop!*

She started to throw it away, then thought better of it. If there were Death Eaters hurting Sirius, she would need some way to convince them to leave. Her magic, as powerful as it was, worked only with physical contact.

Suddenly I wish I had that wand Danger showed me...

The thought was her last coherent one, as she turned the final corner and saw the scene in a flash she was sure she'd be revisiting in her nightmares.

Sirius lay on his side, a thin line of blood dribbling from his jaws. Two boys in robes were taking turns kicking him viciously and firing spells into him. The third was kneeling beside the prone body of a fourth, waving his wand frantically over the enormous puddle of blood now collecting between the stones.

One for my prince. Mare's brown eyes narrowed. *That leaves three for me.*

She brought the mop around two-handed, catching the kneeling boy in the face with the business end, then cracked him on the side of the head with her backswing. The mallet-against-melon sound had the other two boys whirling around, but a quick swipe of wet rags sent their wands spinning away to clatter against the opposite wall. Mare changed her grip, choking up on the wooden end, and advanced on the pair.

"Cowards," she spat. "Filth. Try *me* on for size, why don't you?"

One of the boys whimpered. The other appeared to be trying to scrabble his way between the stones of the wall.

"Pathetic." Mare lunged, feinting right, and whipped her improvised staff across as the whimperer tried to make a run for it. He slid to the floor bonelessly, and she turned her attention to the last one standing. "Anything to say?"

"W-w-we j-just wanted to have a b-bit of fun," the boy stammered. "And then he g-goes and tries to t-tear Dursley's throat out!"

"Well, good for him." Mare pinned him to the wall with the end of her staff and her glare. "So why don't I have a bit of fun now? The same way you were going to do? Should I start by kicking you, or by getting your wand and seeing if I can manage one of those spells you were tossing off?" She wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Oh, really now, if just the threat of pain makes you piss yourself, what good are you ever going to be as a Death Eater? Grow up, and remember you're working for a wizard who likes to throw pain curses around on a daily basis..."

The boy made a little moaning noise, and his eyes rolled back in his head as the staff became the only thing holding him upright.

"Ugh." Mare let him drop, stepping aside so as not to foul her robes by touching him. "Nasty little thing."

Tossing the mop aside, she dropped to her knees beside Sirius, swearing quietly as she laid her hands on him. The damage was severe, with internal bleeding in several spots and more broken bones than she wanted to think about. His breathing was labored, his heart starting to falter, and even as she sent strength into him, she felt a slow detachment, a sliding away of something subtly vital. His spirit, battered and worn from captivity and pain, was losing its grip on his body.

Oh no you don't. Not before I get a chance to talk to you.

She sat back on her heels, tightened her grip on his front paw, closed her eyes, and dived after him.

He was annoyed. Seriously annoyed, if he did say so himself. He had important business to take care of, places to be and people to see, and all of it was behind that door. But his irritating brother, typically for him, had planted himself in front of said door and didn't look likely to move any time soon.

Just have to brazen it out. Get him out of the way and move on.

He stepped into the open and started for the door.

"Where are you going?" his brother demanded, fixing him with the gray eyes they held in common.

"What business is it of yours?" he snapped back.

The other was clearly holding onto his temper by a thread. "I'm your brother."

"That doesn't make you my keeper."

"I'm trying to stop you from doing something you'll regret."

Letha. He could see her beautiful face, hear her voice, lovely even as it cursed, feel her hands start to send cool relief through him, but it wasn't enough, it couldn't be enough... "It's too late for that," he said indistinctly, then summoned up a sneer to confront the other with. "And who are you to say what I'll regret?"

His brother smiled maddeningly. "Believe it or not, you don't know everything."

"Neither do you!"

"I didn't say I did. But I do know you're going the wrong way." A thin hand rose, extended in a "stop" gesture. "No matter what you think has happened, it isn't too late to turn around. Let me help you..."

"Help me? How are you going to help me? I'm *dead!*" Sirius stopped, looking more closely at Regulus. "Which explains what you're doing here. You're dead too. Right?"

"I am. You're not. Not for long, anyway." Regulus smirked. "Nice try, big brother, but I still win this round. All I had to do was stall you long enough for her to show up, and here she is now..."

Sirius spent one instant too long wondering who "she" was, and one more cursing himself for a fool. Cool, strong fingers latched onto his wrist, and Regulus and the door blurred into a distant haze.

If Meghan could pull Harry back from fracturing his spine, Letha should have no trouble fixing the damage from a few lousy Cruciatuses...

Pain flared, then subsided, and he opened his eyes with a gasp. Aletha knelt beside him, eyes closed, her hand still curled around his wrist, the dull blue of her work robes stained with the brown-red of drying blood. He was so busy appreciating the sight that it wasn't until she sighed faintly and crumpled forward into his hastily outstretched arms that he caught hold of the most salient fact.

I have arms. I see colors. Supporting her weight, he got shakily to his feet. *She didn't just bring me back to life—she made me bloody well human again!*

It would be too much to hope, he supposed, that his magic was also back in its usual place. One simply didn't get miracles of that order.

But I have to try. Draping Aletha across one shoulder, so that she would still be held up by him if this worked, he visualized the change back into Padfoot. *And—now!*

Nothing happened. He was still two-legged and dressed in ragged robes, his hair a bit too long and his face covered with a week and a half's worth of stubble. It wasn't quite the look he'd had when he'd come out of Azkaban, but he thought it might be one he could take to a fancy-dress ball without terrifying every woman in attendance.

Which is a wonderful thing to be thinking about when you're a Squib, alone in a manor filled with Death Eaters, and have an unconscious woman on your hands. Not to mention three, no, four unconscious junior DE's...

Or is it three after all?

Laying Aletha gently down on the floor, Sirius approached the silent, still figure of Dudley Dursley. He started to roll the younger wizard onto his back, then stopped with a sigh. There was no point, and no question in his mind any longer. Nothing living felt that cold or responded that limply to pressure.

The lump in his throat threatened to choke him. Deluded, disgusting, a waste of space and oxygen Dudley might have been, but he had also been a boy barely a month older than Harry.

Yes, Harry. Whom he was planning to hand over to his Dark Master after he'd finished with his own parents, let's not forget. And after he finished beating on you, and possibly even getting to kill

you for his Master's and his colleagues' enjoyment. You were defending yourself, your wife, your godson. No judge in the world would convict you for this one.

He sighed again, turning away. *But that doesn't stop me wishing I hadn't done it.*

Hoisting Aletha carefully over his shoulder, he walked away, one hand on the wall for balance. He might not have Padfoot's nose to guide him any longer, but his human one was good enough to catch faint whiffs of her clean scent, and bits of rag were snagged on the stones of the wall here and there, further guiding him.

If I remember right, her "nest" is just a few steps away from the kitchen where she does most of her work, and it looks like...

He stumbled around a corner and caught himself on the wall before he dropped to his knees. In front of him, a grand staircase swept down from the upper level of the house, with a worn velvet curtain hiding the region underneath it.

That.

Tired as he was, a grin came to his face. *Hiding under the stairs, are you, love? You remember more of our den-nights than you think you do...*

Behind the curtain lay a tangle of bedding which made him even more sure of that point. Aletha stirred once as he settled her into the hollow her body had carved out in the sheets, but relaxed again when he tucked a pillow under her head. Covering her with another sheet, Sirius chose a spot at her feet, curling up as Padfoot might and letting the weariness overtake him at last.

"You saved my life, and I can't even give you yours back to say thank you," he murmured as he slipped into sleep. "Maybe if I could figure out what you were trying to tell me with the colors song..."

One instant Danger was sleeping soundly. The next, she was awake, staring intently around her.

What woke me?

The sun was starting to set, but she knew that hadn't awakened her from a sound sleep. And if it had been a predator, or anything else that her wolf form interpreted as possible trouble, she would have been on her paws and baring her teeth at it already.

So either I'm getting so jumpy and strung-out from being alone that I'm jumping at shadows, or...

Behind her, someone cleared a tentative throat.

Danger emitted an embarrassingly cublike yip, leapt straight into the air, and came down facing the opposite way.

"Sorry!" The small, brown-haired woman had her hands clapped over her mouth. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you," she said around them, looking as earnest as anyone could while trying to stop laughing. "I've been worried about my friends, is all. There's trouble in the house, and I don't know where they've gone, so I thought maybe you could help me find them."

Maybe I can. Danger moved a few steps closer and sniffed, repressing her growl. *You smell like rat. Like Letha and Padfoot too, but mostly like rat.* She stopped and took a closer look. *Wait a minute. I've seen you before. Right before this all started, at Diagon Alley, with Sirius...*

"Can you change back?" the woman asked quietly. "It would help a lot if we could talk." She tried for a smile. It wobbled around the edges. "My name's Evanie. I know Mare calls you Princess, but that isn't your real name any more than hers is Mare. She's Aletha, or she ought to be. What about you?"

Brown eyes closed, the better to concentrate with. Feet, hands, clothes, hair, face, voice—

"Call me Danger."

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Facing Danger

Chapter 53: Coals of Fire (Year 6)

"Danger." Evanie nodded, twisting her fingers in and out of one another. "That would make you Sirius' friend's wife. Remus. Did I get that right?"

"Yes." Danger thought she could trust her voice enough for that one word, if not much farther. The silence inside her mind was threatening to drown out the noises around her. "And you?"

Evanie's fingers froze for a moment. "I'm sorry, and me what? Or and I what, I suppose, grammar was never my strong point."

"I..." There was no easy way to say it. "My nose is good when I'm in wolf form. I can smell a man on you. I was wondering who he was."

And if he is who I think he is, if there's anything you'd like to take with you when we get you out of here.

"His name is Peter. But you knew that already, didn't you?" The eyes, a lighter shade of brown than Danger's own, were faintly accusing. "If your nose is as good as all that, you'd know who he was."

"I haven't been around him enough to know his personal scent as a human, but given that there's a good bit of rat mixed in there, I had a bloody good guess," Danger snapped back, then bit her lip. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for."

"I'm the one who should be sorry. I woke you up and started poking at you." Evanie glanced around, shading her eyes from the setting sun. "Come inside with me? I get nervous out here. We can sit in Mare's—Aletha's—kitchen and I'll tell you what I know."

"Sounds like a plan." Danger took a deep breath, made sure of her balance on two feet instead of four, and followed at Evanie's heels. When they reached the edge of the woods, she tapped the other woman on the shoulder. "I can cover us from here to the door," she offered, tapping the handle of her wand where it poked out of the pocket she'd sewn into her jeans for it. "Disillusionment, it's called. A simple charm, which is good since I muff the more complicated ones half the time."

"Thank you." Evanie smiled, an expression composed of equal parts pleasure and relief. "I'm always worried someone will see me when I leave Peter's rooms. They did once, and..." She stopped, shivering. "Never mind. It wasn't very nice, was all. The house-elves will warn us if anyone is coming, now that I've asked them to."

Good for you, making friends with the ones who see all and know all. Danger extracted her wand from the pocket and tapped them both on the head with it absently. The greater part of her mind was worrying the puzzle of what hadn't been in Evanie's smile that she had expected.

I don't know anything about her, except her name and the fact that she's a Muggle prisoner of the Death Eaters—of Wormtail, for heaven's sake. What could I be expecting out of her?

She was still trying to work it out when they passed the well and reached the kitchen door, and it was the act of taking the Disillusionment off them both that gave her the answer. Evanie's face when it was revealed once more was rapt, amazed, wondering, but not envious. There was no hint anywhere in her expression or her scent that she wished she could perform magic herself.

Which puts her one up on me. I no sooner saw what Remus could do with that wand than I wished I had it for my very own...

Her mind seized on this and took it to places Danger would just as soon not have gone, especially right now.

Right now. Two weeks. Two weeks tomorrow since we were separated. Since I felt that shock, that awful tearing pain all through him, through me, and then... nothing. Nothing there, the way that it was, the way it used to be before. Before him, before us, when it was normal to be alone in my mind, when it was the only thing I knew. And the only thing, the only thing keeping me alive, keeping me sane, was the knowledge that he wasn't quite gone, he was still alive. Because if I tried hard enough, I could feel his body. He couldn't feel his body anymore, but I could feel it. I could feel the pain that he would have been in, the pain that had forced him into hiding, and I knew a body that could feel pain was a body that was still alive...

A hand on her arm was guiding her gently along a narrow corridor, into a small room gleaming with cleanliness, into a wooden chair in the corner. A small table sat at her elbow, and a glass of water was being placed on it. Danger watched with some fascination as her hand reached out, closed around the glass, and raised it to her lips. It seemed completely detached from the racing thoughts in her mind.

I pulled myself back together within a few moments. I had to, didn't I? We were fighting for our lives. I told Aletha I was all right, I told her to go, to guard Sirius' back. A bitter laugh rippled the water in the glass, now lower by an inch or so than it had been. And we see how well that turned out. If I'd just been a little weaker, maybe she'd still be herself. Maybe she could have stopped the Death Eater who was trying to take Sirius from where we were hiding, and then we would all be home right now, taking care of the cubs and waiting for Remus to come back to us...

"Breathe deep." The voice was quiet, insistent, and without realizing Danger obeyed. "That's right, in and out. Nice, deep breaths. You need to calm down, cool down. You're overheated. Sleeping in the sun for too long, maybe."

Overheated. Danger held out a hand and regarded the flames that wreathed it at her mental command, then vanished at another one. *That sounds like what the spells did to my love. His body wasn't damaged, or not beyond what Healers can fix, but it was overheated with pain in that moment and he couldn't stay there. I'm not sure if he was thrown out or thrown in, but whichever way it was, he's coming back.*

The knowledge eased the tightness in her chest and relaxed the muscles of her shoulders. *That's one thing I can always be sure of. As long as there is breath in his body, Remus Lupin will come to me when I need him.*

The tiniest of smiles touched her lips. *If I've ever needed him more, I can't think of when...*

In his room at Grimmauld Place, Remus stirred again, restlessly. Meghan, dozing in a chair by his bedside, woke with a start and blinked her eyes into her Healer-sight. "Yes," she whispered, pumping her fist into the air. "Yes!"

The movement woke Hedwig, who had been drowsing on the back of the chair. Meghan stroked the owl's soft head feathers, then pointed at the door. "Get Hermione for me?" she breathed. "She should know first."

Hedwig hooted softly and spread her wings. Meghan settled back into her chair and squirmed all over with satisfaction. Her godfather was more *there* than he had been for nearly two weeks.

Which sounds silly when you put it in words like that, but it's the best way to say it I know...

Everything would be all right with Moony now. She was sure of it.

Evania let out a small, secret sigh of relief when Danger blinked a few times, looked straight at her, and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry about that. Was I gone long?"

"No, only a few minutes." *A few absolutely terrifying minutes. A few minutes when I was sure every second that you were about to pull me into a panic attack with you instead of me pulling you out. But it didn't happen and it's over and dwelling on it won't help anything.* "Does that happen often?"

"It hasn't been that bad before. I think it's a warning. Like that little blinking light on your car." Danger flashed her hand open and shut. "Telling me I've only got thirty more miles to go before I'm running on empty. I'm surprised I've lasted this long, actually."

"You're connected to him." Evania was piecing together the fair amount she'd heard from Sirius and the bits from Mare about the woman in front of her. "Your minds, your souls, they're connected, and you had to put the bond on hold to come and find Sirius and Aletha."

"Exactly." Danger picked up the glass of water again and drank deeply. "It doesn't seem like that much of a sacrifice. Even less because he's hurt so badly that I couldn't feel him there anyway. But he still *was* there, and the instant he came back I would have known about it. Now, if he wakes up, I won't know. Or if..." She set the glass down, shaking her head. "No, that's not true. Bond or no bond, if my husband were dead, I would know it. And since I don't know, he's alive."

"What is it like?" Evania sat down in the other chair, the way she had so often sat across from

Mare—I suppose I should be calling her Aletha, but I barely got to know Aletha and I do know Mare—to do some homely task and talk about their lives and the small, insular world around them. "Having that bond, being with him that way? Is it different than just being married?"

"As I've never just been married, I couldn't tell you," Danger quipped, but she was smiling. "It is and it isn't, from what I can tell. We fight less than we would without the bond, both because we understand each other so well and because what hurts one of us hurts the other as well. We still do disagree on many things, we have our own opinions and tastes, but on the most important things we... we move in tandem. It's like dancing. I may not do the same moves that Remus does, but I understand what he's doing and why, and that means I can make my moves complement his, complete them. And neither of us can do it alone, not anymore. Does that make sense?"

"Yes." Evanie swallowed against the tightness in her throat. "Perfect sense. What would happen if... if one of you decided that you didn't want to dance any longer, or that you wanted a different partner?"

"Before or after the shattered kneecaps and the fractured skull?" Danger laughed. "I can't really conceive of that happening, but if it did..." She stopped, looking at Evanie more closely. "But that's not what you meant, is it?"

"Not really." The tightness was still there, making it hard to talk. "What if... what if one of you wanted to dance, and the other didn't even understand what dancing was about? Or he thought he was too clumsy or too stupid to dance, or that he didn't deserve it? What would you do then?"

Danger drew a deep breath through her nose, then let it out in a sigh. "Good Lord," she said in a faintly exasperated tone. "How did I miss that? You're in love with him, aren't you? With W—*Peter*?"

Evanie tried to answer, but her throat had closed completely. She nodded instead, and squeezed her eyes shut over the heat within them. *Tears won't help. They never help anything. They just make it worse, make it hurt more, when it already hurts quite enough...*

"You're in love with him," Danger repeated, and Evanie heard the sounds of a chair being pushed back, of water running into a glass already partly full. "And he hasn't noticed a thing. You don't seem like the imaginative type, but I still have to ask—forgive me, it's the mother in me—he's good to you? He doesn't hurt you or frighten you at all?"

"No." Her voice sounded too loud in her own ears, but she knew from the way her throat still felt that it probably hadn't been audible to Danger. She groped on the table for the glass, felt it pushed against her fingers, and managed a swallow of water. "No," she repeated, louder this time, and got her eyes open. Danger was watching her with the calm tension she knew herself from waiting for one of the children at the Home to explain a difficult time in their past. "No, he's been a perfect gentleman." A tiny laugh, almost a sob, surprised her. "A little more than I might want sometimes. I don't think he has any... experience. With certain things, if you know what I mean."

Danger frowned, shutting her eyes momentarily. "I think you're right," she said, her brow

furrowed. "He didn't when Remus knew him, and I doubt he's had much chance since then. He's probably decided that he blew his chance for that, like everything else, when he—" She stopped, looking uncomfortable.

"You don't have to hide it from me." Evanie drank a bit more water. "I know it all. Sirius has been telling me, as much as he knows anyway. More about the way things used to be, before the war got so bad, before Peter made his mistakes. And yes, I know they were more than mistakes," she said when she saw Danger's lips narrow, her eyes start to spark. "I know what he did, I know that people died because of him. But do you know what that does to him?"

"I—" Danger clenched her hands into fists for a few seconds. "No," she said, opening them and stroking them down her legs as though she were calming a restless animal. "No, I don't."

"I do." Evanie dipped her finger into the glass, then ran it around the top edge, steadying the glass with her other hand. "I hear him cry in his sleep sometimes. I hear him call out names, names Sirius has told me. And I see him when he comes back from wherever he's been all day. I see the pain and the unhappiness in his eyes. He can never fix what he's done wrong, and he knows that, and it only hurts him more." The glass began to sing, and she damped it with her hand before it could get loud enough to attract unwanted attention. "He's trapped inside a nightmare, and he can't ever wake up from it, as long as he lives." She lifted her head to meet Danger's gaze. "Isn't that enough punishment for anything?"

Mare roused slightly, confused. She wasn't where she remembered being. She was somewhat sore and achy, far more tired than she should have been at this hour of the day, and comfortably tucked into her usual curl of bedding in her nest under the stairs. *How—?*

The voice registered with her next. It was breathy, hardly more than a whisper, but her nose and the raising of the hair on the backs of her arms told her who it must be. Only he had ever made that kind of impression on her, even in the form which was the only one she could remember seeing him wear.

"—broke it off short, before the end. Does that mean something? Am I supposed to finish it? How does it finish?" A quick laugh. "Wish we had Pearl here, or even better, Neenie, she never forgets anything. Oh well, guess I'll have to do. 'It was red and yellow and green and brown and...'"

Scarlet and black and ochre and peach, Mare found her mind supplying, instants before Sirius chanted them under his breath. *And ruby and olive and lilac and fawn...*

How do I know that? I shouldn't know that. It's just a random list of colors—wait, no, it's a song. Danger was singing it when I met her at her house. That's how I know it. Her stomach calmed down from the churning that had begun in it when the colors had spiraled from her so effortlessly. *But she never got to the end either...*

"And purple and white and pink and orange and—" Sirius stopped. His volume had been gradually increasing through the list, to the point where Mare could now take stock of his audible

voice.

It sounds very much like his inaudible one. Deep, strong, well-trained. A bit hoarse, but he hasn't used it for nearly two weeks.

"Blue." A hand rested on her sleeve for a moment, then withdrew. "You stopped before you got to 'blue'. What does that mean? It must mean something. You wouldn't do that to me, Letha, I know you wouldn't. If you told me to do this to you, to..."

His breath hitched. "God, oh God, I'm sorry, Aletha, I'm so sorry. I swore to protect you the day I put that ring on your finger, and instead I did this to you. I'm the reason you're here, the reason you're down on your knees scrubbing those damn floors every day, the reason you don't even know who you... no."

The voice lost its wobble, became resolute. "No. I'm not the reason. That sadistic son of a bitch Voldemort—though my calling anyone that is a stretch, I know—but this is his fault, not mine. He wants me blaming myself over this, therefore, that's exactly what I'm not going to waste my time doing. Better to spend it trying to work out what the hell you meant by 'blue.'" He snickered slightly. "Couldn't have been a little less cryptic, could you? No, not really, not unless you wanted them all busting in on whatever secret you've got..."

Mare listened as Sirius lay down, listened as he mumbled to himself, listened as his breathing deepened and slowed into the patterns of sleep. Exactly two hundred and fifty of those long, regular breaths later, she permitted herself to move.

And, more to the point, to think.

Sirius' words, unplanned, almost casual, had shattered what few illusions about him and herself she had allowed her mind to build. The reality she saw revealed was so overwhelmingly different from what she'd believed that she couldn't yet decide if it was better or worse. Sheer shock had her leaning towards the worse.

Concentrate on the small things. The ones I can deal with. I have a name.

Aletha.

She opened her eyes in the dim light of her nest and looked down at her hands, regarding their backs, their fronts, the way they closed and opened. *It's pretty. Poetic, almost musical.*

I just don't know if it's me.

Pushing that aside, she moved to the next point.

I'm Sirius' wife.

The idea had her stifling a nervous laugh with a mouthful of sleeve. *Oh, I don't think so. Not that he isn't very nice to listen to, and to look at—I would assume...*

Her train of thought whooshed to a halt as she realized she hadn't so much as looked at the man she was blithely dismissing as an impossible husband. With a small sigh, she sat up, turned her head, and looked.

As I suspected. Trouble on two legs, just like he is on four.

Her hand went out as though to caress Sirius' unshaven cheek. She snatched it back before it could make contact. *So I'm attracted to him. I knew that already. But I can't be his wife. He's made a mistake. His wife is...*

She stopped, shaking her head. *Facts, Mare. Concentrate on facts. You never did get to have that talk with him, so you don't know exactly what it was he was forced to do to his wife. You just assumed that it was turning her into an animal, because that's what happened to him. How do you know it wasn't taking away her memories? Wouldn't that be worse? Especially if they kept her near him, so that he had to look at her every day and see what he'd done?*

It left the bitter slick of fear on her tongue, but it made sense. It made more sense than she wanted it to.

It's why Danger acted as though she knew me. If I were Sirius' wife, she would. I would be that sister she talked about, the one who belonged in that room, the one who ought to wield that wand. And she would have been hoping that I would magically remember her, or that house, or those things. But I didn't. I don't. I had a feeling, but a feeling isn't enough. It's very nice and very romantic, but it isn't enough to make a decision about the rest of my life.

Bringing her knees up to her chest, she wrapped her arms around them. She was shivering, and doubted it was all from the cool of the air around her.

If it is my life at all.

If it doesn't belong to a ghost named Aletha Black.

She lowered her face to her knees for a few seconds, then raised it again and lay back down, curling herself back under the covers to try and warm up, ignoring the damp spots on her robes halfway down her legs. There was a puzzle to solve, and no matter who she was or who she wasn't, she had a perfectly good mind.

Besides, if I really am Aletha, I ought to know what I meant.

Even if I don't remember meaning it anymore.

Under her breath, she hummed the colors song, and concentrated on the final word.

Blue. If I were about to have all my memories wiped away, why would I want my husband to remember the word blue?

Unbidden, her hand rose to her chest, pressing its heel against her breastbone.

I want so much to say no. Danger stared into Evanie's eyes. To say it isn't enough, nothing's ever enough, not for what Wormtail did, to James and Lily, to Sirius, to twelve innocent people on that street in London. But then I'm up against my own logic, because if nothing's enough for him, then what would I change? He's as much a prisoner here as he was in Azkaban, and he may not be living his worst moments over and over, but he's adding new ones every day.

And she loves him. Knowing what he did, what he is, knowing everything about him, she still loves him. I couldn't do that.

Does that make me stronger than she is, or weaker?

It was a question without an answer. As was Evanie's, and it needed one.

"I can't say no," she admitted. "But I can't say yes either. I don't know, and I wish I did. I wish I could tell where justice ends and vengeance begins. I believe in the one, and I try my best not to indulge in the other." She slid a hand across the tabletop, feeling the grain of the wood rise and fall under her fingers. "Maybe it's neither of those that's called for here. Maybe it's something else."

Mercy.

Otherwise known as "The poor little bastard's already living through hell, why should I add to his misery?" No magic can raise the dead, and killing him would just put me at his level. I suppose I could take her away with me, but that punishes her as much as it does him. Possibly more, if he hasn't realized what a treasure he has in her...

Treasure led her thoughts in a certain direction, mercy in another. The two ran on parallel tracks for a moment, then circled around and crashed into one another, fusing into an idea that left her momentarily stunned with its idiotic brilliance.

Merlin's copper cauldron. Talk about killing with kindness!

But I suppose it's like Sirius said at Peter's trial, way back when. He was one of them, once, which means one of us. If things had turned out differently, we might be a Pack of ten instead of eight. Even eleven or twelve, if Sirius and Aletha had been able to keep going after Meghan, or if Peter and Evanie had...

Danger shook herself out of her reverie. Thinking of Wormtail by his given name, twice, meant she'd already made her decision and just hadn't acknowledged it yet.

May as well not waste any more time.

"I have something for you," she said. "Can I see your hand?"

"Which one?" Evanie asked cautiously.

"Left." Danger held out her own hand, her pendant chain looped across it. "Just put it—that's it, perfect." Evanie had placed her palm across the chain. "Now hold still. It won't take but a moment..."

With a little metallic writhe, the chain encircled Evanie's fingers. Her other hand went to her mouth, but she remained very still, watching it closely. Danger felt it pulse, once, twice, three times, as though a tiny heart were beating inside it.

It does have our blood in it, though I usually try not to think about that...

The chain dropped back into her palm, lifeless once more. Danger willed it back to its place under her robes, and gently moved Evanie's hand away with her other one. "Here," she said, holding out what she had envisioned. "They're for you."

"What are—" Evanie was quick. Danger saw the understanding leap into her eyes before she had begun the third word. "But how can we—"

"Three witnesses is all it takes, under magical law," Danger interrupted casually. "Witnesses who can testify they saw it happen, they heard the words exchanged. You mentioned some friends of yours, the ones who'd warn you if we had unwelcome visitors on the way. They'd do just fine. A bit unusual, but what isn't around here?"

"You're right." Evanie delicately removed the two pieces of metal from Danger's hand and tucked them into a pocket. "Thank you. It's probably the kindest gift anyone's ever given me."

"Owl me next year if you're still grateful." Danger resisted the urge to shuffle a foot, but did hunch her shoulders slightly. "He's hardly God's gift to women."

"If he were, then everybody would want him, now wouldn't they?" Evanie smiled again, though fleetingly. "But that's enough about me and my silly problems. We have to find Sirius, and M—Aletha. Can you track them? Smell them out?"

Danger grinned, back on familiar footing. "Do Death Eaters wear masks?"

Sirius woke with a start. A hand was over his mouth, and another one was fisted in his hair.

"You *idiot*," hissed a voice in his ear. "I ought to rip this out by the roots and keep going. Do you realize what I've been through thanks to you?"

Reaching up, Sirius dislodged the first hand. "Nice to see you again too, Danger."

"Oh—" She let go of his hair and flung herself across his chest. Fortunately, he'd been expecting something of the sort, and caught her partway there so that only half her weight crashed onto his unprotected ribs. Cradling her against him, he sat up and turned towards the other person whose presence his ears and nose were announcing.

"I see you've met my sister," he said.

"We talked." Evanie had a hand over her pocket as though she were afraid she'd lose whatever was inside. "It's good to see you again. Human, I mean."

"It's good to be that way." Sirius adjusted Danger slightly to stop his leg from going numb. "Do you happen to have the time? I think I slept longer than I expected."

"I don't know exactly, but the sun was setting when I was last outside, and that was about half an hour ago." Evanie glanced over her shoulder, as though hoping the curtain would give her a clue. "I should get back. Peter sometimes doesn't have to stay as long as the others, and I don't want to worry him."

Don't want him to know you have house-elf friends who can whisk you past that locked door without a qualm, you mean. But Sirius wasn't about to complain. "What's in your pocket?" he asked. "Tell me to bugger off if I'm being nosy, but you look like you want to show somebody."

"Is it that obvious?" Evanie covered a smile with her free hand. "I was trying not to be."

Danger turned halfway around, flicking away the tears still sliding down her face and sniffing back the rest. "We have him well trained," she said, and dodged the halfhearted smack Sirius aimed at her head. "Go on and show him if you like, but then get yourself back. I'll do the explaining if it's needed."

Wonderful. Things in a pocket that are going to need to be explained. From long experience with the Pack, Sirius was prepared for anything from frogspawn to the Crown Jewels, but the actual items lying in Evanie's palm made him blink. "Wait. Those are—are those for you? You and—"

"Yes." Evanie was beaming, something he had never seen before. "Danger made them for me. Out of her pendants, or the chain really. That makes them magical, doesn't it?"

Sirius rubbed his neck absently. His own pendants were there once more, though he had a nasty feeling their magic wouldn't work as long as his didn't. "I'd say so. But Evanie, are you sure—"

"I'd better go." Evanie kissed her fingertips and brushed them against his cheek, then did the same to Danger. "Say goodbye to—to Aletha for me. And please tell her thank you for everything she did for me. And that goes for you, too. Both of you."

One last smile, and Evanie was gone, the curtain rippling for a moment and falling softly back into place.

Danger slid off Sirius' lap and looked up at him soulfully. He snorted. "Are you trying to do puppy dog eyes?"

"Trying? Did you just say *trying*?" She drew herself up indignantly. "I will have you know these puppy dog eyes have won concessions from Remus—the day after full moon, no less!"

"Fine. You can use them on him when we get home. In the meantime, you can explain to me just what the hell you thought you were doing with her." Some scrap of common sense had Sirius keeping his voice down, but he thought the jabbing finger and coldly hissed delivery would do just as well as his usual bellowing for conveying baffled fury. "I may not be the best judge in the world, I've only been through a marriage ceremony twice, but those looked an awful lot like a pair of wedding rings!"

"Aren't you a smart widdle Padfoot." Danger smirked and mimed patting him on the head. "They were a pair of wedding rings, yes indeed they were!"

Sirius eyed the hand hovering above his head. "You know if that touches me right now I'm going to try to bite it."

"Exactly why I didn't." Danger's playfulness dropped away. "Sirius, she's in love with him. You've been spending time with her, as Padfoot. You have to know."

I've been trying my best not to know. "Yeah. I know."

"And he's probably well on his way to being in love with her, and just doesn't know it yet." She spread her hands. "This will make them both feel better about where it's eventually bound to end up."

"And why exactly do I want to make Wormtail feel better?" Sirius demanded. "Yes, I told her the truth about him, but that was just to try to clear out the stars in her eyes. I don't want her seeing him as some kind of misunderstood romantic hero, and handing her a pair of rings is going to lead to exactly that! He'll hurt her, Danger, you know he will..."

"Do I?"

The question stopped him, but only for a moment. "If you don't, you bloody well should! You have Remus' memories, you've heard the stories, you know what he's capable of!"

"I know what he was capable of, almost fifteen years ago, in fear for his life." Her voice was cool, detached, as though she were talking about things she had no personal experience with.

Which she is. Hard to remember sometimes she wasn't always there...

"I also know, and so do you, what he's been through since then. What he's done and seen and experienced. Some things you know much better than I do." Her eyes, white and black and brown without a trace of blue, were for one moment mirrors that reflected back to him the touch of darkness in his own eyes, the bit of Azkaban that never truly left anyone who'd been there. "Some things we neither of us know much about, but we can guess. But now he has something he's never had before. Now he has another person dependent on him, caring for him."

"Someone to clean up his messes and wipe his little bum. How lovely."

Danger managed to look down her nose at him, quite a feat considering the difference in their

heights even sitting down. "You really are in a mood today. All right, answer me this. What was the worst thing about being here for you? Was it being locked up again, or being without your magic? Being apart from the Pack, not knowing when or if you'd see us again? Or was it something else?" She turned her head very slightly, shifting her own gaze, and his, past him.

"You know perfectly well that was it." Sirius stabbed a finger around his side. "I don't see what it has to do with—"

Then, in a rush, he did.

"He's going to fall in love with her," Danger repeated, nodding as she saw the comprehension appearing. "He's going to marry her, in a ceremony binding under magical law. And then he not only cares for her, but he's responsible for her. Which means he's going to know what you went through, every single day that you watched Letha scrubbing floors past your cage. Every day that you had to wonder and worry, was she going to make it through? Would she still be there in the morning? What was going to happen to her?"

"Only it'll be worse for him, because I always knew you were on your way, or somebody was." Sirius laid his hand over Danger's, squeezed it, felt the answering pressure. "Nobody's coming for them. This is all they have, all they may ever have. Which means Peter is going to feel that kind of fear, that bone-knotting gut-twisting piss-your-ropes terror, for Evanie. Every day, as long as they both shall live." A smile sneaked across his face. He let it. "That sounds like justice to me."

"I knew you'd see it if I just explained it properly." Danger scooted closer and laid her head against his shoulder. "It's good to have my big brother back again."

"Don't count your Fwoopers before they hatch, now. We're not getting far if I don't have magic and Letha doesn't have a wand. Or the knowledge to use one once she gets it."

"Well, let's start with this." Danger reached under her robes and extracted a potion piece, still in its holster, strung on a slender leather belt. "No magic needed. Just arm, point, and squirt."

"I feel ridiculous with these things." Sirius accepted the piece gingerly. "And what do I do if they put up a Shield Charm?"

"Run?"

"Har har."

"No, I mean it. Run, get around a corner, and squirt them in the face when they follow you around it. Besides, if you're quick enough you can get them before they finish a spell. Now, as to the getting far part of it, I had a few ideas..."

Mare lay quietly and listened to Sirius and Danger chattering. She wished she'd been able to say goodbye to Evanie properly, but there had been no way to manage it without embarrassing Sirius.

Evanie was a smart girl. She'd understand.

As for a wand, and the knowledge to use it... the second I may not have, but the first I think I could get my hands on without too much trouble. In fact, I could get my hands on two. And will, as soon as I can slip out of here.

To that end...

She concentrated on sending out waves of *sleep*, imagining them rolling off her and washing over Danger's earnest face, Sirius' gesturing hands. As far as she knew, her magic worked only with physical contact, but she'd been having it rubbed in her face on a regular basis lately that she didn't know everything. Besides, willing Lucius Malfoy to stay asleep while she worked on his face last night had gone perfectly.

And it was there that I spotted wands. Two of them, sitting on top of a bookshelf like trophies. One a bit thicker, a bit darker than the other, and that other—though I didn't let myself think about it at the time—looked more than a bit familiar...

Sirius punctuated one of his comments with an enormous yawn. Danger echoed him a moment later, and her rapid-fire speech began to slow.

Then there's knowledge. The knowledge of how to use a wand, of how magic works in general. And the knowledge of more esoteric magical things...

Her eyes opened to silence. Sirius was lying down once more, hand still outstretched to Danger, who was clasping it in both her own. Mare smiled, then slid down to their end of the nest and slid a finger gently under Sirius's robes.

Stay asleep, she willed, and pulled her finger free. It took her only a moment to verify what she had suspected, and she turned to Danger and repeated the process. This brought her a moment of consternation, but a closer examination, with the curtain pulled back to admit more light, settled her doubts.

It wasn't a message from Aletha to Sirius after all. It was a message from Aletha to me.

And I think I've cracked her code.

Slipping out of the nest, she started off towards Malfoy's room at a trot.

What she had to do would be best done in private.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 54: Restorations (Year 6)

Sirius opened one eye. Why, he didn't know, as it wasn't going to tell him anything different than his other senses already had. He was alone in Aletha's nest, Aletha's own curl of blankets cold and her scent going stale, Danger's still warm and vivid.

Danger'd better not have gone far. She's got enough sense to Disillusion, but she doesn't know her way around here, and if she gets lost...

"If she gets lost, she'll smell her way back, same as I would," he muttered aloud. "No borrowing trouble, Sirius, you have enough of your own. Like getting us home."

Setting the back of his mind to that task, he peered out from behind the curtain, then pulled it aside when the coast proved to be clear.

We have to get out of here. Especially Danger. She's starting to fall apart, she should never have been away from Moony this long, I wish she'd stayed back at Headquarters where she belongs...

But having Danger nearby had been a comfort, he had to admit, even as it had doubled his anxiety for the women he loved most in the world. She had been his link to freedom, to safety, to everything normal and right, and though she could have found him in dreams from anywhere, it had helped to know that she was *there*, that the Death Eaters' little sanctuary had been invaded.

Without that, without her, they would have worn me down a lot faster than they did.

Hand wrapped around the butt of his potion piece, he eased down the corridors in the direction his nose told him Danger had gone, checking every corner before he rounded it.

Wish I had a mask. They wear them indoors sometimes, and it would stop anyone spotting who I am right off. As it is, I'll have to hope I see them before they see me...

From up ahead, a woman cried out in fear, a man in triumph.

Sirius was running before the first echoes had died away.

He knew those voices, and in that combination, they meant nothing good.

Lucius Malfoy smirked as he removed the Disillusionment Charm from the woman he had by the arm. He knew who she was, but he would look better presenting her to the Dark Lord if she were visible.

"Forget about your little gift to me?" he asked, tapping the side of his nose with his wand. "So kind of you, to make sure I can always *smell* intruders even when I can't see them..."

Danger snarled. Lucius' wand ignited. He cursed and dropped it, but the flames were guttering out even as it fell, and he stomped the last of them out with two quick blows of a foot, then backhanded Danger across the face. "Bad girl. I see where your sister learns her habits. Still, she's young. Plenty of time for retraining, especially with you as leverage against her and vice versa. Now, you're going to tell me what you did with—"

A hand clamped down on his shoulder and squeezed, breaking his grip on Danger and turning him to face its owner.

"Get away from my sister," said Sirius Black coldly, and punched Lucius in the face.

Sirius pulled out his potion piece as Lucius stumbled backwards across the corridor. Checking to make sure it was set on a yellow cartridge, he pointed it and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

"Arm it." Danger had her own wand out now, and fired a Stunner into Lucius as she spoke, one hand on the wall to keep herself upright. "Push on the barrel, pull on the cartridge. You'll need it, he wasn't alone..."

Following her directions, Sirius nodded in satisfaction as the piece began to vibrate slightly under his hand. "What do you mean, he wasn't alone? I don't see anyone else—"

"Lucius?" called a voice from somewhere nearby.

"Bugger." Sirius got an arm around Danger's shoulders and guided her around the corner, away from the voice, leaving Lucius crumpled on the floor. It occurred to him when they were two corridors away that he ought to have had Danger hide the body, but by then it was too late. The hunt was on, and they were the prey.

"Can't Apparate us out of here, can you?" he murmured to Danger without much hope. "We could come back for Letha..."

"No." Danger shuddered against his side, her breath coming raggedly. "Can't concentrate, and they'll have this place warded in any case... I shouldn't have done that, Sirius. The fire. It's linked to Remus, it was given to us both, and when I tried to use it to fight with, the block on the bond nearly shattered."

Sirius gulped at his mental image of the last time Danger and Remus had been separated, before they'd known about the effects their bond had on them when it got overstressed.

And that was three days, where this is going on two weeks. If that block breaks now, it'll kill them both and save Voldemort the trouble...

As if he didn't have enough to think about, his storytelling mind had reactivated, placing the

image from a few seconds ago of Lucius casually slapping Danger next to one from his memories of Draco practicing hand-to-hand against Hermione, wondering how best to use the two in comparison or contrast. He shoved the thoughts away, but they kept recurring, making him growl under his breath. *If I don't survive to get out of this place, you're not getting written, so shut the hell up!*

Danger pressed her face into his side, muffling a moan. "He's waking," she whispered. "I can feel it, Remus is waking up, and I won't be there for him—he doesn't know about the block, he'll think I'm dead, I don't know what he's going to do—"

"Take it easy." Sirius maneuvered them both into a small and dusty room, sliding back to keep them from being visible on a casual inspection, making sure he could reach the potion piece at his side. "We'll get you home soon."

She sniffled once, then made a face at him. "Liar."

"Yeah, but it made you smile, didn't it?"

If this is where I'm going to die, I can't think of better company to do it in.

Well, always excepting two.

He tightened his grip on Danger's arm and prepared to take a few of the bastards with him.

Harry curled himself into a ball, forehead on his knees and arms around his head, hoping that would stop it from exploding as it seemed to want to do. First Voldemort's glee, then his terrible fury, had whiplashed through the link, and Harry knew the wards had to be reducing the effect. What would it be like when they fell?

Because they are going to fall. Once all the Dursleys are either dead or sworn to Voldemort and not living here anymore, they'll fall. That's the piece we missed, the one thing we didn't think about. Dudley being willing to give up his own parents to advance himself as a Death Eater.

So the wards are going down. And I don't know that I can move, much less run. I would feel better—he pitched the thought to carry, aiming it across the room at the furry creature perched anxiously on the windowsill—if certain people weren't here so I can be sure I won't hurt them if I get taken over—

You really think Hermione would let me live if I left you now? Fox snorted, letting Harry know his own opinion of the likelihood of that. **What happens, happens to both of us. Besides, if he takes you over, that constitutes enough of an emergency that no one's going to be worrying about a little thing like Animagus. And in that case, I have a plan.**

The four most frightening words in the English language. Harry buried his face more deeply, trying to keep his breathing even and regular. It might not stop the pain, but it would help with the

sickness he could feel rising in the back of his throat. **Just don't die, all right?**

Can't, Fox sent cheerily. **Not time yet.**

And here I thought there couldn't be anything good about that vision of Luna's...

Harry almost managed a smile, then stuffed the back of one wrist into his mouth to keep himself from shouting. Half the pain in his scar had vanished, but confusion, dizziness, terror were battering at his mind. His free hand went out, groping at the bedclothes, and a sharp smell made him cough. *What is—*

Lock it down! Fox shouted, crossing the distance between them in three jumps and planting his front paws on the bed. **Your fire magic, Harry, it's getting away from you, lock it down! All comments about destroying this place aside, I'm not in a mood to experience it from the inside!**

Trying. Harry fumbled for the right spells, the combinations of thoughts that would control the flames he could now feel spurting from his fingertips at random intervals. **It's hard. Something's wrong. Something's not there that should be there, and it's making everything hard...**

Ron, Neenie on his shoulders, beat everyone to the end of the hall and skidded to a halt behind Dumbledore, who was standing in the doorway of Mr. Moony's bedroom, his wand sketching patterns in the air.

Runes, Neenie whispered, following the wand tip with her eyes. **Protection, defense, healing— Ron, say something, ask him what's going on—**

"What's happening?" Meghan demanded, arriving with a breathless Neville behind her, Ginny and Luna at their heels, both covered in white and smelling like bread. "Is Moony all right? Is he awake?"

"Stay back." Dumbledore's voice sounded absent at first, but Ron caught the notes of worry underneath it, and Neenie's nose picked up the sharp spike of fear in the Headmaster's scent. "He is half-awake, caught between his memories and reality, and he thinks there are enemies here to be fought. The magic he is using to combat those enemies is formidable. I must concentrate to keep it from damaging the house, or any of its occupants."

Meghan started to open her mouth again. Ginny put a floury finger firmly on Meghan's lips. "That means be quiet," she said in answer to the ferocious glare Meghan bestowed on her. "Otherwise you're making it worse, not better."

Ron plucked Neenie off his shoulders, swallowing against the wobbling the movement induced in his borrowed vision, and held her where she could see past Dumbledore. **Think he'll be all right?** he asked silently, watching through her eyes as Mr. Moony twisted restlessly in his bed, shoots of fire appearing and disappearing in the air around him. **Once he wakes up, I mean.**

I don't know, Ron. Neenie shivered against his hands, her tail wrapping around his wrist. **I don't know if he can wake up. Not all the way. Not without Danger here. And my pendants have been just a little bit cold all day, the way they might be if she were in trouble and I was too far away to do anything about it...**

A gray mist crept into the corners of Sirius' vision. He scowled and squinted, trying to will it away.

I don't care how recently I got healed. I refuse to pass out and let them kill me without a fight. Go away, you stupid mist, I don't want you...

But the mist persisted, pooling along the bottom of the doorway, eddying higher and higher in little swirls. Sirius blinked a few times and waved his hand through one of the eddies. It felt like a light touch of nothing, a breeze neither hot nor cold.

Where did it come from? And what is it? I've never seen anything magical like it, unless you count potion fumes, and those I should have been able to smell by now—

With a rush, the mist sprang upwards to fill the doorframe. Sirius jerked back, still shielding Danger with his body. She made a tiny questioning noise.

"I don't know." The mist was settling into a definite form now, edges and lines taking shape. "It almost looks like—"

"This way!" shouted a voice in the corridor outside. "They have to have gone this way!"

"We'll have them soon now!"

"The exits are covered, they can't get out!"

Sirius drew his potion piece once more, but kept it aimed at the floor rather than at any of the speakers. He was starting to think he wouldn't need it just yet, and besides, he couldn't see anyone to fire it at.

Not through that very nice illusion stone wall that someone kindly conjured across the door for us. The illusion stone wall which apparently looks so much like the rest of the stone walls around here that none of the Death Gobblers have noticed there ought to be a door. Not a form of conjuration I've seen before, but it's keeping me breathing, I'm not about to complain, though I would like to know who—

As the noise in the corridor died down, Danger went rigid against Sirius' side. Instinct and years of Pack-living warned him what was about to happen, and he pulled her face against his shoulder just in time to muffle her half-conscious wail.

She's losing it, she'll give us away if this keeps up—I can put her out with the yellow if I have to,

but that leaves me with no magic and her to carry, and Letha lost somewhere in the house, that's not exactly a recipe for getting home alive—

A form hurtled through the illusory wall. Sirius had the potion piece pointed at it before his mind had time to register its appearance, and pointed back at the floor the moment it had. "Where the hell have you been?" he demanded of Aletha, her hands wrapped around a small stiff bundle of cloth and a strange mixture of fear and exaltation on her face. "I woke up and you were gone!"

And isn't that a charming way to speak to the woman I'm hoping to make fall in love with me again. If I keep this up, I'll be able to scratch my voicebox with my toenails...

"Oh, I *am* sorry." The tone in Aletha's voice made Sirius wince. She might have lost her memories, but she had retained all her skill in sarcasm. "I was only looking for the tools to make sure we can get out of here. That *is* what you want, isn't it? You wouldn't rather I put you back where I found you?"

"No, of course I—" Sirius hauled back on his temper. "I'm sorry," he said simply, stroking Danger's hair as her shivering increased in response to his tension. "I shouldn't have been rude. How did you know where to find us? Did you see who set up the illusion?"

Aletha nodded, watching his face closely. The heel of her right hand pressed against her side for a moment in a motion Sirius found achingly familiar. "What's the matter with her?" she asked, indicating Danger. "The block on her bond with Remus, is it failing?"

"Yes, it's—" Sirius stopped mid-word, a wild hope dawning in his mind. "How did you know that? Are you—"

A raised hand halted him once again. "There's no time. Not now. They'll be coming back and the illusion won't hold much longer, or against anyone with really strong magic. If you had your wand, how long do you think you could hold them off?"

"If I could use it, you mean?" Sirius re-ran the mental calculations he'd been performing on that very subject with the potion piece as his weapon. "A minute or two at least, and that's if they're smart and use massed fire to overwhelm my shields before I can pick them off. But I can't..."

He trailed off as Aletha unwrapped the bundle she was still holding. "You found it," he breathed, stretching out his hand automatically for his wand, then pulling it back. "It won't do any good, Letha—Mare, I mean—whatever you are, I can't do magic, it got burned out of me when I broke my vow—"

"You only broke that vow because you were forced to break it," Aletha interrupted him, stepping forward with the rhythm of her words, still holding out his wand towards him. "And you were given permission to break it, ordered to do it even, by the only person with a right to give that order. Don't you think that should count for something?"

"It should, but obviously it doesn't." Sirius laid his left hand over the grip of his wand and tried

not to grimace at the lack of warmth and welcome. "Magic's a bitch like that."

"Then maybe this will." Closing her hand around his and the wand, Aletha met Sirius' gaze with her own and held it. "Sirius Valentine Black, I forgive you."

For one breathless second, nothing happened. Danger's weight sagging onto his shoulder, Aletha's firm grip stopping just short of pain, the polished smoothness of mahogany against his fingers, were all Sirius could feel—

And then the warmth began.

It blossomed simultaneously in his left palm and all five fingertips, flowing together in a tingling explosion of heat, then shot up his arm into his chest, leaving him gasping for breath and his heart pounding. His right hand, still holding Danger close to him, warmed with it, as did the tips of his toes, his ears and his chin. He wouldn't have been surprised to find his eyes glowing with it.

Is this—it's got to be—

He grasped his wand, swung it up and out of line with Aletha, and focused on the last non-battle spell he'd consciously used, on the first time he'd seen Evanie and the last time he'd been happy...

Aletha reached out and caught the bunch of roses as it flew from the wand's tip. "You do have a romantic side," she remarked, cradling them in the crook of her arm. "I thought you must."

"I—" Sirius swallowed against the cracking of his voice. "I don't know how to thank you—"

"Give me that two minutes you said you could." Aletha set the flowers down on the floor and came to his side, reaching for Danger. "I have an idea, but I don't know if it's even possible, and if it is, I'm going to have to give it all my attention and every bit of power I have."

"Will it get us out of here?" Sirius shifted Danger into Aletha's arms, helping his wife lower her semi-conscious burden to the floor. "Or at least give us a clear run at it?"

"It should."

"Take what time you need, then." Squaring his shoulders, Sirius stepped up to the door. "I'll hold them off."

"Don't get killed if you can avoid it. I'm getting quite fond of you."

Getting quite fond, are you? Sirius stole a glance over his shoulder at Aletha, leaning over Danger and laying a hand on her forehead, before turning a patch of the illusion-mist invisible from his side only so that he could watch the corridor beyond. That sounds like your memories haven't come back after all. But you knew Remus' name, and that he and Danger are bonded. And you figured out how to reverse what happened to me—even a forced betrayal requires forgiveness before it can heal...

Auror training came to his aid, slowing his racing thoughts, shutting them off from the part of his mind that would take action if and when the Death Eaters returned this way. For it to matter if Aletha's memories had returned or not, they had to survive.

And that, right now, depends on me.

Gripping his wand a little tighter, Sirius prepared to defend the women of his Pack.

The alpha wolf howled in frustration, snapping at the wraiths gibbering and dancing around him. *Where is my mate?* he demanded of his insubstantial enemies. *What have you done with her? Give her back to me!*

She left you of her own free will, one ghost taunted, floating close enough for him to see the features of the friend-turned-enemy he had tried to catch—was it only a few moments before? It must have been, since he remembered nothing between that time and this. *She went away from you to look for your betas, but she will never find them, and she will never come back to you!*

You lie! The alpha snarled and attacked, but the enemy was gone, and another had materialized behind him, this one wearing different features. He had not seen this face in the fight, though perhaps it had only been hidden, and it was subtly wrong—unscarred, that was it, the face was lacking scars he knew it now wore, and without them it bore an uncanny resemblance to a member of the alpha's own Pack...

Poor little wolf, so lost without his precious Pack around him, this enemy crooned, a note of triumph in the words. *What would he do if he woke and found that instead of his foes, he had been striking out at the ones he adores so much—that he had killed the very things he claims to love?*

The alpha growled low in his throat. *My mate guards me when that rage tries to take me away from myself. She would never stay away from me when that time had come.*

And if it comes out of season, out of its proper time, what then? The enemy laughed, smug and sure of himself. *Or what if the reason you cannot find your so-loving mate is that she is dead? What will you do then, when your rage comes back and destroys everything you care for?*

I will destroy myself first. The alpha crouched, gathering all his power, preparing for the fastest and most powerful strike he knew. *But first, I will destroy—*

Remus, no!

The name, the voice in which it was spoken, and most of all the desperate *need* in that voice froze the alpha in mid-spring. The ghosts vanished as though they had never been, and in their place two women came running toward him hand in hand. He was on his feet, human, before he knew how it had happened, reaching for them eagerly. **Danger**, he called out. **Letha, you're all right—**

We will be now, the taller woman answered, stopping a pace or two away and releasing the

smaller one, who ran into his embrace and clung to him as though she would never let go. **I've got to keep moving, though. This is tricky work. Which way to get to Harry?**

Remus looked around, reaching without thinking into Danger's dreamsculpting magic and forming the featureless plain around them into something more closely resembling his usual concept of his own mind. **There**, he said, pointing at the flame-walled tunnel as it formed. **But what's going—**

No time. Aletha darted down the tunnel, her mental voice echoing behind her. **Tell you later...**

Neenie tried to keep her claws from flexing into Ron's shoulders, but it was hard, so hard, when she could smell the fear and confusion rolling off Moony, the mounting worry in Professor Dumbledore's scent, and clearest of all the wisps of smoke as Moony's fire powers broke again and again through the strongest wards the Headmaster could cast—the other girls were clustered in a little knot at the side of the hall, Neville standing guard beside them with one hand on Meghan's shoulder and the other on his potion piece—

A hissing inhalation from within the bedroom was followed by a shuddering sigh, and the tension went out of Professor Dumbledore's shoulders. "Well," he said, clearing the air with a brisk wave of his wand. "I cannot claim to know exactly what has happened, but I would venture a guess that someone of our allegiance has scored a victory."

Meghan hurried forward and peered into the room. Her hand went up to her mouth. "He's back," she said indistinctly around it. "He's back, Neenie, Moony's back where he belongs, he's going to be all right now!"

Without being asked, Ron leaned around the doorframe. Neenie rubbed her cheek against his ear in thanks and watched as Moony's hand moved to caress an invisible face beside his own. *Danger must have found some way to reconnect their bond without being here...*

They've still got to be together, though, haven't they? Ron asked worriedly. Touching, I mean, actually physically next to each other. Doesn't it hurt them to be apart too long? Isn't that why she had to cut it off in the first place?

Yes, but I think—I hope—she wouldn't have connected with him again unless she were on her way home. Neenie let her jaw drop, breathing in Moony's scent laden with calm and trying to make it her own. **And since she already knows where home is, she won't be nearly as long coming as she was going. I only hope...**

She's been able to help Mr. Padfoot and Mrs. Letha? Ron reached up to stroke the top of her head. Me too. Have to wait and see, though.

Neenie smothered a laugh in Ron's robes. **I thought I was supposed to be the patient one.**

Do you good to have a change, said Ron loftily.

The second laugh refused to be smothered.

With a suddenness that left Harry's mind reeling, the pain and confusion vanished. He sucked in a breath and damped the tiny fires he could now see all over the room. *Here's hoping the Ministry can't track Heirs' powers...*

Fox wiped a paw across his furred forehead in exaggerated relief. **Had me worried there**, he said. **What happened?**

Don't know exactly, but I think Moony must be awake—

Harry!

The voice, being female, was definitely not Moony. It was, however, familiar, and Harry had his eyes shut to obey its call almost before he knew what he was doing. **Give me a hand?** he sent to Fox.

On it.

A brush of green-prickle-pine swept through Harry's magical senses, and then he was standing in the clearing where he had battled Voldemort with his siblings, Draco's brown-haired dream-form at his side and Letha just emerging from the trees. "There you are," she said, hurrying forward. "And—" She frowned at Draco for one moment, but then nodded, as though confirming something she had been told. "Yes, that's right. Harry, Draco, I'm going to need both your help, and I'm going to need it without questions. Will you give it to me?"

"Yes," Harry said immediately, over Draco's, "Of course."

"Good." Letha planted her feet, settling them as Harry had seen her do many times before when she was preparing to cast a particularly tricky spell. "Harry, I need you to find me the direction that Voldemort's mind is from yours. I know it's blocked off, but that doesn't mean it's gone. Which way is it?"

Harry turned slowly on the spot, casting about. *No... no... no... a-ha.* "That way," he said, pointing.

Draco snapped his fingers, and the trees on that side of the clearing disappeared, replaced with a wall of red stone which managed somehow to be simultaneously solid and flickering with fire. Around the edges of the wall Harry could just see an ooze of greenish black, the stench of which was already threatening to bring his headache back.

So that's what it looks like...

"Nicely done," Letha said to Draco, who bowed. "Now, I need you to make me something. About so long and so wide—" Her hands moved gracefully to indicate. "Made of wood, good and sturdy

—"

"Beater's bat?" Harry suggested.

Letha chuckled. "I knew it had a name. Thank you."

The bat materialized in her hands without fanfare, and she took a few practice swings with it, nodding in satisfaction. "Very good. Now, here comes the trickiest part. I need both of you—and you two as well," she called over her shoulder, towards a light Harry could now see between the trees. "I need you to think of everything you've missed over these last two weeks. Think of everything you could have been doing, and what you had to do instead. Let it all come out, every bit of it, or as much as you can manage."

Let it out? I think I can manage that much...

Harry shut his eyes and started at the beginning, The shock and violation of having his soul ripped out of his body came first, followed by the fear for his siblings when they came seeking him in Voldemort's own stronghold, succeeded by the anxious hours waiting for news and the horror and disbelief at the news when it finally arrived. Moment by moment, moving in fast-forward, he relived the past two weeks, running on a parallel track the way he had wanted those weeks to go.

Parties for the birthdays, Draco's first, then Neville's and mine. Practice with potion pieces, with wands, with partners and alone. Sharing gripes over homework, flirting and stealing kisses, teasing each other about getting spotted stealing kisses. Damn it, I wanted a little time to be normal, to have my life the way I like it, not the way His Dark Lordliness wants it to be, and instead I get stuck in a bedroom at my relatives' house for two solid weeks—

"Excellent, Harry," Letha's voice broke into his reverie. "Have a look."

Opening his eyes, Harry stared at the glistening black ball hovering over Letha's outstretched hand. "Is that a Bludger?"

"It is and it isn't." Letha smiled, as though she had a delightful secret she planned to share. "You'll see in a moment. Now for the last part of what I need from you. I know you're happy to have your protection back—" She nodded towards the wall across the connection to Voldemort's mind. "—but it's in my way at the moment. I need you to take it down."

"Take it—"

"For three seconds, that's all," Letha continued as though she hadn't heard Harry's outburst. "Three seconds down, and then by all means put it back up. By that point, you'll need to. Will you do that?"

Harry turned halfway around and signed to Draco with the hand Letha couldn't see. *We're sure she's the real thing?*

She couldn't be here if she weren't. Draco flicked his eyes through the trees towards the light Letha

had called out to earlier. *Besides, I think they'd have noticed.*

Following Draco's line of sight, Harry couldn't resist a smile at the two figures who might as well have been one, so tightly were they embraced. *Good enough for me, he signed. I'll need to be awake for this, though...*

I can split your consciousness if you let me. Draco wagged his fingers back and forth. *Get you just awake enough to pull the locket off and put it back on, and let you see what goes on here.*

Sounds good.

"Yes," Harry said aloud, turning back to face Letha. "I'll do it."

"Thank you." Letha's voice had begun to sound a bit strained, and Harry noticed for the first time that her hand was quivering, as though she were holding the Bludger in place with her own magic.

Which she'd have to be. Bludgers don't hold still of themselves. But I still don't understand where she got it—she's no dreamsculpter...

Abruptly he was in two places at once, the forest glade with the wall to one side superimposed on the bedroom at the Dursleys'. His hand went to his chest in both places, his fingers closed around the locket, and his mouth shaped the word, "Ready?"

"Ready," piped Letha's dream-voice, and her hazy figure took a stance in front of the Bludger and raised her bat.

Harry pulled at the locket. The pendant chain obediently released it.

Pain and fury lashed him like lightning. He raised his wand for another spell, only to have the impudent creature's pitiful efforts cut it off short. How had the blood traitor regained even his human form, to say nothing of his magic, and what was he so determined to defend? Whatever it was, Lord Voldemort would destroy it, and force the treacherous fool to live long enough to see it die, just as he had done with Potter's Muggle relatives—

A cold nose shoved at Harry's hand, pushing it upwards. With a wrench, Harry pulled himself partly free of Voldemort's mind. He knew he ought to be doing something, but what?

The chain, several voices called in chorus. Put the locket back on it—tell it to let the locket back on—hurry, there's not much time—

Harry looked hazily down at his chain. *Well, you heard them,* he told it, as his hand guided the locket back towards it with the help of a small and furry muzzle. *Let it back on...*

Sirius fired three offensive spells in quick succession, following them up with yet another reinforcement on his Shield Charm. When he'd told Aletha he could hold for at least two minutes,

he'd expected to be battling Death Eaters. Possibly a lot of Death Eaters, but still, Death Eaters. He had not expected to be facing Voldemort himself.

Though the way everything these past couple weeks has gone, maybe I should have...

He was about to reinforce his shield again when it happened. Voldemort, standing in all his offended evilness in the center of the corridor, froze with his wand halfway up to cast another spell. His mouth opened, and out of it came the most unholy shriek of pain Sirius had ever heard.

What the—

Sirius shook himself. *Never mind what, get him! Now!*

The Stunner seemed almost a mercy blow. Voldemort slumped where he stood, and Sirius finally turned away from his post at the door to find Danger sitting up and Aletha kneeling beside her, head in her hands. "You all right?" he asked them both, wagging the wand between them.

"I am," Danger answered, jumping up. "She will be. But we need to get out of here right now, if you wouldn't mind, oh Heir of Slytherin House..."

"Heir of—right." Sirius pulled his pendants out of his robes and tossed the chain over Danger's head, then over Aletha's as Danger helped her to her feet. "Think it'll take all three, since there are three of us?"

"It might not, but let's not take the chance." Danger jerked her head towards the hallway, which was beginning to sound like someone had kicked over a beehive. "Saving jewels won't do us any good if that lot gets us."

"Agreed." Sirius focused on his pendants. *Green jewels, please*, he thought clearly, remembering Draco and Hermione's story of the way Draco had escaped from Lucius at the Shrieking Shack in their third year. *We need that now, but not too much—we've got to be able to go up as well as through, so give us a little resistance, please, enough to climb...*

The gems pulsed with emerald light once, twice, three times, and went out. Sirius hooked an arm around Aletha's shoulders, Danger steadying her from the other side, and stepped into the solid stone wall as if he did so every day.

We'll get back to ground level and past the wards, and then I want to find out what exactly is going on with Letha.

She may have healed me, but the Wizengamot's still out on whether or not she's healed herself.

Harry opened his eyes in the Dursleys' master bedroom for what he fervently hoped would be the last time. The catflap was still swinging where Fox had gone out at a run. Rolling carefully onto his side, Harry sat up, then stood when his head remained on his shoulders and nothing exploded

inside it.

Get out of the house, but stay nearby. Moony's orders repeated themselves inside his mind. Someone will come for you within a few moments. If you see Death Eaters, hide. Defend yourselves only if necessary.

Humming under his breath, Harry pulled out his potion piece and snapped it around to the red cartridge. He armed it, pressed his hand deliberately to the antidote patch, then began to apply tiny drips of the Semi-Universal Solvent to the tops and bottoms of the bars on the window, leaving the one on the farthest right intact. They would need it.

The rattle of the catflap alerted him to Fox's return. "Got it?" he asked without looking around. A muffled bark was his answer. "Good. Bring it over here."

Go here, go there, Fox grumbled as he got his head back inside Harry's pendant chain and spat out the coil of rope on the bed beside his brother. **Do this, do that. Everybody bosses me around.**

"That's right. Make sure everything's packed up? I wouldn't want to have to come back for a textbook or anything like that."

Yeth mathter. It wasn't easy for a fox to pretend to have a hunchback, but Fox managed it for a few steps before leaping off the bed just ahead of Harry's hand. **Whatever you thay mathter.**

A very few minutes later, a rope affixed to the one remaining bar in the window was trailing down to the ground outside number seventeen, Privet Drive, and nothing—apparently—was climbing down it. Wearing the Invisibility Cloak over his bag was a bit awkward, but with Moony's warning about Death Eaters, Harry wasn't minded to leave his back vulnerable for even the length of time it would take to descend a rope one story.

Which seems to have been a good idea, Fox commented from his perch in the bag. **Junior Death Eaters, your six. Looks like the same three you caught picking on Graham that time. No, wait, there's one more now—**

The pause after this was so long, and filled with so many confusing emotions, that Harry sent a general questioning feeling through the link. **What's wrong? Can't you tell who the last one is?**

Oh, I can tell all right. Fox's mental tone included a good helping of snicker. **I just don't think they can. Don't shout...**

The image flashed across the link as Harry's feet touched the ground, and he understood the warning. Even with it, he was hard put to keep from a yell, and considered himself lucky to get off with a sharp inhale. **So what do we do now?**

Personally? I'd say get behind a hedge and take the Cloak off, then poke your head out like you just sneaked out the door or something. Get their attention and see where we go from there.

Going to his knees beside one of the bushes which gave Privet Drive its name, Harry slipped out from under the Cloak. **To quote a certain brother of mine: Yeth mathter.**

A certain brother? Is he taller than me?

Harry was grinning as he got to his feet.

"Freeze, Potter," snapped Henderson, the closest of the three Slytherins to Harry's actual position. Carrow and Giorno, his usual compatriots, were coming from their places at the trot, all three wands out and trained on Harry. "Hands where I can see them."

Slowly, Harry brought his hands up, displaying them empty, then made a little twirling motion with his finger. Henderson scoffed. "Oh, right! Like I'm going to fall for that old thing! Turn around and let you get away—not likely!"

"You must think we're stupid," Carrow seconded, glaring at Harry. "Think we don't know you got that godfather of yours to kill Dursley for you, because you were afraid of him. You'll come with us to answer for that, and a lot more besides—Giorno, where's that Portkey we got off my uncle?"

"L—l—" stuttered Giorno, who had been the only one of the Slytherins to turn around at Harry's gesture.

"L—l? What's that supposed to mean?" Carrow turned bad-temperedly to follow his Housemate's line of sight, and his own eyes bulged. "L—li—"

"What's wrong with you two?" Henderson demanded. "What's an l-li any—"

Behind him, something growled, very softly for itself but still loud enough to make the earth tremble slightly.

Henderson spun in place, and his jaw dropped. "Li—li—"

"Lion?" Harry suggested.

Moony lifted his lips to display his teeth and growled again, this time adding in a hint of roar.

Was that Henderson or Carrow who screamed like a girl? Fox asked, peering out of Harry's bag to watch the Slytherins' rapidly retreating backs.

Not sure. Harry was grateful he didn't have to speak aloud. All his breath was currently occupied by laughing harder than he had the entire summer. **Pretty sure it was Giorno who wet his robes, though.**

Doesn't smell like the first time today, either...

The necessity of Harry's answering this was removed by Moony, who paced up to them solemnly and beckoned Fox with one claw. Fox jumped lightly down and crossed to Moony's side, and

Harry recovered his breath and pulled himself upright just as the lion's paw patted the ground for the third time. A moment later, Draco shook himself all over, arching his back with a sigh of pleasure, as the human Moony smiled at both boys.

Harry started to kneel at his Pack-father's feet, Draco beside him, but Moony's hand on their shoulders stopped them both. "No," he said, his voice rough. "Not anymore."

Sensing something in the offing, Harry squared his shoulders. Draco held his head high, his face alight with anticipation.

"Children kneel to their parents to show their authority," Moony continued, his voice beginning to smooth though still catching every few words. "But you two did what was best for everyone these last two weeks, even when it was hard, even when it was painful. You did it not because you were told to, but because you knew you had to. Those are not the acts of children." His eyes glinted in the light from the lamp overhead. "You may not come of age by our laws for another year, but tonight I am proud to say that my sons..." He stopped to get his voice back under control before finishing. "My sons are men."

Someone had to have moved first, Harry knew, but he didn't think even replaying the memory would shed much light on the subject.

Better just call it a three-way tie. It all ends up the same way in any case—world's biggest Pack-hug ever enacted on Privet Drive.

"Let's get home," Moony said when they finally let each other go. "Danger and Sirius and Letha are already on their way. Letha..." He hesitated. "She isn't quite herself, but she's alive, and she's coming home. That's what matters."

"That, and she downed Voldemort," said Draco, grinning. "What was that Bludger made out of?"

Moony chuckled. "All the negative emotions we've had the last two weeks—or should I say you've had, since I don't remember a bit of them until a few minutes ago—and all the positive ones we wish we'd had, all wrapped up in a big confusing whole. A clever idea, though I doubt it will work twice..."

Still chattering about the things they had missed in their various exiles, the three wizards took firm hold of one another. With a loud crack, they were gone, and peace fell over Privet Drive once more.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 55: Mothers and Fathers (Year 6)

Harry caught his breath gratefully as Moony pulled them out of the darkness of Apparition onto Grimmauld Place. *That took longer than usual. Probably because he's Side-Alonging two, and he isn't fully recovered yet, he can't be until Danger gets home...*

From overhead came the throbbing beat of wings. Draco lifted his head, peering into the sky, and Harry was about to do the same when he noticed Moony looking determinedly at the row of houses where number twelve was edging into view. "You all right?" he asked his Pack-father.

"Nothing's wrong, Harry." Moony produced a smile, but the tension around its edges belied his words. "I would rather be indoors before we get to greeting each other, that's all. It seems likely to take some time, and we're vulnerable on the street."

Translation: once he and Danger touch, they're not going to be paying attention to anything else for a while, and why give the Death Eaters a chance for a goal on the rebound? "Good idea," Harry said out loud, and started forward as the steps came into sight. Draco seemed about to bolt for the end of the street, where hoofbeats had now replaced the wings, but Harry caught his eye before he could move and flicked a hand toward the house. "They'll come to us," he mouthed. "Let's get under cover."

Bossy, bossy alpha, Draco signed, squaring his shoulders and swaggering a few steps.

You're being redundant again, Harry signed back as they climbed the stairs behind Moony, who was unlocking the door. *Better get it out of your system before—*

The door opened, and Moony waved them in ahead of him.

Too late. Harry stepped inside, Draco at his heels, and felt a great weight lift off his shoulders, echoed by Draco's thankful sigh.

They were home.

An instant later, the metaphorical weight was replaced by an actual one.

"Oof!"

"Surprise," said a sweet voice in Harry's ear, a pair of slender arms wrapping themselves around his chest and the matching legs twining about his waist. "Guess who?"

"Growing your hair out, Ron?" Harry tweaked a strand of ginger which had made its way across his shoulder. "Not sure if it's the best look for you."

Ginny growled and dug her elbow into his collarbone. "Not funny."

"Oh, I don't know," Draco commented over the top of Luna's head. "I thought it was pretty good."

"Boys," Ginny said in a tone of deep disgust. "Why do we keep them around again?"

"They're good for some things," Luna said without lifting her cheek from where it was pressed against Draco's breastbone. "Like kissing, and cuddling, and lifting heavy things without magic."

"Fair enough." Ginny dropped to the floor and stalked around Harry. "Well?" she demanded, hands on her hips. "Let's have it."

"If you insist." Harry hooked an arm under her shoulders and hoisted her up. "Lifting heavy things, or light things in this case—check." Bending his knees, he got his other arm under her legs and lifted her up to cradle her against his chest. "Cuddling—check. And finally..."

He lowered his face towards hers, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders again, lifting herself in his hold to meet his lips halfway. Vaguely, in the background, he heard the door open and close again, heard excited voices and quiet shrieks of joy, and let the knowledge of who else had come safely home seep into his bones and deepen his pleasure in the kiss.

We're all back now, Pack and Pride together again. So bugger off, Voldemort.

This round goes to us.

Mare would have taken a step back, or a few dozen, right out the door and back onto the street, but she hoped she wasn't stupid enough to put herself in physical danger just because she wasn't sure of her emotional footing.

They're just people. People I know, or know of at any rate. I can handle them.

Still, after a day and night of shocks on the level she'd had (though her alternate form, besides coming in handy for quick transportation, certainly explained the name she still felt more comfortable claiming), she thought she could be forgiven for finding a quiet spot to put her back against the wall and observe.

To her left, Danger was wrapped in the arms of the slender, sandy-haired man Mare knew was Remus, though she'd seen his face only for the briefest of instants before it had been hidden behind a surfeit of brown curls. His hands moved inside the sleeves of Danger's robes, caressing and cherishing her skin, the simple touch as sensuous as though they had begun making love right there.

Then again, what else are they doing?

To her right, a tall red-headed boy with a tricolored cat snuggled against his neck watched intently as his equally ginger sister locked lips with her black-haired, bespectacled boyfriend. A dark-blond girl smiled benevolently at them from her place against the chest of a silver-blond young

man, who seemed to be placing some kind of bet with the broad-shouldered brunet beside him.

I thought I was ready. I thought I understood. But just being able to place names with faces, to know Harry from Draco and Luna from Ginny, or to trace the connections between them as siblings, beloveds, Warriors of the Pride, it didn't prepare me for the reality. For what they are to each other, and how much that affects me, with my needs, with my power.

And I haven't even faced the worst of it yet.

Steeling herself, setting her feet, settling as strong a shield as she dared over her innermost self, she turned to look straight ahead of her.

Sirius was on his knees, the better to hold the tiny person who had flung herself into his embrace the moment they'd come through the door. His eyes were shut, tears dropping from them unashamed to soak the girl's likewise shaking shoulders. They had released each other only once, Sirius to cup a gentle hand against his daughter's face, Meghan to brush two fingers against her cheek and lay them on her father's.

All fire, that one. Passion and heart, and determination enough to save the world by herself. What is she going to do when we come face to face?

The question had the hair on the back of Mare's neck tingling and the stale taste of worry filling her mouth.

Will she hate me because I can't be what she wants, what she needs? Will she blame me for the choices I've made when she finds out they aren't the ones she wishes they were? I care for her already, I don't want to see her hurt, but I can't imagine that she won't be, not when I know what she must be hoping for and how far short the reality has to fall...

Meghan released her father and lifted her head, the sweep of eyelashes past the corner of her face showing where she blinked back the last of her tears. When she turned, Mare drew a deep breath in wonder that memory could be so faithful. If she'd had any doubts left about Sirius' story, smaller versions of his silver-gray eyes shining out of a face otherwise near-identical to her own would have put them to rest.

Stay calm. Let her make the first move. And above all, be honest with her. She may be angry at the truth, but she will forgive it eventually. She would never forgive a lie.

Trying to hold her principles in mind, Mare took one step forward, bringing her face wholly into the light, and waited.

For one second, Meghan's eyes lit up with joy. Then the shadow of a memory flitted across her face, and the light dimmed somewhat, but did not entirely fade. She started towards Mare with the gliding step of a dancer, Sirius rising to his feet behind her, blotting his cheeks with the back of his hand and watching her closely. Farther back in the hallway, Harry set Ginny on her feet and reached up to Ron's shoulders to rest a hand on Neenie's back, Draco moving behind and between

them to do the same.

Within arm's length of Mare, Meghan stopped, gazing up fearlessly into her face. Slowly, giving each movement its fullest measure of expression, the girl sank into a full curtsy, bowing her head and touching her back knee to the floor. Her robes spread like blue wings to either side as she waited, wordlessly, for her acceptance of Mare as authority to be acknowledged.

Should I? Can I? I'm not her mother, not the way she wants me to be—

But she knows that. If I were her mother, if I were still Aletha, she would have jumped at me the way she did at Sirius. She didn't, which means she understands I can't give her that, not now, maybe not ever.

It would be cruel not to give her what little I can.

She laid her hand on the back of Meghan's neck for a breath, then bent to lift the girl to her feet. "I'm glad to see you," she said, and knew, as Meghan would know, that she spoke nothing less than the truth.

Where we go next is up to us, but this seems like a good place to start.

Remus slid his hands back out of Danger's sleeves and kissed her cheek one last time. **Us to our duties now, I think. Being alphas, keeping the Pack in line, as much as it ever can be kept.**

I can do that. Especially the part I can feel you thinking about for me. Danger reached up to finger-comb Remus' hair back into place. **Yours may be harder. We didn't have time to talk much on the way out, so any clear insight you can get on what's happened to her would be very helpful...**

I'd gathered as much. Remus blew her a mental kiss. **We'll manage this like we do everything else. Together. Now go hug some cubs, and see if you can't tease Harry into Animagus form. We don't want him getting rusty.**

Rusty wolf. Danger gave an artistic shudder. **Probably smells worse than wet.**

The normality of having Danger's silliness as his companion brought a smile to Remus' face, and it was with that smile he approached—*I wonder what she'll prefer to be called now? Aletha, or the name the Death Eaters gave her? Mare, that was it, they called her Mare...*

"Do you have a moment?" he asked, pulling her attention away from the cubs, Harry now in possession of a squealing Meghan and playing keep-away with the other boys.

"Of course." She inclined her head, regal and cool as Aletha had always been in moments of tension or uncertainty. "In private?"

"If you don't mind. We can go into the front room, just here." Remus motioned for her to precede him through the curtained archway. Once inside, they both took seats, and Remus sealed the arch with a Privacy Spell, glancing at his companion as he did so. She was following his every motion with narrowed eyes, as though comparing it to a standard.

"So," he said, tucking his wand away again. "Shall we start with, I'm very pleased to meet you, and thank you for saving my life? Not to mention several others I'm fond of?"

It surprised a laugh out of her. "You're welcome. I'm fond of some of them myself, though I suppose I ought to be more than that..."

Her eyes acquired a haunted tinge Remus didn't care for. "Ought to?" He edged the words with alpha disapproval, the same tone he might have used on one of the cubs in a self-pitying mood. "The last time I looked, your feelings are entirely up to you. And while we're on the subject, may I ask what you'd prefer we call you?"

She gave him a sharp look, which slowly softened. "I wasn't expecting that," she said. "Though now that I think of it, I probably should have been. This is why the—the Pack survived, isn't it." She pronounced it like a foreign word, or a term she wasn't sure she had in its proper context. "Because you didn't bother with what ought to be and just went ahead with what was. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather stay with Mare for the time being. Though I can think of some it won't all be the same to."

"Then they'll learn to deal with it not being the same." Remus loaded this tone with certainty. Sirius, he knew, would indeed learn, far more quickly than he would give himself credit for, and Meghan had been bracing for this possibility since the start. "So. Mare. You seem to know our stories, but I only know bits and pieces of yours, what Danger was able to gather from the things you said and did on your way out of the Death Eaters' hideaway..."

"And you want to know more." Mare settled back into her chair, toying with the edge of her robes. "I can't blame you. I wish I knew more myself. But I'll tell you what I can." She paused, her hand sliding inside her robes to rest for a moment on the grip of a wand Remus knew almost as well as his own.

"Aletha was a smart woman," she began finally, tapping each finger of her right hand on the wand's back end in turn. "She thought well on her feet, and she knew her husband. She knew him inside and out, and that's how she knew she would have to do the thinking for them both in front of Voldemort, because they had put Sirius' back to the wall and the only thing he knows how to do in that situation is fight. Not that that's bad, but it isn't always the answer, and she knew it wasn't that day."

Remus watched, fascinated, as the traces of emotion flickered across Mare's features. Fear, longing, hatred, love, but always, under it all, intense and lightning-quick thought.

"She knew, if they gave in this one time, if they bent and allowed Voldemort his little game, there would still be a chance for them. Magic can be regained, memories can be restored, but no power

on earth can reverse death. And even if they didn't die, even if Voldemort only—*only*—put the Imperius Curse over Sirius and forced him into erasing her memories, they would still be worse off, because Voldemort had no reason to be precise or careful with her mind, and Sirius did. So she told him to do it, to do what he'd been told, and she gave him a clue as to the way she hoped it could someday be fixed."

"Yes, the colors song from *Joseph* ." Remus nodded. "Danger's told me, and I have an idea what the clue means. 'Blue'—did you, did Aletha, mean a blue one of these?" He lifted his pendants out of his robes, displaying the gems. "Is that what she used, to store her memories?"

"You are good." Mare smiled. "That's exactly what she did. It's why she danced around the floor while she was humming it, too. To give her memories time to copy themselves over, to settle into place, so that she wouldn't lose anything." Her face grew shadowed again. "But it didn't work quite the way she was hoping it would. And it may be wrong of me, but I'm grateful it didn't, because if it had..."

"If it had, you would have been wiped out of existence," Remus finished, feeling a pang of mingled sympathy and worry at her slow nod. "It was very brave of you to activate the jewel in any case, knowing that might happen."

Mare dismissed this with a short, jerky laugh. "We weren't getting out of there without someone else who could use a wand, and it was the only way I could think of to get that knowledge quickly. I'd be no more dead being erased to make way for her than I would if we were caught, and having her back would make Sirius happy, so it wasn't all that much of a risk. But it didn't work that way. Her memories did come back, they're all here inside my head, I can see every one of them if I try, but they're not *mine* ." She smiled. "I understand you have some experience with that."

"I do, though it's different in certain ways." Remus contemplated the place in his mind which had been so achingly, terrifyingly empty for those few confused moments he had spent battling his demons alone. "Harry might actually understand it better. He has a particular moment in his life he had to lose, one he treasured very much, and though he got the memory back, it wasn't the same—it was like watching a film, he said, or hearing a story. He'd lost the scents, the feelings, the little things that put him into the moment. Does that sound right?"

"Exactly right." Mare's fingers knotted and unknotted themselves. "I'm not Aletha, but I know her, know her better than she knew herself. She never knew she had this, for one thing." She held up a hand, blue light shimmering around it. "Or if she did—" Her eyes went wide. "Her mother. Merlin's robes, her mother."

"Easy." Remus crossed the space between them in two steps and put his arms around her, holding her as she began to shake. "I'm here. You're not alone. Tell me about her mother."

"The power came down that way." Mare spoke in a monotone, staring at her shimmering fingers. "From her mother's side, and her mother before her, probably all the way down from Ravenclaw's daughter, from Margaret. But Margaret was a Squib, and all her descendants were Muggles, so none of them could *use* the power." Her hand closed into a fist. "But that didn't stop Teresa from

trying. And that was what killed her, what killed her and destroyed their family."

"I thought Aletha's mother died from cancer." Remus kept his voice calm, but his mind was racing. "And that her father felt Aletha ought to have done something about it, even though they waited too long to tell her for even magical healing to help, so he broke off contact with her."

"That was the surface of things." The light pooled in Mare's palm and formed into a ball, shedding layers like an onion. "But the cancer wouldn't have started so soon or spread so fast if Teresa hadn't drained her own life trying to heal the birds she worked with. Trying to use a magical power, without any magic other than life itself. And when she was dying, she made Aletha promise, made her swear that she would never try to heal that way, because she didn't know that magic would make the difference. She thought it would destroy her daughter the way it had her. So Aletha promised, and that's why no one ever knew she was the Heir of Ravenclaw."

"We know it now, thanks to you." Remus extended a cautious finger towards the ball of light, and Mare nodded slightly, letting him know it was safe to touch. He dipped into it and came up with little glimmers of blue highlighting his skin, alternately warming and cooling as they slid down into his palm. "What about her father? Was there anything about him?"

"N—" Mare broke off with her mouth open for the O. "Yes. Yes, there was, but this is *my* memory, not hers. It's the first one I have, before even waking up in my little kitchen, and I didn't realize what it was until this very moment, until you mentioned her father..."

Remus called up a long ribbon of blue fire and wound it around his own hand. "Can it be shared?"

"Y-yes." Mare shifted restlessly, her shoulders rising in instinctive distaste. "Voldemort was testing me. Making sure Sirius hadn't cheated and left me any of Aletha's memories. He showed me a memory of his own, one that would have put Aletha into a killing rage. And I'm not sure it isn't going to do the same for me now that I know what it is." She turned to catch and hold Remus' eyes. "He murdered her father."

The fire around Remus' hand flared briefly as his emotions spiked, but he pulled it, and then, back under control and nodded in understanding. "Go on."

"It was a long time ago. Shortly after William Freeman disappeared. He looks almost exactly the same as he does in Aletha's last memories of him." Mare dipped her fingers into Remus' fire, as he had done with her healing light, and twined it around her hands as she went on. "Voldemort corners him in some little alley somewhere. Plays a bit of cat-and-mouse, and makes him give something up. A brooch, the one thing he must have taken to remember his wife by, because Aletha remembered her mother wearing it, and very hazily her grandmother. Shaped like a stylized eagle, blue enamel on bronze..."

Remus added a line of bronze fire beside the blue. "Show me?"

Mare shaped the blue fire she was already holding into the form of a palm-sized heraldic bird of prey, beak open, talons extended, then surrounded it with a thin line of bronze. "Like this. About

this size too. Probably a cloak-pin originally."

"I would agree." Remus started to call up a memory of his own, then stopped. Speculation could wait on known facts. "What happened after Voldemort got the brooch?"

"I'm not sure, exactly." Mare frowned at the fiery likeness of the pin. "Voldemort kills him, William, but after that... a complicated spell, one I don't recognize, either from myself or from Aletha. All I know for sure is, he Vanishes William's body when he's done, and tucks the brooch into an inside pocket of his robes with a smile like he's just heard his rich uncle is dead. And that's the last thing I remember until I woke up to Lucius Malfoy's boot in my side." She grinned. "I am glad Sirius got to punch him. Not that I would have minded doing it myself, but I'm positive Sirius enjoyed it more..."

"Are you going to flirt with my husband all day, or may I have him back now?" Danger inquired from the doorway.

Mare looked around Remus and raised an eyebrow. "Do you have any room for him with all those passengers?"

Remus turned to have a look. "I don't mind them," he said, smiling at the cat in Danger's arms, the fox sprawled around her shoulders, and the wolf pressed against her leg. "We'll make room for them somehow."

"And I would rather stay here for a little while, if you don't mind." Mare pressed Remus' hand. "Thank you for listening, and for understanding."

"It's what I do." Remus got to his feet. "We'll likely be somewhere on the ground floor if you want us, or you can go straight to bed if you're tired."

"Dobby's made up one of the guest rooms on the first floor for you by now," Danger added. "It'll be the one with the light on."

"You're much too good." Mare smiled again, but the corner of her mouth had begun to tremble. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Remus said, bowing. "Good night."

A mental nudge to Danger got her moving quickly, Wolf beside her. Neenie jumped down outside the Privacy Spell and retransformed, as Fox did the same on Danger's other side. "I missed you all so much," Hermione murmured, leaning against Remus but sparing one hand to hold Draco's. "It wasn't quite so bad once Ron got up, but it still wasn't like having the Pack here properly..."

"It might never be that way again." Harry stood up out of Wolf's form. "Not the way we were used to it. What's the matter with Letha?"

Remus shook his head. "It's probably best to go through it as few times as possible. Have you seen Sirius and Meghan?"

"They're up in our den," Draco said, nodding towards the stairs. "They said for the rest of us to come up whenever we wanted. Now sounds good to me." He gave Neenie his sweetest smile. "I can always carry you if you're out of the habit of walking places on your own..."

Neenie reached up and flicked his ear. "Keep teasing me about it and I'll tell him you volunteered to be his eyes when I get tired."

Draco turned the color of a boiled prawn and pressed his lips firmly together.

The little group reached the second floor without further incident, and Meghan hurled herself at Danger, giving Sirius a chance to pull Remus aside. "When you get a minute," he said quietly, "ask Danger where she went on our way out of there. We nearly ran out of time on those green jewels before she got back, and she wouldn't say a word to me or Letha about it, but I don't need to be in her head to know whatever happened upset her."

"Noted." Remus scooped Meghan up, slung her over one shoulder, and tickled her for a moment before dropping her to the padded floor. "Where did Ron and the rest of them get to, by the way?"

"Went to bed," Harry answered from between Remus' feet. "Said they'd seen we were alive and that was enough for tonight, we can always talk in the morning." He squirmed out of his self-imposed confinement and sat up. "So what is the matter with Letha?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Sirius took a seat beside Harry, bumping shoulders with his godson, then scratching Wolf's ears when that canine crawled into his lap. "She knew my whole name and how to reverse the breaking of the vow, but she wasn't acting like herself at all."

"Probably because she isn't exactly herself." Remus sat down and let his hand rest, almost carelessly, against Draco's side where his Pack-son was curled up in a heap of pillows. Danger had both Hermione and Meghan snuggled against her, one on each side. "She's requested, for the time being, that we call her Mare, because she doesn't feel like Aletha..."

Sirius' face tightened as Remus explained what he had learned from his talk with Mare. "So I did kill her after all," he said bitterly when Remus was done. "Just left us with a living reminder of it, one we get to see and talk to every day."

Danger nodded to Hermione. Hermione reached over and slapped Sirius on the back of the head.

"Go on, hit me all you want to, it doesn't change anything." Sirius rubbed the point of impact, scowling. "I destroyed her. Left us with nothing but her shell with someone else living inside it, and a bunch of old records of her that this new person doesn't want around..."

"And you wouldn't be so bitter about it if you hadn't fallen in love with the new Aletha just as fast as you did with the old one," Danger put in. "Don't try lying to me, I know it as well as you knew about Evanie. She hasn't really changed, Sirius. She seems like someone else to us because she's starting from a different point, she doesn't have all the memories that shaped the Aletha we knew, but her heart and her soul are the same, and she knew they would be. It's why she told you to do it

the way that she did, so there could still be this chance for a new beginning for you both."

"I know, I know, I know!" Sirius slapped his hand against Wolf's side harder on every repetition, until before the third one could connect Harry rolled away human and got to his feet. The other cubs came to his side at his hasty beckoning, and Remus conjured another Privacy Spell between them and the adults just in time, as Sirius bent over and buried his face in his hands.

It would hurt him more than it already does to have them see this, and they know it.

Danger slid up beside Sirius and hugged him once around the shoulders, then laid a handkerchief delicately on his knee and withdrew to sit beside him. Remus scooted closer but refrained from touching. Unlike Danger, he was a legitimate target should Sirius' pain take the form of needing to punch something.

Here's hoping he took all that out on Malfoy.

The thought of the Pack's old nemesis, and what Danger had been able to tell him about the man, started a new train of thought in Remus' mind.

"She didn't forget everything, you know," he said when Sirius' harsh sobbing had died down somewhat. "She knew enough to talk to you, and not to be surprised when you answered. She responded to a few of the lures Danger threw out in her dream—subtly, but she did respond. And she remembered Draco."

"How d'you reckon?" Sirius asked, picking up Danger's handkerchief.

"She healed Malfoy," answered Danger in Remus' stead, using her wand to sketch two pictures on the air, one of a hideously scarred face, the other smooth and sneeringly handsome. "You might not have noticed, being bent on smashing up his face again, but she fixed it for him. Took away all his werewolf scars except one. See it?"

Sirius peered at the picture, then snorted. "Right under the eye. Just where he marked Fox and Neenie to twin them."

"Exactly." Danger dismissed the pictures and the Privacy Spell in one broad swoop. "She wouldn't have done that if she didn't remember us somewhere deep in her mind. And she took a big risk with her magic, balancing me and Remus at a distance like that and reestablishing our bond without us being together. She may not think she cares about us, but she does, or she wouldn't put herself in harm's way for us like that."

"I made a memory box for her," Meghan added, sitting next to Remus this time, as Hermione dropped down beside Sirius and Harry and Draco converged on Danger. "Things she likes or cares about, things that are important to her. Maybe it will help her feel like the memories are really hers, and she'll see she doesn't have to be either all Mare or all my Mama Letha—she can be both."

"I'd say wait until she gets a bit more established here for that one, but it's a good idea." Danger stroked Draco's hair with one hand and Wolf's back with the other. "What she wants most right now, it sounds like to me, is to be treated like herself. Like a new member of the Order, a friend of ours who we'd like to get to know better, and someone to whom we owe a great debt of gratitude. Not some selfish imaginary person who's taken over our Letha's body and should be evicted whether she wants to go or not."

"We wouldn't treat her like that," Hermione objected, leaning into the curve of Sirius' arm. "It isn't even true! She *is* Letha, just Letha without her memories!"

"That's right, and we all know that, but she doesn't realize that we do." Danger chuckled absently as Wolf rolled over and exposed his belly for scratching. "So we'll have to show her, and the best way I know to do that is just to be a friend to her. You four, pretend she's the new Defense professor if you can't think of anything else. You've certainly seen enough of them come and go, and you always manage to be civil to them one way or another."

"We're going to have another new one, aren't we?" Draco asked. "Neville's mum won't want to come back after what happened to his dad at Diagon Alley."

Meghan nodded. "She told Professor Dumbledore that she resigned last week," she said. "I don't think he's having a lot of luck finding anybody to take her place."

"I would almost think the post was cursed, the way everyone says it is," Hermione said thoughtfully, "except who'd curse a teaching po—oh—" A huge yawn interrupted the word. "I must be tireder than I'd thought."

No, Danger said as she caught Remus considering whether or not to reveal what Dumbledore had once told him. **Not tonight. Not when we've just got them wound down enough to sleep. You can tell them in the morning if you want that the post really is cursed, or you might have thought better of it by then, but you're not telling them about it tonight.**

Yes dear. Remus kissed the top of Meghan's head and nudged her towards Sirius for similar attentions. **You've missed ordering me around these last two weeks, haven't you?**

You mean it shows? Danger tossed him a mental grin. **We can always sneak off to our room for a little while before we come back here to sleep, you know...**

The sneaking off had been brought to a highly satisfactory mutual conclusion, and Danger was just considering whether or not she ought to rouse Remus before he fell asleep on her when she felt him rouse himself. **Looking for seconds, are we?** she sent with a chuckle. **Give me a few minutes to catch my breath and I'll be happy to oblige.**

Thanks, but not just yet. Remus pulled back far enough to look her in the eye by the light of the waxing moon, gleaming in through their open curtains. **Danger, where did you go while you and Sirius and Letha were trying to get away? The way Sirius put it, you were gone for long**

enough to nearly get all of you caught again, and you wouldn't tell him why...

Oh. Danger shut her eyes, striving for patience, for calm. **That.**

Yes, that. If it's something I should know about, something you found or found out—

No, no, it's nothing like that. It's just... Danger shook her head, impatient with words as she rarely was. **How about I show you. Will that do?**

Perfectly.

Hand in mental hand, they plunged into Danger's memories.

Remus grinned when Sirius Stunned Voldemort, as Danger had known he would, which was why she had chosen to start the memory at that moment. They followed as Sirius activated his green gems and half-carried Aletha upwards through the wall with Danger supporting her other side, as the three emerged in an upper hallway, as they started for the direction Sirius thought was most likely to bring them to daylight soonest—

The memory-Danger stopped dead as they passed the entrance to a large hall, walking halfway in and halfway out of the wall so as to be able to duck entirely into it and stay hidden if Death Eaters should suddenly round a corner. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" Sirius poked his head out of the wall. "Oh, that. Danger, not to be callous, but dead Muggles are nothing new around here—"

"I don't think they're—" Danger cut herself off. "You know what, you stay here. Stay hidden, give Letha a minute or two to recharge, and I'll be right back—"

"Danger—" Sirius lunged for her and missed as she darted across the corridor, and had to step back into the wall, cursing under his breath, as a trio of Death Eaters hurtled down the corridor seconds too late to see her. Still hand in hand, Remus and the real Danger followed Danger's memory-figure into the semi-darkness of the hall, past the unmoving corpse of a large Muggle man, to the smaller body she knelt beside—

Remus exhaled a breath of sudden understanding, and Danger's worry lest he not understand evaporated.

Memory-Danger held tight to the hand of a battered, bloodied Petunia Dursley.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, laying her other hand gently against Petunia's bruised face. "You didn't deserve this, no matter what you'd done."

"My baby," Petunia breathed, the words barely audible. "I loved him... why..."

"I wish I knew." Tears brimmed in memory-Danger's eyes. "I wish we had been able to help you."

Petunia's lips trembled into the slightest of smiles. "Not alone... helps." Her eyes fluttered open, tried to focus on Danger. "Harry?"

"He's all right. My husband is going to get him, to take him home."

"Good." Petunia closed her eyes again. "Tell him... sorry..."

The final sound of the word trailed off into nothingness, and the hand in Danger's grasp went limp.

The real Danger turned away, burying her face in Remus' chest, as her memory-figure bent double, fighting down her tears.

"You did right," Remus murmured to her, holding her close. "No one should have to die alone."

They slipped out of the memory and back to their bodies, and gave each other comfort once more before returning to the den room, to sleep among their Pack and wake to a new day together.

In a comfortable guest room on the first floor, Mare slept restlessly, her hands making tiny movements to each side, as if she were constantly reaching for something which was never there.

She dreamed of a white-haired woman in blue, who smiled at her and called her daughter, and whose cloak was fastened at the front by a stylized eagle wrought in bronze.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 56: Shepherds and Prodigals (Year 6)

Remus spent a good portion of the next morning with Dumbledore, coming up to speed on the events that had transpired in the wizarding world while he'd been out of action, Danger listening with half an ear while she, Molly, and Voni Pritchard performed a similar ritual in the kitchen. Sirius had left the house early to lead a team of Aurors back to the manor where he and Aletha had been imprisoned, though no one thought that was likely to amount to much besides discovering whose it was and ensuring the Death Eaters couldn't use it again.

And Aletha, or rather Mare...

"Mare remains a puzzle to me," said Dumbledore, making Remus jump. The Headmaster chuckled. "You spoke her name out loud, and my ears have not yet failed me in spite of my age. So tell me, how does she strike you? Is she trustworthy?"

Remus started to bristle, then stopped himself. "Considering her as a different person than Aletha, which is what she wants, it's a fair question," he admitted. "It's also one we might none of us be suited to answer, since we don't know her very well yet. But I want to say yes. At the core, she's still Aletha, and I never knew Aletha to betray a trust. She certainly won't be selling us out to the Death Eaters, given how they treated her."

Dumbledore nodded. "I think the same, but wanted to hear it from your perspective. What of the third option that lies before her? Neither remaining with us nor going over to the Death Eaters, but removing herself from our midst?"

"I... hadn't thought of that," Remus said slowly. "But now that you bring it up, it makes sense. Just because she has Aletha's memories doesn't mean she also has the feelings involved, for us, for the cubs, for our cause."

She is halfway in love with Sirius, but she may be questioning now if that's her own feeling or one left over from Aletha, Danger contributed. I think it's her own—certainly he put forth plenty of effort to be charming, and there's the "enchanted prince" angle, plus her saving his life—but my telling her that is necessarily suspect.

"I have kept her aunt apprised of the situation, as I believed you would want." Dumbledore handed Remus a lightweight envelope. "She agreed that her coming would do little good besides adding one more person to the tally of those worrying here, but holds herself ready to do anything which may be needed."

"You think Mare might go to her?" Remus skimmed the letter, smiling at Amy Freeman's usual bluntness of statement. "I would think the associations with Aletha would be too strong."

"Less so than in this place, and perhaps more to her taste if she does not wish to make a complete break." Dumbledore ran a finger down the rows of scrolls stored in the desk of the war room.

"Mare does not deny her blood, and besides her daughter, Amy Freeman is the only relation she has living."

"Living. Yes. Great Merlin." Remus rubbed the corners of his eyes, tempted for a moment to wish he was still in his uncaring sleep. "I have to write to her, to Amy. To tell her what we've found out about her brother, Aletha's father—and we haven't even told you, have we?" At Dumbledore's shaken head, he went on. "It was a memory Voldemort showed to Mare just after the Memory Charm took effect, testing to see if she remembered anything about herself..."

Dumbledore went very still at the story of the brooch. "I might appreciate seeing this memory for myself, if Mare would be so kind as to share it with me," he said when Remus was finished. "It might help me solve a mystery to which I have referred before."

"Yes, you have." *And never gone beyond referring to it, which is annoying even when I know it's for our own safety. What we don't know, we can't tell, no matter what happens to us.*

My own personal ray of sunshine, sent to brighten up my world, Danger said sourly inside his mind. We'll get all the stories straight at the party we have after the final battle, if anyone's still sober enough to tell them at that point. Until then, let the man have his secrets. They don't hurt you, do they?

Since they're secrets and I don't know them, I can't see how I'd tell, Remus shot back, and got the sense that Danger had snorted into her tea.

"I have made preparations, Remus," Dumbledore said quietly. "I was in Diagon Alley shortly before this attack, and it is possible the strengthening I did to the wards at Ollivanders thwarted the Death Eaters in one of their objectives. Certainly Mr. Ollivander reported a surprising number of attacks on his shop in the short time our enemies spent in that location. But my point, and I promise you I do have one, is that I was there to make a particular purchase I wanted kept very secret. Only you and Danger are to know of it at the moment."

Remus peered at the object in Dumbledore's hand. "You just bought this? But it looks like—"

"Good." Dumbledore smiled. "I had hoped you would say that. It was a special order, made to my precise specifications, and I will be keeping it in my office. In the bottom left-hand drawer of my desk, which unlocks with the key you will find hanging on the back of Fawkes' perch. And just to ensure its further safety, I will be keeping it..." He reached into one of the drawers of the war room desk and took out a box. "In this."

"It's a box," Remus began doubtfully. "How will that—"

Dumbledore lifted the lid of the box.

Shiny, Danger crooned inside Remus' head.

Remus administered a mental poke in the side and lowered his hand experimentally towards the

flames filling the box, after getting the go-ahead nod from Dumbledore. "Gubraithian fire?" he asked, and Dumbledore nodded again. "I thought so. You showed us some once before, back when we were first demonstrating our power for you." He lifted his hand with a wreath of flames clinging to it. "It feels different than ordinary fire. More subdued and more energetic at the same time. Which makes no sense, but it doesn't go into words very well."

"I would imagine not." Dumbledore dropped the item in his hand into the box, where it landed atop the parchment envelope already there, and motioned to Remus to return the flames. "The fire will not harm the box's contents, but it will destroy any other thing which may come in contact with it, and the contents of the box cannot be removed by any magical means, nor can the box be destroyed by any spell which would leave its contents also intact. To the best of my knowledge and skill, the only way to remove what lies inside this box..." He closed the lid and latched it. "... is with an unprotected human hand."

"Which means you can't even get it out yourself," Remus said slowly. "Not now that you've put it in."

"I might be able to dismantle the charms, having built them, but I would not lay money on the possibility." Dumbledore smiled, setting the box aside. "And I see I do not have to call your attention to the final destination of your train of thought."

Only three people in the world could get that secret out of that box now, Danger said, her thoughts no longer lively and laughing but full of respect tinged with worry. **And one of them, it doesn't sound like Albus wants to know about it yet.**

"I assume you don't want us to tell Harry about this," Remus echoed aloud. "Not unless something drastic happens."

"Nicely put, and leading well into our next topic of conversation, but let us linger on this one for a moment longer." Dumbledore's eyes were devoid of twinkle, holding Remus', and Danger's through him, in a direct and challenging gaze of light blue. "I have written a great many secrets in the letter enclosed in that box, against the day when I may fall in battle and be unable to give them to you in any other way. Until that day comes, and perhaps a trifle selfishly, I ask that you leave the box alone."

The gaze dropped to the floor, and Remus had the impression that was as much to hide the sudden appearance of tears in the eyes as it was from shame or worry. "I told only the strict truth in the letter, and as a result I do not always appear in my best light. I would prefer not to be present when it is opened. As for Harry, I do not even wish him to know it exists until he is seventeen." A long sigh. "I would keep it from him longer if I dared. There are things no one should have to face, especially not so young."

"We faced it as young, Sirius and Aletha and I," Remus said, accepting Danger's wordless mental caress. "And we seem to have turned out all right."

Dumbledore lifted his head, his smile returning. "You, my friend—my friends," he corrected

himself, a fragment of twinkle shining in his eyes for Danger, "are a constant source of wonder and fascination to me."

Aww , you'll make me blush, Danger cooed, and Remus laughed aloud. Whatever might be in store for them in the next hour, the next week, the next year, in this moment his soul was content.

We still have our troubles, but we'll live through them the same way we always have. We might even turn some of them into assets.

It's what the Pack does best.

Seated on the bed in her guest room, Mare called up the mental map she had received of the bewildering maze which was number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

It's far too big for the little bit of townhouse it seems like from the outside. But then, the manor was the same way. Wizards can do that with enclosed spaces, it seems—borrow space from somewhere else, to fit more than they otherwise could inside four walls.

Opening her eyes, she got to her feet and started down the hall, grateful that no one was around. She wanted to be alone for this first foray into the unknown.

Unknown. The word resounded in her head to the rhythm of her footsteps. *Unknown. Not a bad way to describe this power of mine—unknown as to origin, to limits, to side effects...*

Though that wasn't quite true, Mare reflected as she made her second turn. She knew her power's origin, if not the exact way that Rowena Ravenclaw had come by her Healing gifts in the first place. As to limits, unless she found some source of strength other than herself, her own stores of magic and energy would provide them automatically. And side effects—

Does collapsing in a faint count? She chuckled. Back to energy again. Nothing's free, not even magic.

She turned once more and stepped through a doorway, a quiet hum of pleasure coming to her lips unbidden as she looked around. Her destination was safely reached, and that without any wrong turns or backtracking.

The more quickly I can confirm the factual content of Aletha's memories, make them my own through personal experience, the better off I'll be.

Stepping up to a bookshelf, she pulled down the first of several Healing textbooks she had known Aletha kept here. The motley crew who frequented the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix held several fascinating puzzles for a natural Healer, and she wanted to see if anyone had ever looked into some of the avenues she was thinking about pursuing.

It might save me some time, stop me chasing down dead ends. Or it might give me new insight into

what will and won't work.

Her hand stilled on the cover of the book.

Am I so sure I should be doing this, though? What if I decide not to stay? These aren't my people. I never made any promises, swore any oaths. Why should I be bound by something another person wearing my body said she'd do before I existed? I like them all quite a lot, they've been nothing but kind to me, but that's no reason to embroil myself in a war!

With a little shake of the head, she carried her book to one of the large chairs in the room and plopped down with it.

This is no time to be making those kinds of decisions, not when I've just arrived. I need to take a few days, get to know them all better, find out what's at stake here, and then make up my mind.

Besides, no matter which way I eventually decide, this will help. If I go, I'll leave goodwill behind me. If I stay...

A moment's fantasy, or perhaps a memory, drifted over her. She perched on the arm of this same chair, laughing at the absurd verbal sallies of the man seated in it, and then his hand closed tight on hers and pulled, and she slithered down into his lap and took firm possession of his mouth...

Yes. Well. Mare dragged herself reluctantly out of that little dream. We will have to see where that goes. And it will just have to wait until after I work out my little puzzles. So. She flipped open the book to the index, in the back. Let us start with the letter E...

Ginny looked up from her Potions homework as Hermione came into the girls' bedroom, a letter in one hand. "Who's that from?"

"Viktor. Krum," Hermione added at Ginny's brief blank look. "I'd written to him before the school year ended, asking him if he could send some books we may need to help us refine the spell-breaking year. He was away at Quidditch training camp most of the spring and summer, and they held all his owls at the post office, so he only just got the letter last week, and he says the books I want are very valuable."

About to make a joke on the way Hermione's last two words would sound spoken with Krum's Bulgarian accent, Ginny caught a glimpse of her friend's face and stopped. Hermione's voice was cheerful enough, even unconcerned, but thin strain lines had begun to show around her mouth and eyes.

Is she worried about Ron meeting up with Krum again? But why would she be? They settled all that a long time ago, there's no question who she'd rather be with...

"So he can't send them here, but he's going to take a few days off and bring them." Hermione was absent-mindedly crumpling the letter she still held in her hand, and her smile was somewhat

forced. "He wants to know where we ought to meet, and I don't know what to tell him. We'd usually do something like this in Diagon Alley, but it's such a mess still, and I don't want to Floo all the way to Hogsmeade just for a little exchange of books, but we're going to need those once we're all back together, this is just the power-gathering period for the year, we'll have to have those spells to direct that power when the school year starts and I don't know any other way to get them—"

"Breathe," Ginny interrupted. "Please. I'm getting dizzy just listening to you."

"Oh." Hermione laughed shakily. "I'm sorry. Was I rattling on again? I've just been thinking a great deal about the year lately, and how we'll have to be more careful than ever with the strains the war is going to put on us. I don't want to be the one who falls down on the job and wrecks our best chance to take away one of Voldemort's strongest weapons."

Ginny bit off her immediate response, which would have suggested that Hermione had just uttered a pile of bovine manure. *If she doesn't want to tell me what's really wrong, she doesn't have to, but I'll be keeping a closer eye on her. Maybe ask Luna to do the same. Just a letter from an old friend shouldn't have her this worked up, not unless...*

She frowned, which was safe to do since Hermione was now lying crosswise on her bed, flattening out the letter she'd crumpled. *Could she still have feelings for him? Still prefer him over Ron? I can't really believe that, but it would make sense of the way she's acting. Definitely have to ask Luna on this one.*

"You could ask one of the adults to take you out to the Den to meet him," she suggested casually. "The wards on that, plus supervision, should make it almost as safe as it is here."

"Of course." Hermione's laugh was more real this time. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"Too close to the problem?" Ginny arched her back and exhaled a sigh of relief as her aches eased. "It happens to Mum a lot. She gets so fixed on her worries and troubles, she never thinks to step back a bit and look at them in perspective. Percy's like her that way." She stopped, stifling a grin behind her hand. "Or he used to be. He's not so much anymore..."

"All right, that does it." Hermione sat up and put her hands on her hips. "What are you all being so mysterious about with Percy? You've been giggling over it since the day after Ron got up, and I'd bet you were thinking about it even before that. What *is* it?"

"Oh, it's nothing." Ginny waved her hand grandly. "Just a little adventure in misdirection."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "How would you like to have an adventure in misdirection of your own? Turn left when you want to turn right, say, and go backwards when you want to go forwards? All day tomorrow?"

Ginny shuddered. "That's horrible. Could you really do it?"

"Try me."

"No thanks. I'd rather tell you. See, Crystal gave Percy this old Muggle book she likes, all about a man who acts like he doesn't have a brain in his head when really he's a hero who saves innocent people, and when he's saved somebody, he leaves behind the sign of a little red flower, so they call him after it—the Scarlet Pimpernel..."

"...so this will be the symbol we use." Percy sketched it in the air with his wand, a crimson circle with two lines of differing lengths pointing out from the center. "We leave it where we've been, just like the Death Eaters leave the Dark Mark."

"A clock?" Fred asked, squinting at it. "What's it mean?"

"It has two meanings," Crystal answered before Percy could. "The first is, it's time for the Death Eaters to go. They've overstayed their welcome. And the other one..." She grinned. "Remind me what this mysterious masked figure of ours is going to be called, the one who's going to get the Death Eaters' attention and save Muggles wherever he goes?"

"The Red Shepherd," said Danielle, nodding along with Maya. "Red for the opposite of the Dark Mark's green, and a shepherd to lead people to safety." She frowned at Crystal's increasingly smug grin. "Right?"

"It's got another meaning." George leaned back on the seat he and Lee had built out of crates in the storeroom behind the twins' shop. "This is my lady. Everything always has another meaning. Go on, Crys, tell 'em."

"Red shepherd's clock is another name..." Crystal motioned to Percy, who drew another picture in the air with his wand. "For this."

"Sneaky," Lee commented, gazing at the small, five-petaled flower. "Better hope there's no Muggle literature experts out there, though."

Maya scoffed. "Are you mad? These are *Death Eaters*. We'll be lucky if they even acknowledge Muggles can read."

"And that's not all." Percy dismissed the flower and waved his wand at several of the empty crates, which rose up, forming a tower at either end of the room. "A shepherd can't just lead his sheep around in circles. He has to have somewhere safe for them to go. A sanctuary, if you will."

"With a capital S!" Maya crowed, beaming. "But what are these for?"

"To show you one of my ideas for how to get people into Sanctuary." Percy walked around the towers, continuing to make spellcasting motions. "There will likely be several different entrances, but I had an idea for one which only allows Muggles to enter."

"Only allows Muggles?" Lee frowned at the translucent bridge now taking form between the towers. "Is that even possible?"

"Theoretically, yes." Percy made a brisk, slashing motion at both ends of the bridge. "If there are charms which repel Muggles, or stop them from seeing things, which there are, it should be possible to reverse those charms and cause only Muggles to be able to see or access a certain place. So..."

He swirled his wand three times counterclockwise.

"Did that do what you wanted it to?" Fred asked, blinking.

"Not seeing anything here," Danielle confirmed.

"Me neither," said Maya.

Crystal cocked her head to one side. "Does that work for anything you draw like that?" she asked with a sly smile.

"Does what work?" asked Lee. "There's nothing..." He trailed off, eyes widening. "Percy, you did it!"

"Part of it. The rest still needs testing." Percy bowed to Crystal. "If you wouldn't mind?"

"Oi!" George protested. "No putting the moves on my girl!"

"He's not." Crystal elbowed George in the gut. "He's just being a gentleman, which is something you could learn from him. Where do I go, Percy?"

"Up here." Percy conjured a set of stairs onto one of the towers, then reversed his earlier motion, bringing the bridge back into visibility for the rest of the audience. "It looks too strange when she's walking on nothing," he confided, stepping back to watch.

Crystal mounted the stairs and started across the bridge. Halfway across, she yelped as a wizened old man, dressed in rags, appeared in front of her. "Halt!" he demanded in a croaking voice. "Who would cross the Bridge of Death must answer me these questions three ere the other side he see!"

"Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me." Crystal directed a glare at Percy, who pushed his glasses up his nose and looked smug. "Where did you see Monty Python?"

"Your little brother and sister hang around with the Pack long enough, you learn all kinds of things," said George, chuckling. "You going to answer him or not?"

"You will all pay for this," Crystal muttered, and turned back to the old man. "Ask me the questions, bridgekeeper, I'm not afraid."

"What is your name?" the old man croaked.

"Crystal Huley."

"What is your quest?"

"To get across this bridge and wring a few Weasley necks."

Danielle, Lee, and Maya laughed. Percy and the twins looked apprehensive.

"What..." The old man paused dramatically. "...will you name your first-born red-haired child?"

"Excuse me? I'm not having any red-haired ch—" Crystal clapped her hand over her mouth before she could finish the word, but it was already too late. With a loud *sproing*, the section of the bridge where she was standing gave way, and she fell with a scream—

Into a pool of water, which appeared below her just in time to break her fall.

The twins applauded. Maya was already rushing forward to help pull Crystal out of the water. Danielle stopped long enough to smack Fred on the back of the head and feint towards George. "She'll want to do you herself," she informed him before conjuring a towel and tossing it to Maya. "Might need this."

"As you can see, it comes with a built-in safety feature," Percy informed the twins. "I hope it will stop any Muggles who might be under the Imperius of a Death Eater, because the Death Eater will be in control and not know the proper answers to the questions."

"Same vulnerability as before, with the same answer." Lee cast a nervous look at Crystal, who was wringing out her hair and muttering savagely to the other girls. "Here's hoping they don't have anyone else like Dursley around..."

I wish I'd never met Dudley Dursley.

The thought was nothing new to him. He'd lived with it, in varying degrees of fervency, for the last four years of his life. This, however, was a new low.

Hiding in my own house. In, at the moment, what appears to be one of the places also used by the people I'm accused of helping. He picked another tuft of black fur off his robes and muffled a sneeze in his sleeve. The people I never set eyes on, at least not while they were here, but I'm the suspect because "they couldn't have got away without inside help"—yes, of course they could, it's just that none of you want to admit you're incompetent bunglers!

It still made him shiver to think of how narrow his escape had been. *If Brilly didn't like me enough to disobey Father's implied order not to tell me what they were starting to think... if I hadn't had those few minutes' warning, long enough to grab a few essentials and get out of my room... if I hadn't spent every spare second when I was little playing down here, getting to know every nook and cranny in these halls...*

His imagination caught hold of the "ifs" and painted him a vivid picture, one of a door which refused to yield to his frantic pressure and a window which shrank into nothingness even as he turned towards it, of the whipcrack sound of Apparition beside him and rough hands snatching his wand away as he tried to draw it—

Stop. He clenched his teeth and flattened his hands on the padded floor. Stop this now. It didn't happen, and it won't happen—as soon as I'm sure they've really left, that they didn't leave anyone behind to grab me when I move, I'll get out of here and head for the Ministry, I'm sure they'd love to hear even what little I've got to tell them...

Further images of grim-faced Aurors looking thoroughly skeptical of his story, of holding cells which were every bit as windowless and grim as his imagined room-turned-prison, smashed to pieces as confused noises filtered down from overhead. Automatically, he looked up, but the underside of the stairs told him nothing.

So make it tell you something, stupid! What do you think your wand is for?

Rolling his eyes at his own mental tone, he drew his wand and outlined a square with it, then tapped it twice. It flickered for a moment, then turned transparent.

Oh, Merlin's bloody balls. He shoved a handful of sleeve into his mouth, trying to muffle his pained moan. I did not need to know that everything is in perfect working order under that particular red robe...

Belatedly, his brain caught up with his eyes. *Red robes. Only one type of wizards usually wear red robes. Unless Father and the rest are being more creative than usual and are really desperate to get hold of me...*

"This is where she nested," said a voice he recognized from outside the curtain currently shielding him. "We can have a look if you like."

And that makes it a definite yes for the good guys. By most people's definitions, that is.

I suppose even by mine, now.

"Why not?" answered a feminine voice, and the curtain lifted. "Dark in there—oi, hold it, you! Come out slowly, hands where I can see them!"

He froze in place, raising his arms slightly to show that his hands were both open and empty. "I'm coming," he said, grateful that his voice had decided to remain mostly steady. "Give me a second? I'm a bit stiff."

"I thought they'd all cleared out," commented the voice he'd recognized. "What happened, you miss your Portkey?"

"On purpose." He inched forward, ducked under the curtain, and stood up. "May I get my bag, sir?"

"Oh, for—yes, get it." Sirius Black lowered his wand. "Easy, Tonks, this one's all right. Finally made up your mind, did you?"

"Had it made up for me, more like." He reached back into the alcove and retrieved his rucksack as the female Auror, her spiked hair striped in watermelon pink and aquamarine, watched him warily. "They thought I let you out."

"Ah. Sorry about that. I could write you a note, but I don't think they'd take it..."

Theodore Nott snickered. "Doubt it. And I wouldn't go back now in any case. But I'm not about to join up with your side either."

"No requirement," Black said easily. "We'll have a few questions, obviously, and you'd be helping us a lot by answering as fully as you can, but once that's through, you're free to go. We'll find you a host family until you go back to Hogwarts..." A moment of humor sparked in his eyes. "And you will have rights of refusal on that one, though the supply may not be unlimited. You'll also get the standard reward for information received, and a bonus if anything you tell us lets us catch a few of the buggers, pardon my French. Should give you something to start with once you've left school. Sound good?"

Compared to what I was facing yesterday? It sounds like heaven. "Yes, sir."

"Good." Black conjured a chair against the far wall of the corridor. "Have a seat. We'll come back for you when we're ready to go."

Theo sat down, considering what else he might want to take from his room, if the fit of temper he was sure his father would have had on finding him gone had left anything in usable condition. *Some of the books, certainly. My homework, so I don't have to do it all again before school starts. A few more sets of clothes—*

The thought of clothes and his father in close proximity struck a chord within his mind, and he undid the flap on his rucksack, retrieving one of the rolled-up things on the very top. The female Auror, Tonks, had drifted to the bottom of the stairs, dividing her attention between him and her surroundings. He would have preferred to do this without an audience, but somehow he didn't think she would turn her back if he asked...

No harm in asking, is there?

"Excuse me," he said, drawing her eyes. "Would you mind just going up the stairs a little ways for a minute?"

The eyebrow she lifted was more eloquent than any words could have been. He glared at her. "Look, I'm not going anywhere—you can chain me to the damn chair if you want to! There's just someone I need to talk to, and I don't want to be overheard, all right?"

She regarded him for a few more seconds. "Sirius trusts you," she said finally. "He's generally got

pretty good judgment that way. But in case you're scamming us, you should be aware my husband works with dragons, and there's no real way to find out what became of anyone who just *happened* to wander into a preserve..."

"What a cheerful thought," Theo muttered, turning away as Tonks' footsteps mounted the stairs to the halfway point and stopped. He went to one knee, swallowed against the strange thickness in his throat, and spoke the name most on his mind at the moment.

With a pop like an exploding balloon, she appeared before him, her eyes even rounder than usual. "Master Theo! You is not to be doing this—I is not supposed to answer when you is calling any longer—"

"Too bad you weren't ordered not to answer, then, isn't it, Brilly?" Theo interrupted, unable to keep from grinning. *Father can't think of everything. And by the time he thinks of this, it'll be too late.* "Were you ordered not to take orders from me?"

Ears drooping, Brilly nodded. "I is sorry, Master Theo. I is not being able to help you any more..."

Theo shook his head. "I didn't call because I need help, Brilly. I'm going to be all right." *I hope.* "I want to do something for you."

He held out the item he'd removed from his rucksack.

Brilly gasped. "Master Theo!"

"Now, I can't order you to take this," Theo said quickly, speaking over her automatic protest. "Just like I can't order you to go to Hogwarts and work in the kitchens there. But I can tell you that there's always work to be done in the castle, and I can tell you that I would be very angry with Father if he punished you for helping me. And one more thing." He summoned up a smile, surprised at how easily it came when he thought of a future free of his father's icy harangues and his mother's clinging sentimentality. "I've only got two years left at Hogwarts. After that, I'll be setting up housekeeping for myself. Maybe with a mate or two, bachelor quarters. Robes all over the floor, sinks full of dirty dishes, toilets too nasty to think about..."

Glowing, Brilly extended her hand. "You is giving me that right now," she ordered. "That is not happening to my Master Theo, not as long as my name is being Brilly. Which it is."

Theo choked back a laugh and gravely handed her the black sock. "So it is, and here you are. Congratulations, Brilly, you're a free elf."

"I is a free elf for two years," Brilly corrected, holding the sock at arm's length as though it smelled. "Then I is your elf. Which is the way things is ought to being."

"Agreed." Theo exhaled a long breath, informing his tears that they wouldn't be needed today. "Well, see you then, I guess."

"I is seeing you sooner than that, if I is going to Hogwarts and so is you." Brilly giggled, muffling

the sound with her free hand. "I is taking good care of you, Master Theo. Very good care."

"I know you will, Brilly. You always do."

And just possibly, with room service and special laundry service whenever we want it, my Housemates won't kill me for this...

Shoving that aside as a problem for another day, Theo watched Brilly Disapparate, then returned to his chair. Tonks descended the stairs unmasked, looking at him oddly. "What?" he snapped when he got tired of feeling her eyes boring holes into his skull. "Did I grow an extra head?"

"Would you like to?" Tonks grinned at his snarl. "Just trying to lighten things up." Her tone grew serious. "I wanted to say... I know you didn't want me listening, but I couldn't help hearing bits and pieces of it. That was a really nice thing you did."

"Nah." Theo closed the flap on his rucksack. "I'm too lazy to do my own laundry is what it is."

"If you say so." Tonks returned to her attitude of guarding, but Theo thought she might have been watching the stairs a little more and him a little less.

Maybe I'll survive this crazy new world after all.

A soft noise brought Mare out of her book. "Who's—oh, hello, Meghan. Were you looking for someone?"

"For you. If you don't mind." Meghan advanced hesitantly into the room, stopping two paces beyond the doorway. "If I won't bother you."

"No, you won't bother me." Mare beckoned the littler witch to her side. "You might actually be able to help me." She smiled. "Considering that you're the only one around with experience in using what we have."

Meghan seemed to expand with pride. "I learned a lot working with Madam Pomfrey. And with... with my Mama Letha." She swallowed once, but her voice stayed clear and distinct. "And one warning Madam Rowena gave me herself. You can't ever use this power to heal yourself. If you do, it will work, but it will also turn into a loop." Her hand described small circles in the air. "Like when two spells catch each other wrong, or time magic goes bad."

"A feedback loop?" Mare hazarded. "It gets hold of itself and goes out of control?"

"Yes." Meghan nodded, wrapping her arms around herself for a moment as if she were cold. "And when it's finished, your power is gone, all the way gone, like it never existed at all. You can never use it again, and your children won't have it either, so you really, really can't ever use it on yourself."

"Thank you for the warning." Mare suppressed a shiver at the thought. Even with her relatively new discovery of her abilities, she didn't want to think about losing them. "So, with that out of the way, come sit with me? I've got some ideas about a certain person that I was hoping to get a second opinion on..."

Meghan skipped across the room and into the chair beside Mare's, looking eagerly at the books Mare had open on the table.

She is an easy child to love. I'll have to be careful what I say to her.

It would be all too easy to make a promise I have no way of keeping.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 57: Meetings and Gifts (Year 6)

Deep in the middle of an otherwise quiet wood, three women worked side by side, constructing what appeared to be toy houses made of sticks and mud. Behind them, a teenage boy waved his wand at one rock after another, occasionally converting them into boulders but more often melting them, changing them into trees, or vanishing them altogether. After his third successive failure, he kicked savagely at where the rock had been, then swore aloud.

"What?" asked one of the women, looking up from her work.

"Still there. Just invisible." The boy sat down on the rock and sighed. "Is this really going to work?"

Another of the women shrugged. "Who's hurt if it doesn't? Just us."

"And we don't count," the third woman said, a wealth of bitterness in her tone. "Everyone knows that."

"Funny how everyone always knows things I don't know," said a voice which belonged to none of them.

The boy leapt to his feet, pointing his wand at the interloper, as the women snatched up stones or, in one case, a good-sized tree limb. "What do you want?" demanded the oldest of them, her arm cocked to throw. "Who are you?"

"Just a traveler like yourselves." The black-haired man showed his hands empty, then lowered them to let his tattered knapsack drop to the ground. "Looking for other... travelers."

"Like us, are you?" The woman with the tree limb stepped closer, sniffing the air warily. "Who sent you?"

"No one sent me. At least, no one who wants anything from you." The man held out his arm, pulling back his sleeve to expose a collection of scratches in various stages of healing. "Do you believe me yet?"

"Which part?" The oldest woman let her stone fall to the ground, but her eyes remained hooded. "You're one of us, that much we can all tell. But how are we supposed to know if you're telling the truth?"

"Who would have sent me?" The man spread his hands. "There is no leader anymore, not since this past winter. Which I'm sure you know, since that's probably when you ran."

The boy spat on the ground. "Why shouldn't we run? What did their precious *pack* ever do for us? Kept us barely fed and clothed—we've done better for ourselves, and without taking orders."

"But it's getting too dangerous on full moons," the second woman took up the tale. "Too hard to keep from being found out. Even the farthest we can get from humans isn't far enough. So we decided to try something else."

"I never said you shouldn't have run, and I'm glad to hear you've done well." The stranger's voice was soothing, approving. "I may be able to help you with what you're trying, if you'll let me. And I have something else I think you'll like. But you have to trust me."

"Why should we?" The third woman eyed him with distaste. "Why should we even listen to you? How do we know you're not from the Ministry, trying to *control* us?"

The other two women growled under their breath, and the boy gripped his wand more tightly.

The man seated himself on a fallen log, seemingly at his ease. "If I were from the Ministry, why would I bother talking to you?" he asked, crossing his feet in front of him. "They don't generally talk to 'dangerous animals.'" His hands never moved, but the sneer quotes were audible in his tone. "Or has their policy changed since I was there last?"

The oldest woman nodded slowly. "He's right," she said, motioning her companions to stand down. "They don't talk. Or if they do, it's all orders. Snapped out the way you'd treat a dog."

"Odd how one night a month taints all the other twenty-seven in some people's eyes, isn't it?" The stranger reached over, making his movements broad and clear, and pulled his bag to his feet, opening it as he did. "Still, some of us find ways to cope." Removing a clear plastic bag of semi-globular objects, he opened that as well. "I don't suppose any of you would care for..." He trailed off as four pairs of eyes fixed themselves on the bag. "Never mind, silly question."

"Prove it's good first," the second woman snapped, swiping her hand at the corner of her mouth.

"Certainly." The man thrust his hand into the bag. "Pick the one you want me to try."

The women glanced at each other for a moment. Then the oldest nodded to the boy, who pointed. "That one, at the bottom nearest me."

The man withdrew the indicated object and bit a piece off its end. "Mmm," he said indistinctly, chewing. "Still warm. Here, catch." He tossed the bag towards the oldest woman, who snatched it out of the air and growled the boy back as he started forward. Carefully, she reached into the bag and withdrew, one at a time, three of the bread rolls it contained, handing them to her companions in order of age, then taking the last one for herself. After one more look around at one another, all four of them bit in at the same time.

If any of them had been looking, they would have seen a small smile of exultation appear on the stranger's face.

Much later that night, a woman stood on the front stoop of a small, nondescript house, anxiously

looking down the street, first one way, then another. A loud pop beside her, like the explosion of a balloon, made her squeak and whirl to confront the man who had met with the four in the forest. "Brian! You startled me, don't *do* that!"

"Don't come home to you? Well, if you insist, I'll go..." Brian Li started to descend the steps.

"That is not what I meant and you know it." Corona Gamp's small hand closed firmly on his shoulder. "And I was going to ask how things went, but you wouldn't be joking like that unless they'd gone very well indeed."

"And very well they went." Brian turned his head and kissed Corona's fingers, then followed her into the house. "As I expected from the descriptions we got, this is another little splinter group from Greyback's pack. More of the camp followers, those who were there because they were given no other choice. One of them is actually a Muggle, or was—she had the idea that they might be able to survive better on the edges of that society, since werewolves are only a children's scare-story to them..."

"And so they would, if it weren't for full moons," Corona finished for him. "Or if they had the money to build some sort of safe room, and to patch themselves up afterwards."

"They were working on the safe rooms." Brian described the little huts the women had been building, and their intention to have their one wanded member enlarge them to a usable size. "As for patching themselves up, they'd intended to stay where they were until they recovered, then move on to the next village down the road. As long as they didn't get the name of being thieves or running out on the work they'd promised to do, it would work." He smiled smugly. "Of course, with what I was able to give them, it will work much better. "

"Which will mean they might be able to stay in one place and not have to move on all the time." Corona nodded, tapping her wand against the teapot to warm it, then measuring out three spoonfuls of tea leaves into it. "They'll become established there, find permanent work, even start to make friends."

"Which will, in its turn, ease their transformations and make them quicker to recover." Brian sat down in a kitchen chair with a sigh of relief and reached for one of the biscuits on the plate in the center of the table. "Positive feedback, rather than negative."

"Speaking of settling in one place, I assume we won't be going anywhere for the next few days?" Corona levitated the kettle under the tap and turned the water on with her free hand. "We're cutting it rather close for the full moon as it is."

"This is our base until three days after," Brian assured her. "At which point I think we're due for a check-in. We'll swing south and west to look in on the groups I spoke with last month, but once we've done that, we should go back to Headquarters for a few days."

Setting the teakettle on the stove, Corona swirled her wand around it twice, bringing it to the boil. "Sometimes I still can't believe I am where I am," she said, pouring the steaming water into the

teapot. "Fighting against everything I ever knew, in the company of someone from whom I would once have run screaming." She set the teapot on the table, then returned to the stove to claim the two mugs she had left on the counter beside it. "And happier than I ever thought I could be."

"No more cages?" Brian accepted the first mug she poured out.

"Only the ones I build for myself." Corona sat down beside him and blew on her own tea, taking a biscuit and dunking it. "And those are to keep the rest of the world out, not to keep me in."

Brian leaned closer. "Do I count as the rest of the world?" he murmured.

Corona's answer, though not in words, still managed to indicate a definite no.

Neville sat at the table in the library, the parts of his potion piece spread out on a strip of waterproofed cloth. "All the artillerists have to learn how to disassemble and reassemble their pieces," he said, cleaning the part in his left hand with his wand. "That way, if anything goes wrong with them, we can do field repairs."

"Good sense." Mare, on the other side of the table, reached for an already-cleaned part but stopped with her hand halfway there. "May I?"

"Go ahead." Neville nodded to Meghan, who was perched on the edge of the table watching. "Pearl can show you her piece and you can see where the parts fit in."

Meghan, nothing loathe, drew her piece and laid her hand across the top of its barrel, verifying that no vibration hummed through it. "Safed piece," she murmured, and set it down.

"More sense, if you're going to carry as deadly of potions as you do." Mare compared the part in her hand with the piece lying complete on the table. "I seem to remember, back at Hogwarts, wand safety wasn't much taught. The professors must have thought the lessons would sink in better if they were experiential."

Neville shot a firm look at Meghan, cautioning her to stillness. She quivered with indignation but subsided from her momentary excitement.

She needs to stay calm or she's going to wear herself out. "I seem to remember" is just how Mare says she's looking into Mrs. Letha's memories. It doesn't mean Mrs. Letha has magically come back.

Personally, Neville wasn't sure that would ever happen, but he wasn't about to say so to Meghan. She did better when she had something, no matter how remote, to hope for.

"There is one thing I've been meaning to discuss with both of you," Mare said absently, picking up another part of Neville's piece and fitting the two together. "This business of being Heirs, and the Founders' Castle. How exactly would one go about visiting there? Is there some ritual, or do you

simply show up?"

Meghan giggled behind her hand. "Do you mean what we're *supposed* to do, or what *we* do?" she asked, indicating herself and Neville with a shoulder.

"Both, please." Mare continued her experimentation. "In that order, if you don't mind."

"There is a ritual for it, words you're supposed to say to ask permission to come there," Neville began at Meghan's nod in his direction. "I don't know it very well, because we've never used it ourselves, but I can find it out."

"And you've never used it because..." The cartridge assembly taking shape in Mare's fingers appeared to amuse her greatly.

"Because we were little and didn't know any better," Meghan said with a sigh. "The Founders must have thought we were cute, just turning up like we did, or they'd have thrown us out a hundred times."

"So you can go there without special preparations if you don't know any better?" Mare flipped the completed assembly over several times, inspecting it. "Fall asleep willing yourself to go there, and wake up there?"

"Something like that." Neville set aside the yellow cartridge he'd just cleaned for refilling. "I always wanted to..." The words tried to stick in his throat, but he swallowed once or twice and eased them out. "To take Dad there. He would have... would have loved it."

"Are you so sure he never went on his own?" Mare's eyes remained on her work, but her voice carried clearly to Neville's ears. "He might have thought it was just a pretty dream, but I have a feeling all true Heirs of the Founders find their way there once or twice, whether they know it or not."

"They said to say hi to him," Neville whispered, staring at the table to try and defeat the tears. "Adam and Helga. They told me to say hi to him for them."

"So they did know him." A handkerchief floated into Neville's line of sight. "Or at the very least, they knew of him, and considered him worth their notice. Considered him a true Heir."

A quiet thump and a slight patter of feet heralded Meghan's arrival in the chair beside Neville's, where she curled up into one of her disconcertingly small Pearl-balls and busied herself with a bit of string. Neville was grateful for her apparent unconcern and Mare's continued concentration on his half-assembled piece, as it gave him a chance to blot his eyes without being stared at.

If I'm going to be a true Heir of Hufflepuff, the way Dad would have wanted, I have to let go of anger and focus on what has to be done. And right now, what has to be done is to win this war, to make sure other kids get more than just a couple years with their dads. He stole a glance at Meghan, who had her string tangled in a series of knots similar to those he'd seen Harry undo with

one pull and was muttering under her breath. *To give my kids a lot more than just that couple years, someday.*

But I don't think anyone would mind if I made very sure Bellatrix Lestrange doesn't hurt anyone else along the way.

He made a mental note to ask Mr. Padfoot a question or two about that particular dark star of the Blacks.

It never hurt to be prepared.

A delightful pair of children, certainly. Mare folded up her notes from the day, sliding them between the pages of one of the books she planned to take to her room tonight, and mused on Neville and Meghan, who had left a few minutes before in response to a call from upstairs. *Strong beyond their years, and devoted to one another and to their Pride. But even more than that, fountains of information when they are with an adult they trust...*

"Which they shouldn't," she said aloud, shutting the book with more force than necessary. "Trust me, that is. How do they know I am what I say? How do they know I wasn't secretly turned, or planted with an Imperius Curse that only activates when it's wanted? How do they know I'm not about to kill them all in their sleep?"

More to the point, how do I know that?

"These are good people." Mare pushed her chair back and stood, anger rising in tandem with fear. "They may not be my people, I haven't made up my mind about that yet, but they are good people with a good cause and I will not cause them any harm if I can help it." She whirled and began to pace, her hands clenching and unclenching restlessly. "Do you hear me, whatever you might be out there? I have already hurt these people enough just by existing, and I refuse, I absolutely refuse to hurt them more!"

"I'm glad to hear it," said a woman's voice behind her.

Gasping, Mare spun to confront this stranger in the room—but the room was gone, the bookshelves and walls replaced with a panorama of mountains and forest and lake, and the white-haired woman, robed in blue, sat atop a tall rock, smiling gravely down at her—

"Lady Ravenclaw, I presume?" Mare was unable to keep all the sarcasm out of her tone, but thought a certain dollop of it might be appropriate. *People certainly do like dragging me off to new places without my consent these days.*

"I am. And you are Mare." Rowena Ravenclaw slid down from her perch and dipped a slight curtsy. "I understand what troubles you, so let me put your mind at ease on one thing, and perhaps another as well." Her eyes drifted out of focus, then came back together, as though she were looking at a point beyond Mare's shoulder.

Or straight through me, like I'm not even there... Mare held back a shiver and redirected that energy towards trying to think of the other person she had seen perform a similar maneuver lately.

"Luna Lovegood has something of this power, by virtue of her honorary Heirship," Rowena said without adjusting her gaze. "It was strengthened by other circumstances of which I'm sure you're aware, so it acts... oddly at times."

Mare sat down on another handy rock, rubbing a finger in circles on it to get a feel for its grain. "I thought the Ravenclaw power was Healing."

"It is. But once upon a time, we had a lesser power as well, what is called clairvoyance, the gift of Sight." Rowena blinked her eyes back to normal. "It was seldom strong and sometimes an annoyance, so in my great-granddaughters' time the family agreed to subject it fully to the Healing power and thereby strengthen the latter. Ravenclaw Heirs such as you and young Meghan can therefore See what relates to the Healing of the body or mind, but nothing else. I, however, retain the power which once was mine, and thus can answer the question you were asking, or rather implying, a few moments ago."

"I..." Mare tightened her grip on the rock until her palms ached from the grit. "I would be grateful for that answer."

Rowena smiled. "Then receive it with joy. You are only what you seem. No Death Eaters' hooks remain in you, and the only harm you can do to the Pack now is to leave them."

"Are you so sure about that?" Mare shot back, her relief turning her waspish in the perverse way her mind adored working lately. "Won't it hurt them more to have me always around but never the person they want me to be? The living reminder of just how bad it can get?"

"And yet you are alive." Rowena seated herself on a rock across from Mare's. "Your mind functions, as does your magic, and your heart—to your sorrow, I think. You wonder sometimes about the way you care for Sirius?"

"That's—" Mare bit off *none of your business*, because if it wasn't her own many-times-great-grandmother's business, whose was it? "Sometimes I do," she admitted. "Is it real, or is it left over from Aletha?"

"Can it not be both?" Rowena lifted a stone from the ground beside her and skipped it across the surface of the lake, achieving five bounces before it sank. "You and Aletha have a great deal in common. You share a body, a personality, a wand and the magic it commands. You like and dislike a great many of the same things. Is it so unthinkable that you could fall in love with the same man? Especially when he has been courting you almost since the day you met?"

"Sirius? Courting me?" Mare laughed. "That's absurd, he—" She stopped, thinking back, seeing some of the things Sirius had said and done, even in the days when he had been only "Prince" to her, in a different light.

"He performed the spell which brought you to life," murmured Rowena. "Did you truly think he would turn away from you after that?"

"I thought he would hate me for not being Aletha," Mare answered frankly, too stunned by this new way of thinking to do anything else. "And himself for making me not be her."

"Ah, but he has long practice in placing blame for evil deeds where it belongs and not where it doesn't." Rowena skipped another stone, getting six bounces with this one. "And in all the ways he cares for most, in your strength, your courage, your refusal to give up and your compassion for those who suffer, you *are* Aletha. He has loved her through many changes in their lives. Is it such a stretch that he could continue to love her even when she has become you?"

"I—I'll have to think about that." Mare stood up, fighting the urge to feel at her head and see if it was still spinning. "Thank you for the reassurance, it means a lot to me, but I think I should go now."

"Of course." Rowena reached into her pocket and withdrew a wand, which started to rise to point at Mare—

"Wait. Please," Mare added quickly, realizing how rude she'd sounded. "I don't mean to be a bother, but I've just thought—if the Ravenclaw line had a lesser gift, what about the other three?"

Rowena chuckled. "I was hoping you'd ask that..."

"So each Founder's line had two gifts, not one," Remus said later that evening, reaching for another piece of the flatbread Danger had toasted to go with the bowl of sweetened cottage cheese in the middle of the table. "Are they things we would recognize? Now that I think of it, I have seen Meghan using her powers that way, to See what's wrong with someone."

"I believe so." Mare chose a piece of flatbread for herself and sprinkled cinnamon on it before dipping it into the cheese. "Gryffindor's lesser gift is for crafting magical artifacts, binding magic into things so powerfully that they remain magic nearly forever."

"Ike uh or-ing ahh," Sirius said with his mouth full, dodging Danger's smack and swallowing at the same time. "Sorry. I meant like the Sorting Hat. That was his once, wasn't it?"

"And the sword Harry pulled out of it." Danger nodded. "Even Hogwarts itself must have been charmed by someone with that gift, or how has it stayed so powerful a place for that thousand years?"

"And in our own time, we have the Marauder's Map." Remus snapped a piece of bread in half. "It worries me now that we were ever so young and full of ourselves that we couldn't see the obvious fallacy in commanding this piece of parchment to 'never lie' about the castle and believing that we would be obeyed."

"Come on, Moony, it could've been like kids with wandless magic." Sirius loaded his own piece of bread with a towering heap of the cheese. "They don't know they shouldn't be able to do it, so they do it anyway, right?"

"We ought to have been old enough by then to know what magic can and can't do." Remus crumbled one of the pieces between his fingers. "But we went ahead with our own plans and ideas, never bothering to investigate what we had in our hands, and if we had..."

"Don't," Mare said sharply, bringing Remus' head up to focus on her. "You're falling into a trap. Don't speculate on what *might have been* when we still have plenty to do with what *is*. When this war is over and done with will be quite soon enough to wallow in self-pity for your teenage mistakes."

Sirius snickered around his mouthful. "Give it up, Moony," he advised, taking the time to swallow first. "She's got you dead to rights."

Danger smiled and drew a tally mark on the surface of the cheese with her flatbread.

"Do be sure to tell me when I am permitted to wallow," Remus said, a bit sourly, and nipped Danger's bread out of her fingers. "And I believe I got us onto a tangent. We've covered Gryffindor's lesser power and Ravenclaw's. What about Hufflepuff?"

"Oh, I know, I know, I know!" Danger bounced in her seat, raising her hand like Hermione when she desperately wanted to answer a question.

Which is almost all the time in class, from what I hear.

"Tell us, please," said Sirius, sweeping Danger an elegant seated bow.

"It's Neville's little..." Danger wiggled her fingers in front of her face. "Disappearing trick. The way he can make you look around him, not see him unless you know he's there and you look in *just* the right spot."

"Full marks to you." Mare tossed Danger another piece of bread as a prize. "Which brings us to the final puzzle of the evening. When I asked Madam Rowena about the Slytherins' lesser gift, she informed me that we already know about it. Can any of you think of some power other than Parseltongue that supposedly marks the Slytherin line?"

Three heads shook back and forth. "And you'd think we would have heard, with all the pride Count Dorkula takes in his lineage," said Sirius with a scowl.

Remus emitted a stifled cough as Danger burst into giggles.

"One of these days you're going to run out of disrespectful nicknames for him," Mare said mock-scoldingly, swallowing against the flutter in her throat when Sirius' scowl became a grin. *I am not sixteen years old, there is no reason a man's smile should do this to me...*

"Sure I will," Sirius retorted. "The day after we win the war."

"Remus'll make some room in his wallow for you," said Danger, getting her voice under control. "You can wallow because your inventiveness on one subject has run out after almost twenty years when there's no more need for it, and he can wallow because he had poor judgment as a teenage boy. And then Mare and I will come along and throw buckets of cold water on you both, and you can clean up the mess."

"What? No fair!" Sirius could do quite a fair imitation of Meghan in a pouting mood when he wanted to. "Why should we have to clean it up?"

Danger glanced at Mare and silently beat one, two, three in the air.

"Because we said so," they chorused.

The peals of laughter were audible up two flights of stairs and through a closed door.

I'm glad somebody's happy. Hermione laid an Imperturbable Charm on the door of the girls' bedroom and returned to contemplating the blank scroll open in front of her. *I don't know why this upsets me—it's getting us something we need, and letting me see an old friend again...*

Setting down her wand hastily, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms. "Have to get Danger to check the temperature charms in here tomorrow," she muttered, shivering. "It gets so blasted cold all of a sudden."

Picking up her quill instead of her wand, she dipped it into the ink and began to write.

Dear Viktor...

"Maybe it's because I remember how happy I was when I first knew him," she murmured as the opening of a polite, thanks-for-your-letter note filled the top of her scroll. "Before the third task, before Voldemort, before the war, and I know I'll never be happy like that again."

Or maybe it's something else, her mind whispered. *Maybe it's something worse...*

Hermione ignored the whispers with the skill of seven months' practice subduing the nasty mouthings of her werewolf curse and continued writing.

Unfortunately, as you know, we're under fairly strict security here, but I can meet you at my family's home sometime next week to pick up the books you've said you'll lend me. Please owl back to let me know what days and times are best for you, and I will let you know when I can come...

"Thank you for coming." Percy turned from his contemplation of a dingy gray wall to shake hands with Roger Davies and Selena Moon. "And how is your newest arrival? A boy, I hear?"

"Yes, Zachary Cedric." Selena reached into her pocket, then paused. "Unless you mean the other newest arrival..."

"No, I was referring to the baby," Percy said hastily. "I know perfectly well what your other arrival looks like."

"Yes, and why they had to dump him on Selena's family I don't understand," Roger grumbled. "There must have been other people who would be willing to take him."

"Yes, willing." Selena removed the photograph she had been reaching for and elbowed Roger in the side in the process of handing it to Percy. "For their own reasons, most of them. Try to show a little sense, will you? They wanted to keep him alive, and with us he'll stay alive. He may drive me mad, or the Greengrasses might, but we won't die."

"Not before our time, in any case," Percy murmured, studying the picture of a red-faced, dubiously blinking baby. "Quite a handsome child. Congratulations. Now, I believe Lee and Maya have explained the basic premise we'll be working with?"

"Some of it." Roger accepted the photograph back. "I'm not sure I understand it, though. What's the point of all the fancy-dress and symbols and code names?"

"To fight fire with fire." Percy drew his wand and illustrated this literally, showing two streams of flame shooting at one another, the impact point marked by showers of sparks going in every direction. "While the water slips in from underneath, unnoticed." A wave arose and swamped one of the fires, putting it out with no trace.

"Still don't follow," said Selena, shaking her head.

"The Death Eaters have their own fancy-dress and their own symbol and their own names for themselves and their master." Percy vanished his illustration and holstered his wand. "Therefore, when they see an opponent arise who also has all of these things, they will think of this opponent, of us, as real competition. They will put all their strength and all their cunning towards destroying us. And meanwhile, Harry and the DA, and Professor Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix, will be able to get on with the real work of destroying Voldemort."

"So you're just going to be window-dressing?" Roger looked disappointed. "No offense, but I'm not sure I'm up for play-acting without any real work involved."

"It'll be work, though," Selena said, watching Percy's face. "Like the skirmishers with the DA. Luring the Death Eaters into ambushes, or losing them when they're on your trail. Right?"

"Exactly." Percy inclined his head to Selena. "And our work will also have a second facet. Had you planned yet on who might be tasked with bringing the Muggle relations of wizards to your Sanctuary, if the wizards themselves are unable to do it?"

"No, that hasn't come up." Roger perked up again. "Are you thinking your group—the Red

Shepherds, was it?—do you think they could do that?"

"It would be our pleasure." Percy smiled. "And if, as I have heard posited, the Death Eaters have spies within the Ministry, perhaps even in positions of power, where they can cause Muggles or Muggleborns to be harassed in ways which may be immoral but are not exactly illegal..."

"You'd know about it." Selena nodded. "Or your dad would. Everybody knows him, goes to him for help, tells him things they know."

"And with a group that's not in school anymore, you have more freedom of movement." Roger had started to shape the air with his hands as he talked. "I mean, some of us have other responsibilities, but we can still get away more quickly than Hogwarts students, even ones who're in with the house-elves. And we can't be Traced, which may not be a problem after the year's finished but it won't be finished for... well, a year, or near enough one, and the war isn't exactly going to wait. I think you've got something here, Weasley. Is that offer still open?"

"Of course." Percy extended his hand, and he and Roger shook on it. "Welcome to the Red Shepherds."

"Glad to be part of it." Roger looked around him. "So is this where you're going to set up? It's a bit dusty."

"It won't be for long." Percy glanced at Selena. "Is there any basis in fact for the rather touching story I've been hearing regarding your houseguest and his house-elf?"

"Strip it of the flourishes and it's probably all true," Selena said with a sigh. "He didn't kiss her, she didn't cry, and he didn't threaten to drown her in the nearest loo, but he did free her and she did promise to take service under him as soon as he's left Hogwarts. Why?"

"Because if he'd care to suggest that she might come to help us here, we would be grateful." Percy gestured vaguely around the space. "Diagon Alley's newest restaurant shouldn't look like this."

"Restaurant?" Roger frowned. "Aren't those a lot of work?"

"I have an expert on my side." Percy chuckled briefly. "It seems George's lady friend may work in a paper shop now, but she didn't always. Her first job, at the advanced age of fourteen, was in a pub, where she learned within the space of two years to do everything except tend bar, and quite possibly a bit of that when the owner wasn't looking. With her to guide us, I think we should do well enough to pass."

"Do you have a name for it yet?" Selena asked.

"Yes, it was named almost as soon as we stepped inside." Percy regarded the dirty walls with a smile. "Welcome to the Pepper Pot."

Roger left first, Selena lingering a moment on the pretense of straightening her robes, which had become smeared with grime during their brief tour. She gave Percy a sideways look as she brushed herself off. "Well done, the way you let him argue himself around. I've seldom heard better."

"Thank you."

"So why aren't you a Slytherin?"

"Tradition." Percy paused, as though recalling something. "And perseverance. I believe Professor McGonagall would tell you that my Sorting was one of the longest ones she has ever witnessed."

Selena pressed her lips together firmly, nodded in comprehension, and hurried out with a quick parting wave.

Percy counted to three and smiled as he heard the expected burst of laughter from outside the door.

Yes, we are embroiled in a war. We have already taken losses. The vision of Penny rose before his inner eyes, making him press his fingers against the corners of his outer ones. But that is all the more reason we should try to find joy where we can.

I have a feeling we'll need it badly before we're through.

Humming "Happy Birthday" to herself, Ginny played hopscotch on the tiles of the main floor hallway. She had been peremptorily banished from the kitchen but didn't mind. This kind of banishment usually led to gifts, cake, and parties.

And parties with the Pack and Pride involved usually lead to—what was that?

A scrabbling thud on the front door sent her into the shadow of the stairs, hand on her wand. *No one should be able to find us here, we're under the Fidelius, but "should be" isn't always "is"...*

The doorknob turned, and a disheveled man stumbled forward into the house, a breathless woman supporting him. Ginny took one look, slammed the door with her wand, and dashed down the basement stairs, the woman's four shouted words ringing in her ears.

"Oi, you're not allowed—" Harry began as she burst through the swinging doors at the bottom.

"Brian and Corona are back," Ginny interrupted him. "They're hurt and Corona says they've found where the Death Eaters are hiding their giants. And judging by the way they came running in here, the giants might be after them n—"

The ceiling shuddered.

"I hate being right," Ginny muttered.

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Facing Danger

Chapter 58: Doing What You Can (Year 6)

Remus shoved his book onto the shelf as Danger shot him a précis of the conversation in the kitchen. **How many?** he asked, drawing his wand and shooting a quick "Get out here" messenger Patronus down the hall towards Sirius' bedroom.

I don't know if—three, she says, only three.

The word "only" seems somehow inappropriate in this context.

Would you prefer there be six?

Rolling his eyes, Remus Apparated down to the main hallway, which was already milling with Order members. He spotted Mare, bending over Brian, and Danger supporting Corona as Voni Pritchard helped her sip from a cup of water—Sirius had apparently judged the corridor too full for safe Apparition, as his footsteps were currently pounding down the stairs above Remus' head—

So much for the adults. Now for the "fun" part.

Explaining to the cubs why they can't come help us fight.

The Pride had claimed the doorway of the War Room as their observation post, of which choice Remus couldn't help but approve. *No one can claim they're underfoot, but they're still able to see what's going on, and if we need a runner or a messenger, they're right here to volunteer...*

He stopped for a moment, that thought percolating through his brain, adapting itself to the current crisis. *Right here, but out of the way, ready to do what they can and be safe from what they can't—*

I knew you'd think of something, Danger said approvingly as the perfect way to handle the situation lit up within Remus' mind.

Harry was looking distinctly mutinous as Remus arrived at the War Room's door. "We're not about to go and hide in the cellar with Bernie and the elflets—" he began.

"I wasn't going to ask you to," Remus cut him off. "Though I might if you show me you're more interested in your attitude than in what we need done. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." Harry hunched his shoulders for a moment, an echoing of Wolf's apologetic pose, then straightened up. "Where do you want us?"

Here's hoping this doesn't backfire horribly. "Get up to the attic. Make sure you have your Zippos with you. We'll need lookouts."

The Pride blinked at him for a second. Ginny was the first to recover. "Yes sir," she said, and grabbed Harry by one sleeve and Ron by the other, towing them forward behind her.

Remus stepped out of the way, running a quick finger down Neenie's spine as Ron passed him. **Am I going to regret this?**

Only if it doesn't work. Danger threaded her way through the crowd to meet him. **Now I think you'd better take charge of this bunch of hooligans—**

Me? Remus barely stopped himself from yelping it aloud. **Why me?**

Because we're still trying to find out where Albus has got himself off to, Arthur's got his hands full getting the Ministry to understand what help we need, and do you really want one of our Auror-types to head this up? They're trained at fighting battles with Dark wizards, not at stopping giants stomping through a heavily inhabited Muggle area.

And I am?

No, but you are trained, or rather, experienced, at getting a loose-knit group of people to come together and work towards a common goal. Danger's eyes had locked onto his and weren't giving an inch of ground. **We have Sirius and Alice and Mad-Eye to head up the actual fighting. What we need from you is direction, the feeling, however erroneous, that someone understands what's going on.**

You fill me with such confidence. Remus felt his Zippo buzz in his pocket and flicked it open, summoning a line of green fire upwards from it to his ear and mouth. "Yes."

"We see them," Harry's voice reported over the buzz of chatter in the background. "They're north of us, looking around at the houses, one of them leaning over and trying to figure out a parked car. Muggles running away from them, Death Eaters on broomsticks with them—"

"Hold a moment, Harry." Remus leaned out from the passage and made a hand-sign to Sirius, still three steps up on the main staircase.

"QUIET!" Sirius bellowed.

The entrance hall went silent.

"Carry on," Remus said into his improvised microphone.

"Heard that up here," said Harry with a trace of awe. "Three giants two streets north of us..."

As Harry repeated the report he'd given, Remus felt Danger's touch within the magic he'd used on the Zippo. Tiny specks of green fire floated outward from her hands to each Order member, settling into an ear apiece, and people's eyes went first wide, then narrow with intent as they understood what they were now tapped into.

"Get me a count on the Death Eaters with them, please," Remus said in response to Sirius' signal from the stairs.

"Um. One moment." A muffled, five-second argument. "Somewhere between six and twelve, we can see six brooms up but we can't tell how many of them are riding double at this distance—"

Ron said something irritable in the background.

"Oh, right. Hold for that number, please."

There had to be wizards along to get them here this quickly, Danger mused as the Zippo line crackled faintly. Brian and Corona would have Apparated out, so the Death Eaters must have Portkeyed the giants here along the Apparition trace...

"We have that number." Harry's voice was triumphant now. "Ten, repeat, one-zero Death Eaters, and it doesn't look like they all agree what they should be doing with the giants either."

"Let's just make sure they don't get a chance to come to that agreement, then," Remus said dryly. "Molly, any news from Arthur?"

"Most of the people we'd want are apparently out investigating reports of a troll attack near Cambridge." Molly's tone made it clear she didn't think much of Cambridge's trolls. "They're being recalled as quickly as possible, but we could be on our own for up to ten minutes."

"Right." Remus wanted to swallow hard, but didn't dare with every eye on him. "If your usual partner for missions isn't here, pick someone and stay with them. First priority is to protect the Muggles, second is to take out the Death Eaters. Don't engage the giants unless they're threatening you or a large enough group of Muggles that you can't help them any other way. Let's head out."

A murmur of agreement, and the Order of the Phoenix parted so that Remus and Danger could make their way to the door.

Tell me again why this is working?

Because you sound like you know what you're doing, and that's good enough for most people.

Somehow that fails to reassure me...

Harry gripped the windowsill tightly, Ginny's arms around his waist making doubly sure he didn't lose his balance. He had never realized how much he relied on his eyes for everyday things like remaining upright.

More power to Ron, then, for just getting back in the game, much less for giving me this.

He twiddled the unobtrusive wheel set into the right earpiece of his glasses, zooming back a bit from the Death Eaters' masked faces and getting a wider view. "That giant who was poking at the car decided to pick it up," he reported, hearing two or three sucked-in breaths behind him. "He had to use both hands, but he's got it. The Death Eaters are pointing at something—I think they want

him to throw it into a house—"

"I've got this," Padfoot's voice echoed over the link. "*Mucinno !* "

The suddenly slimy car slipped from the giant's grasp, making him howl in dismay.

"Everyone cover your ears," Moony advised.

Harry spun the zoom wheel to normal and backed up from the window, careful not to step on Ginny's toes. Most of the Pride already had their hands over their ears. Ron was shielding Neenie's. Ginny drew her wand and cast a Privacy Spell around the two of them, then clapped her hands over her own ears just in time as the smashing of the car's windows heralded the much louder explosion of its fuel tank and the screeching in pain of the giant whose feet the resulting fireball had engulfed.

Moony said something Harry hoped his ringing ears had made him mishear, and the battle was joined.

Playing lookout, some uninvolved corner of Harry's mind had time to remark, was a cross between calling plays for a game of Quidditch where none of the players were particularly interested in what he had to say and replaying a Combat Club match without the detachment of passing time or little icons on a parchment map. These duelers were real, flesh and blood, fighting it out in the street below him.

And let's not forget they're fighting with real spells...

He lost track of how many times he alerted an Order member to a Death Eater swooping down from above, stalking up from behind, or coming in fast from the side, and spared one second to give brief, fervent thanks for Ginny's presence of mind in tossing her chain over his head to act as his voice and ears within the attic. Through her eyes he got flashes of Neville and Draco standing at the other two windows, Luna and Meghan beside them, each using her own particular Sight to add to what the boys could see through the Omnioculars Draco had Summoned from their bedroom.

Good thing they both had a pair. Ron had to take mine apart to get the spells to build into my glasses.

Ron and Neenie, in the attic's center, bent over the little map of the outdoors that Ron had conjured, keeping a tally on both sides as Ginny called out the progress of the battle and suggesting moves for Harry to send out to the Order.

Which Moony's rebroadcasting in his own voice, but that's probably just as well—half the Order thinks we get too much latitude for "a bunch of kids" as it is...

Status update, Ginny demanded, breaking Harry's momentary trance.

Two giants down. Harry allowed himself a brief grin at the sulky expression on the face of the

giant with the burned feet, who was sitting in the middle of the street with his arms crossed, ignoring the battling of the smaller people around him. Another was inadvertently helping the Order by swatting at the three Death Eaters who were buzzing about his head, trying to bring him back under their control. **Third one is—**

On your right, Neville says. Ginny's arms were steady around his waist, helping keep the disorientation down as he turned his head to follow the directions. **Pearl says he's taken some hits but nowhere near critical yet. Luna agrees.**

"Giant moving east," Harry said into his Zippo, tracking the coarse-haired head with his eyes as it bobbed up and down between the rooftops. "Hurt but still able to do plenty of damage."

"We're on it," Moony's answer came back. "The Ministry should be here momentarily to help us mop up. Can we get a location for Corona Gamp? She got separated from her partner and we can't find her."

"Hold for that," Harry said aloud, at the same moment tossing an image of Luna into Ginny's mind. **Ask her, please?**

Already on it. A quick exchange of voices, and Ginny's mind-sense went shrill with alarm. **Death Eater! Just talking to her now, but it could go to wands any time! One block south of the main battle site, in an alley behind a house with a white door—**

Harry relayed this as quickly as the information came into his mind, heard Moony repeating his directions to Mrs. Longbottom and Professor Jones, felt Ginny's mental fingers crossing that they would be in time—

"That's one of the last Death Eaters, that Corona's talking to," Ron said, the words echoing double in Harry's mind from his own ears and Ginny's. "The rest are either down or scarpered, or still trying to get that one giant to do what they say—"

A series of brisk cracks, like a string of firecrackers going off, heralded a wave of Apparitions around the giants, most of them in the bright blue of Magical Creatures, several near the second giant in Auror red. Harry spun the wheel on his glasses one final time and closed his eyes, massaging them gently with his fingertips. **How do you like your birthday surprise?** he asked Ginny.

Not exactly what I wanted, but as long as nobody died, I'll take it.

"Everyone alive down there?" Harry asked the green flame still flickering in his hand.

"Thanks to some excellent work from our lookouts, yes," Danger's voice answered. "Well done, all of you. We'll have to remember this as a good technique for next time."

"I don't know about anyone else, but I'd just as soon there not be a next time," said Draco, Luna leaning against him with her eyes closed and her head on his shoulder. "The Muggle-Worthy

Excuse people are going to be working overtime today, not to mention the Obliviators."

"How long until something happens they can't excuse away?" Neville asked quietly. "This was a small attack, probably spur of the moment when they spotted Brian and Corona, trying to either catch them before they could report or follow them to our headquarters. What will they be able to do when they really try?"

"Regular little ray of sunshine today, aren't you?" said Ron, Vanishing his conjured map. "Can we concentrate on the whole 'nobody died' bit for the moment? Not to mention, we did something right, and it wasn't some kind of fluke or just a lucky break." The snarkiness in his voice could be excused, Harry thought, given that the rescue mission which had cost him his sight had been called both those things, several times behind his back and once within his hearing. "We helped today, we did our bit, and they can't take that away from us, no matter what."

"You're right." Neville rotated his shoulders, wincing at an audible pop. Meghan pressed his hand, and the tension in his face eased. "We helped keep people alive, and that's not nothing."

"And now they've seen how well it works to have lookouts up high, they may try it for future battles." Ginny reclaimed her chain from around Harry's neck, tucking it away under her robes. "Maybe have someone on every team with a portable broom, someone good with Disillusionment or with an Invisibility Cloak..."

"But it's almost impossible to wear a Cloak when you're flying," Harry objected, thinking of experiments done in the Weasleys' orchard on just this subject. "You'd need some way to fasten it around you and the broom, or the Death Eaters could just look up and see you under it."

"Sew a few buttons on it, of course," Ginny retorted as Draco opened the door to the stairs. "Do I have to think of everything?"

Harry tried out several answers to this question, but none of them made more sense than keeping quiet.

Smart boy, Danger said approvingly, collecting and dispersing the last of the earflames she'd created for the rest of the Order. **Already knows when it's not wise to dispute his lady.**

I didn't know there was a time when it was wise.

There isn't. But he doesn't need to know that yet. Danger smirked. **Let him keep the illusion that he's in charge for another year or so.**

Another year, hmm? Remus dismissed Danger's earflame along with his own, closing the Zippo in his pocket to break off the connection with Harry's. **That just happens to bring us to Ginny's sixteenth birthday...**

Danger attempted to look innocent.

Remus snorted. **Try it on someone who doesn't know you like I do.**

Or maybe someone who can't read my mind?

That would help as well, yes.

Mare took her turn sliding into the cover of the Fidelius Charm on Headquarters, all the while pondering on how strange a thing was memory. Her muscles knew the smooth action of draw and cast, her voice could provide the words to match, as long as she wasn't thinking too hard about what she was doing. If she did...

Then I fall apart in confusion, and someone else has to rush in and save me. Fortunately it only happened once, the person who did the rushing in was Hestia Jones, and she attributed it to the fortunes of battle, not to my own personal incompetence.

She stepped inside the house, listening with half an ear to the exhausted, jubilant chatter around her.

We got off easy this time. No one dead, only minor injuries... next time we might not do so well, and it might be my fault. Someone could get hurt, even killed trying to take care of me. Do I have a right to put them in that kind of danger?

Near the back of the hall, a sparkle of light caught Mare's eye, twinkling in the way she'd learned from Meghan meant someone was being affected by a spell. Excusing herself at every step, she made her way through the crowd to discover the glitter coming from Corona, who was wrapped in Brian's arms, one hand resting against his cheek.

"...didn't hurt me," she was saying as Mare came into earshot. "She never even touched me. She only went after you to get my attention, and all she wanted was to talk to me, though to Elladora that means shouting at me, mostly about what a disgrace I am to the family and how maybe someday I'll come to my senses and be useful to them again..."

"You know you shouldn't listen to her." Brian turned his head and kissed Corona's palm. "She may be your sister, but didn't she disown you right along with your grandmother? By her own doing, you should be free of her now."

"Are you sure she never touched you?" Mare asked, feeling a trace of guilt for breaking into a clearly private conversation but salving her conscience with the knowledge that neither Brian nor Corona could see what she could. "You have magic on you, affecting you somehow. I can see the traces."

"Magic on me?" Corona looked briefly baffled, even afraid, then laughed aloud, her face clearing. "Oh, that! Elladora tried to cast a spell when I first got near enough, but I dodged it and it caught my robes. You're probably seeing the residue from that. It can linger for days, I've heard."

"Probably." Mare shifted her sight and nodded in agreement as the shimmer of light faded, then vanished altogether. "Nothing to worry about, then."

"No." Brian kissed Corona's cheek. "Nothing to worry about at all."

And a partial answer to my question. Mare moved a few feet away to give the pair some privacy, then spotted an open door and made for that. I may not consider that I have a right to put these people in danger, but if I asked them, I'm sure they would say something different. They care for me—and I'm starting to believe that they truly do care for me, not just some residual feelings for Aletha. As for my feelings...

She slipped through the open door and closed it behind her, breathing a sigh of relief at the diminished noise.

Why bother lying to myself? I'm halfway in love with Sirius already, and the rest of the Pack isn't too far behind. They're smart and funny, loving and accepting—exactly the kind of people I want in my life. And whether or not I feel connected to them, I am connected, by my allegiance in this war if nothing else.

Wearily, she sat down on the backless bench which was the closest seating to the door. *I could always go away from here. Emigrate, make a new life somewhere else, or just stay abroad for a year or two until everything blows over. But what would that say about the kind of person I'm making myself into, if I run away from a fight this important, this necessary? I may not have chosen it, but neither did any Muggleborn these past twenty-five years, and that didn't stop them from having to fight it.*

She sighed. "Too much to decide all at once," she said aloud, scooting to the end of the bench and spinning herself around on it. "Time to try out another piece of muscle memory."

One which, if I'm not mistaken, often helped Aletha work out her knottiest problems...

Sirius was on his way to the War Room to clean up his rough account of the battle when he noticed something odd.

What's that door doing shut? Moony's not in there, he's upstairs with Danger, and the cubs are all down in the kitchen demolishing Ginny's birthday cake...

He cast a Silencer on the doorknob and hinges, then carefully eased the door open, wand at the ready.

The sound which emerged from within went straight to his gut.

Mare sat at the ebony baby grand he'd restored himself from the dusty old relic left behind by some long-ago musical Black, her eyes half shut and her fingers coaxing soft chords from the keys. She was only humming the melody, not singing it, but that didn't matter. He knew all the

words already.

*Woman needs man and man must have his mate,
On that you can rely...*

Biting his lips to keep from speaking or running to her side, he began to half-consciously hum along with her as she began the final stanza. It took no effort at all to see her as she had been fourteen years ago, dressed in flowing red and playing this same song, giving him a reassurance beyond words that his exile was over, that he was welcome in her home, in her arms, once again.

*It's still the same old story, a fight for love and glory,
A chance to do or die!
The world will always welcome lovers
As time goes by...*

"You are so beautiful," he breathed as she rippled notes upward to finish the song.

Then he ducked out of sight into the War Room as she gasped and spun around.

There is a limit to how far reenactments should be taken. Sirius blotted at his cheeks with the back of his hand, scowling. *I promised myself I wouldn't push her, and I won't.*

But Merlin's spotty forehead, it hurts not even knowing if she's going to stay...

Late that evening, Albus Dumbledore arrived at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, and after wishing Ginny many happy returns debriefed the birthday revelers about their role in the afternoon's battle. Once he understood fully, he dismissed them to their own pursuits, retaining Hermione, in her role of Pride liaison within the Order, and Harry, with whom he spoke briefly alone.

"Half about starting proper Occlumency lessons with Snape this fall," Harry said with a grimace when he arrived in the den room. "But the other half was odd. He says he has something to show us, and he'd like to show us all, but it's dangerous, so we each have to decide for ourselves. Do we want to know 'something that could change the course of the war, and something Voldemort would kill to keep from being known'?"

"Thought we already did." Ron was experimenting with finding his way around the den room unaided, since Hermione was still downstairs. "We've all heard the prophecy, haven't we?"

"But that's something he would kill to find out." Draco scrubbed his hand back and forth along the nap of the carpet. "This is something he would kill to keep from being found out."

"Which means we might actually be safer, in some ways," Neville put in. "He'd torture us if he knew we could tell him the prophecy, but if he finds out we know some secret of his, he'll just kill us to stop us telling anyone else."

"Still nothing I want to happen, but I see your point." Ginny had her knees drawn up to her chest. "We can't exactly be in a worse case than we are. And the same argument applies as last time—who'd ever think Dumbledore would tell us anything important?"

"Voldemort won't." Luna's tone was quietly certain. "He doesn't tell anyone his most important secrets, because he doesn't trust anyone. He thinks it makes him safe, but it will destroy him."

"Destroy is a good word." Harry flopped down full-length onto one of the long cushions which littered the floor. "I like that word."

"We still have a lot of work to do before it happens," Luna added. "But it'll all come right in the end."

Meghan rose hastily from the corner where she'd been plaiting the fringe on a blanket. "I'm just... I think I should... I'll be back later."

Ron took a hasty step back as she brushed past him. "Oi, watch where I'm going there!"

"She wasn't watching much of anything," Ginny said as the door banged. "I wonder what's wrong?"

"It'll all come right in the end," she says. Meghan scowled and kicked savagely at the base of the wall in the first-floor corridor. How can it? How can it, when my Mama Letha is going to go away and leave us? How can it when I saw Dadfoot crying over her? He's not supposed to cry—he's supposed to hold me when I cry, and tell me it will be all right—except it won't, and it can't, and I hate everyone who thinks it will, and—

She stopped. A light was coming from a room near the stairs.

That's the tapestry room. Who would be in there tonight? I thought everyone who wasn't with us was down in the meeting with Professor Dumbledore...

Rising to her tiptoes, she slipped down the hall as light-footed as her Animagus form, and peered cautiously around the doorframe.

What she saw had her stuffing her sleeve into her mouth to keep from crying out.

Nearly an hour later, Sirius trudged towards the stairs, perversely welcoming each ache and pain his overstressed muscles could throw at him. Aches and pains gave him something to consider other than the proposal set forth and adopted in the meeting which had just broken up.

We're too centralized here, Albus says. It's too dangerous to have us all in one place, even under Fidelius. We need to start spreading out, to establish secondary bases so we have somewhere to go, just in case. Also so we can react more quickly all around the country, but mostly so we don't get caught this way again, having to defend the one place where all our secrets, all our knowledge,

and particularly all our children are.

I agree with that part of it, at least in theory, but why did Moony have to bring up people's homes for the secondary bases? Doesn't he understand what going back to the Den would do to me right now? I'd see Letha there, in every corridor, every room, and I don't know how long I could control myself around Mare...

He snickered once, without true humor. Who would've thought my lovely boyhood memories were actually good for something? As long as I concentrate on them and not on the time I spent here with the people I love, I can be a gentleman. But that won't last much longer, and I'm afraid of the way it's going to end.

Sirius' head came above floor level, and he stopped, frowning at the light which spilled out invitingly into the corridor. "Wonder who's after a bit of edited genealogy at this hour," he muttered aloud. "Might as well find out."

Mounting the last few steps, he paused to massage an especially persistent ache out of his left thigh, then crossed the corridor to the drawing room and entered.

As his daughter had before him, he stopped in shock.

The Black Family Tree had been transformed.

Which may not be exactly the right word, but I'll be a flobberworm's uncle if I know what is!

Beneath the stern motto of "Toujours pur", a new phrase had been introduced. Neatly woven into the fabric, as though they had been there from the beginning, were the words "de la coeur".

"Always pure of heart," Sirius translated under his breath. "Maybe it wasn't always that way, but I've sure as hell tried."

The main body of the tapestry also showed alterations, or perhaps in this case, Sirius thought, restorations would be the more appropriate term. Every name and connection which his mother had blasted away had been painstakingly returned to its original state. The burn marks were still visible in some areas, but the names were readable and clear, and there could be no doubt they belonged where they had been placed.

It's showing the truth, for the first time since I can remember. Isn't that a kick in the twigs?

He stepped closer, kneeling on the sofa which had been moved to conceal the mutilated lower portions of the tapestry. "There's Uncle Alphard," he murmured, craning his neck. "And there's Andy and Cissy, and Tonks and Draco right where they belong underneath them." *And Ted and Lucius get equal mention. Wouldn't that just burn the both of them? Well, not Ted so much, he's pretty easy-going, but Lucius... one of these days, if I get the chance, I might just mention it to him.*

His gaze traveled to the left, and he smiled to see Regulus' name shining in its gold thread. *Thanks*

for the help, little brother. I may not always sound like it, but I didn't really want to be dead. As long as you're alive, there's always some hope that what you want will happen, even if it's the slightest little thing you can imagine...

Drawing a deep breath, he allowed his eyes to slide to the left once more.

As he had suspected, his own name had returned to its place beside Regulus'. A line led downward from him as it did from Andromeda and Narcissa, though his had two branchings. Sirius swallowed against the usual lump in his throat at the simple notation "Marcus" with its one year embroidered neatly beneath, looking away from it at the thing he'd never thought to see—his beautiful, bright-eyed daughter acknowledged in her proper place as a child of the House of Black.

I suppose it does matter to me, as much as I've always said it didn't. She's as good as any pureblood brat, and better than most of them. Why shouldn't she have her rights?

Whoever fixed this thing up, I owe them the price of that, along with the rest of it. Wonder who it

His thoughts froze as he noticed what he hadn't before.

His name had yet another similarity with that of his two cousins.

As though he were under Imperius, Sirius felt his gaze moving further left still, along the dotted line which indicated an alliance by marriage. The notation at the other end was simple, exactly what had been shown for his cousins' spouses.

Aletha Carina Freeman

Born 1959

Married 1982

Renewed vows 1995

As he reached forward to touch the name, scarcely breathing, a tiny sound made him look down at the floor between the sofa and the wall where the tapestry hung. A girl and a woman lay sleeping there, nestled against one another like the two missing pieces of his heart.

My daughter. And my wife.

The sight slotted everything into place for Sirius, fitting it together as neatly as the tapestry.

She did this. Mare—no, Aletha—she did it for me. To tell me she's going to stay, she's going to give it a try. Give us a try. It won't be perfect, just like the tapestry's not, but hell, who wants perfection? What fun would that be?

"I love you so damn much," he whispered, brushing his fingers against his cheek and blinking in

surprise when they came away damp. "Just show me what you need. Help me do what's right for you." He reached down and touched Meghan gently on the cheek, blinking harder than ever when she smiled in her sleep. "Don't let me screw this up, not again, not when you just gave me back my life..."

His hand was intercepted on its second trip down by a slenderer, darker-skinned one, which conveyed it to a pair of lips. "Shh," breathed the woman he loved, after placing a soft kiss on his fingertips and releasing him. "Don't wake her."

Sirius shook his head. "Won't," he mouthed. "But—why?" He indicated the tapestry. "Why now?"

She sat up, gently disentangling Meghan, and swung herself over the back of the couch with the lithe grace he found so irresistible. "Because I knew if I left here, if I left you, I would always wonder," she said quietly, taking his hand once again. "And when I heard you humming in the corridor, while I was playing, when I heard your voice nearly break on that one note, that's when I knew..."

"Knew..." Sirius summoned his courage and slid his free arm around her. "That you loved me again?"

She shook her head with a smile. "Not that I loved you again. More like I never really stopped."

Lips met, clung, then parted after only a few seconds when she pulled back. "I don't want you to misunderstand. It's not..." She chuckled a little, the warm and rich sound that never failed to make his heart stutter. "Not like magic. I haven't suddenly become exactly the Aletha that I was before this all happened. I'm still much more of Mare. But I've made up my mind that I'm going to learn to be myself, all of myself, not just the old and not just the new but both. If you understand."

"I think I do, but I'm just glad whichever you you're being at the moment doesn't think I'm utterly repulsive." Sirius ran a hand through her hair. "Do you want to use Mare still, or..."

"No, I'll go back to Aletha." She grinned. "Or should I say, Professor Black."

"Beg your pardon?"

"I spoke with Headmaster Dumbledore earlier—we met in the hall, just as he was coming in—and he asked if I would be willing to take the Potions position at Hogwarts this year."

"Potions, hmm?" Sirius considered this. "You're definitely qualified. Wonder what's happening with Snivellus, though."

She smacked him on the back of the head. "Behave. It's no wonder the cubs get up to the antics they do, with you as a role model."

Sirius pouted and rubbed the place where her hand had impacted. "Ow. You never used to hit that hard before."

"Oh yes I did." She kissed her fingertips and laid them over the spot. "But then I did that, and it was all better again. Isn't it?"

"Mm-hmm." Sirius leaned back against the couch and spent a few moments just looking at her. "Letha?"

"Yes?"

"I've missed that. Just saying your name, knowing you'll answer me." He slid a finger across the smooth, cool skin on the back of her hand. "I've missed a lot of things."

"And some of them, you're still going to have to miss." She squeezed his hand once, then released it and scooted back a few inches. "I'm not just taking the position because I was asked to, Sirius. I'm taking it because it will give me a place, a role, a... a new person to be, almost. Someone who's needed, who's necessary, but who doesn't have quite so many demands on her as Aletha Freeman-Black always did. And also, please don't be offended, because it will give me some distance from you. As much as I love you, if I try to figure out who this new Aletha will be right next to you, I have a feeling I'll become someone neither of us could put up with for long."

Sirius sighed. "Sad, but true." He winked at her. "I do tend to corrupt everyone I come in contact with, after all."

"Of course you do. If you didn't, you wouldn't be you." She got to her feet in one smooth motion. "I need to get to bed, and I'm sure you do too. Will you take Meghan to the girls' room? She shouldn't sleep on the floor all night."

"Sure." Sirius climbed over the couch, then paused. "Letha?"

"Yes?" She stopped in the doorway, turning to look back at him.

"Don't stay away too long."

"Don't worry," Aletha said softly. "I won't."

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Facing Danger

Chapter 59: Of Fear and Faithfulness (Year 6)

Hermione sat on one of the couches in the music room of the Marauders' Den, staring out the back door at the neglected vegetable garden.

I'm almost glad the Den wasn't chosen as one of the new secondary bases. That would have meant I had to write Viktor again and tell him to meet me somewhere else, and he might have thought I was putting him off and been angry with me. Granted, it would have been nice to sleep in my own bed again, even just for a week—though really, my bed at Hogwarts is my own bed more than the one upstairs now, if you count by the amount of time I spend in each one—

Intentionally lowering the shoulders which had started to rise in defensive reflex, Hermione forced herself to take a deep breath and calm the jitters which had her mind babbling. "I'm not nervous about seeing Viktor," she said aloud, quietly so as not to confuse Charlie, who was waiting just outside to act as escort past the wards to that same international Quidditch star. "Not exactly. It's just that he's male, and I haven't seen him since..." Her mind stuttered over that particular clause. "I haven't seen him for a long time. It's normal to be nervous."

Especially without Ron here. But Letha wanted to talk to him, and she specifically said alone, so it only made sense to set it up so that he went to see her at the Burrow while I see Viktor here, since they never did get along...

She giggled under her breath. *Ron never did get along with anyone who liked me that way. I don't know why I couldn't see what a hopeful sign that was. But now we've worked it out, and it actually works better than I ever thought it would—we balance, he and I, we keep each other even, a lot like Padfoot and Letha...*

A sigh. At least like the way they used to be. I don't know what to make of the way things are now. How can Letha be herself and not herself at the same time? She can't be two people at once... can she? And how are we supposed to treat her? Like herself, or like Mare, or—

Charlie rapped on the French door, breaking into what promised to be a spiraling and inconclusive line of thought. "Think I see him," he called. "I'll go out and get him. Any secret passwords I should know?"

"No." Hermione laughed. "Just make sure he brought the books with him before you open the wards, so he doesn't have to go back out and come in again if he forgot!"

He'll give me what I need, we'll talk for a little while and catch up, and then he'll go away again. She folded her hands in her lap and lifted her head, preparing her best company smile. *There is nothing to be afraid of. Nothing at all.*

She wished the Peppermint Toads hopping about in her stomach believed her.

I know I have to learn to handle things on my own, but I still wish Ron were here, or I were there...

"Come in," Aletha called at the hesitant rap on the door.

It still feels strange to think of myself by that name, but I've made up my mind and I'm going to follow through with it. I can't live my life ignoring who I was born, any more than I can ignore who I am now.

The trick is going to be defining the two properly.

Ron poked his head into the room, his movements hesitant without the accustomed weight of Neenie on his shoulders. "You wanted to talk to me? Professor," he added after a moment's consideration, clear on his face, about the proper way to address her.

"Yes, I did. Come in, Ron, I'll get the door. Table and chairs about two steps ahead of you," Aletha added, drawing her wand to close the door as Ron stepped inside. A quick Imperturbable Charm ensured they wouldn't be disturbed. This was not a conversation she wanted to be overheard.

Though that's less for my sake and more for his. Unless I'm very much mistaken, he's been bottling everything up for Hermione's sake, keeping it all under wraps so he doesn't upset her, and as gallant as that may be, it's untenable in the long run. He's got to be honest with himself, to admit how angry and scared and, yes, bitter this is making him, or it will poison anything I try to do.

"Your eyes look just about normal from here," she tossed out as an opener. "Meghan did a good job with your cosmetic repairs, though I say it as shouldn't."

"Pity she can't do anything about the real problem." Ron's tone was light, but the undercurrents Aletha had suspected were there, to a trained ear—*which mine is, even if I don't necessarily recall the training as a personal matter. Use the skills now, worry about precisely whose they are later.*

"It is," she agreed. "But if I remember right, you didn't want her to try."

Ron pressed a hand against the tabletop. "Not if she's going to get hurt by it, I don't. I'm enough of a problem without hurting her. We need her."

"Are you not needed, then?" Aletha shelved the "problem" statement for later use.

"Not nearly as much." The undercurrents were rising, making their presence felt, coming out in the sarcastic edge to Ron's words and the rush in his sentences, as though they all had to be said at once before he lost his nerve. "What good do I do anyone? I don't have anything special I can do, no powers, nothing like her or Harry or Neville. Bog-standard wizard is all I am, a bit below standard actually—copying off Hermione's the only way I get through half my classes, I even got a Troll on one of my O.W.L.s, and I always thought Fred and George were making that up—"

"May I tell you what I see?" Aletha slipped her question into Ron's pause for breath. "As

something of a newcomer to the situation, judging it just on how I've seen you and the Pride interacting this last week or so, and what I know of the past?"

Ron jerked one shoulder. "Go on, then." He flushed at the ungraciousness of his answer. "I mean, yes, Professor. Sorry about that."

"It's all right." Aletha wrapped her pendant chain around one finger, lining up her words in the order she wanted. "As you've said, you don't have any special magic you can do that makes you valuable to the Pride. You'd call me a liar, and rightly so, if I gave you the 'don't be silly, of course you're just as important as they are' line."

A bitter half-smile appeared on Ron's face, and he took another breath.

"I wasn't finished," Aletha said calmly before he could speak. "As I was saying, I'm not going to give you a simple rote response. But I will ask you to consider that only half the Pride has any power of the kind you mentioned. Does that mean that they're less important than the others? That Ginny, or Hermione, are somehow not as valuable to the Pride as Luna or Meghan?"

"No—but that's different!" Ron's hands shaped circles in the air in front of him, as though he were trying to sculpt his thought process as Ginny sometimes did with clay. "Hermione's our scholar, our researcher, she can look up anything faster than any two of the rest of us, and Ginny sees how things go together just by looking at them, without her models we'd never have been able to run half the training exercises we did with the DA—"

"So you're telling me that they may not have any particular magical talents, but they still have areas of specialty which make them important?" Aletha allowed herself a momentary grin, but kept her voice strictly neutral, allowing only the bare lift at the end to turn her statement into a question.

"Yes. And—" Ron raised a finger as though to cut her off, though Aletha wouldn't have dreamed of interrupting at this point. "*And* they're important just because they're them. Because nobody else can be them, and do what they do in the Pride. If they weren't around, or if they were different, then we wouldn't be a Pride. We'd be..." He shrugged. "I dunno. A mess, maybe. Not a Pride. Why d'you want to—"

Aletha swallowed a laugh as Ron's expression went from confusion to shock to angry denial. "That's not fair. It's not like that with me. It's different."

"How?" Aletha challenged. "How is it different?"

"It's...I...it just *is* ." Ron shoved back his chair and stood up. "Look at me. I'm useless unless I've got someone to lead me around by the hand, or sit on my shoulders and do nothing but see for me all day when she's got plenty of better things to be doing. And even when I could see, what was I good for? Nothing except running off on mad excursions and getting myself captured, that's what!"

"On that particular mad excursion, if I remember right, you defeated one Death Eater and were holding off two more when you were ambushed from behind." Aletha kept her tone calm, factual, but allowed a few traces of her private amusement to seep in. Unless she was reading Ron very wrongly indeed, the quickest way to get him to change his mindset on this topic would be to make him aware that he sounded silly. "Doesn't sound like you're quite so substandard a wizard as you were making out. Not to mention, you risked your life to save three other people. That's got a name, hasn't it?"

"Yeah." Ron groped behind him for his chair and sat back down with a thud, folding his arms and scowling. "Stupidity."

"No, that's what you're doing now," Aletha countered with a fair amount of acid in her voice. "And it's getting tiresome. If you're angry about losing your sight, *be* angry about it. If you're sad about it, *be* sad. Even be afraid if you're that. Those are all normal, realistic responses to what's happened to you. Blowing everything out of proportion and deciding that you're useless because you've lost one sense is not."

"And what if I don't want to be normal and realistic?" Ron shot back.

Aletha settled into her chair, making sure he could hear it creak. "I can wait."

She counted six heartbeats before Ron laughed reluctantly. "Sorry to whinge," he said, reaching out to find the table and scooting his chair in closer. "I know I shouldn't. But..." He grimaced, but went on. "I *am* scared. And sad, and angry, and everything else. I don't want to be useless, I don't want to be a burden, and just being there for Hermione... I know it's not nothing, but it isn't enough. Not for someone that close to Harry. You wanted realistic, well, realistically, we've all got to be able to fight, to defend him and each other, and I can't do that properly if I can't see."

"Very true." Aletha slid her hand across the table until it touched his. "Which is the other part of the reason I wanted to talk to you alone. Now that you've got your feelings in better shape, so they won't be in my way, shall I investigate this particular Dark spell and what it might take to reverse it?"

"You think that's possible?" Ron blinked once or twice, his eyes focused on her with deceptive intensity. "I thought Dark magic did damage that couldn't be healed."

"It can't be healed by normal magic," Aletha corrected. "My power doesn't work quite like that. And even if I can't give you back what you lost, I have an idea or two that might let us work around it. If you're open to creative solutions, that is."

"If it'll let me see again, I'm all for it." Ron turned his hand over, exposing his palm. "What do you need from me?"

"To start with, I need you to relax." Aletha covered his hand with hers and insinuated her power into the sharp-edged twists and turns of the lingering magic around Ron's injury. *Mirror-maze is right—this is going to take a lot of concentration even to understand, never mind threading my*

way through it.

"Relax," she repeated, sending a tiny pulse of magic through Ron's body to aid him in that goal. "Think about all the things you like doing best, and imagine doing them again, just the way you always have."

But once I do understand this spell, once I know what Dolohov intended when he threw it, then I can either fix what's gone wrong, or...

Well, we'll deal with "or" when we know if we need it.

Gathering her forces, she plunged into the labyrinth.

Peter Pettigrew grinned to himself as he approached the last turn in his twisting path. Barely over a week in the new hideout, and already I've found three different ways to get to my rooms. No maze can defeat me, not when there's such a tempting treat at the end of it. And I've got an extra-good story to tell her today, so I hope she'll excuse my coming in early...

"...sure he's not around?"

The voice, rough, male, and as out-of-place outside Peter's rooms as it was familiar, stopped him in the act of taking that final step around the corner.

What does Rodolphus Lestrangle want here, and who doesn't he want to be around for it?

"Positive. He stayed to watch the duel between Nott and Malfoy, I saw him settling in myself." The second voice, smoother than the first but otherwise similar, had Peter gritting his teeth. "And even if he didn't, what's a little worm like him going to do to us? I only asked you to come along so you can get a look at our quarry in its natural habitat, as it were. Before we change it for something better."

"Better for us, you mean." Rodolphus sniggered. "You're sure about sharing firsts with me, and giving me the better half? I'd be happy to take seconds, since you're doing the work..."

"No, I want it like this." Rabastan Lestrangle's tone oozed smug anticipation. "By the time we get done with her, she'll be properly broken in, ready to do whatever she's told. And besides, didn't Mother always say nice boys share their toys with their brothers?"

Their raucous laughter broke Peter's half-stunned trance. Before he quite knew what he was doing, he had his wand in his hand and had cast a Disillusionment on himself, then shoved it away and transformed into Wormtail. Invisible, he scurried around the corner, positioning himself between the brothers. Rodolphus had turned away, scanning the cross-corridors, while Rabastan muttered to himself over the doorknob of Peter's rooms, tapping it every few seconds with his wand.

Popping back into his human form, Peter snatched his wand out again and threw a Body-Bind over

Rodolphus. The slight sound of the transformation and the spell attracted Rabastan's attention, but Peter had already wheeled around, and Rabastan wasn't quick enough to bring his wand up to guard against his unseen opponent before Peter's second Body-Bind struck him full on.

Both brothers toppled slowly over and landed hard on the stone floor of the passage, making a tremendously loud crash that seemed to echo on forever. Peter steadied himself on the wall and fought back dueling urges to laugh and to beg their forgiveness. Neither would come out well. Instead, once he thought he could speak without his voice cracking, he removed his Disillusionment and stared down his nose at them both.

"The Dark Lord himself gave me that woman," he said, trying for a tone of righteous indignation. "If you think you should have her instead of me, go talk to him about it. Otherwise, stay away from her. She's *mine*."

Shielding his movements from the Lestranges with his body, he removed the locking spell from the door and pulled it open, then turned back to look at them once more. "I'll let it pass this once," he said coldly. "Don't come here again. Now go away." A flick of his wand removed the Body-Binds, and he slammed the door behind himself and double-locked it.

For a second and a half, he stood in awe of his own boldness and tenacity.

Then his head began to spin, his breath to come short, and his hands to shake so hard he had to grip his right with his left just to guide his wand back to its proper pocket.

What did I just do? Am I out of my mind, challenging the Lestranges? Either one of them, Rodolphus or Rabastan, could annihilate me without blinking, and let's not even bring up Bellatrix! The only reason I lived through that was that I got the drop on them, and I won't always have it...

Movement from the other side of the room caught his eye. Evanie rose slowly from behind her own fireside chair, her hand clamped around the fireplace poker, the fear on her face ebbing away to be replaced with something Peter chose not to look at too closely. Instead he focused on the thought he'd been avoiding for weeks, the one he couldn't ignore any longer.

She shouldn't be here.

No matter how much I like having her around, this is no place for her. Not now, not when the Lestranges have taken notice of her. Especially not now, when they have more reason than ever to go after her. They won't have stopped wanting her for herself, but they'd take her now even if she were cross-eyed and hunchbacked, just to be square with me.

Maybe I can't save myself, but I can still save her.

"Put that down," he said hoarsely, jerking his chin at the poker. "Get your things together and think about where you'd like me to drop you off. I'll give you five minutes."

"Drop me off?" Evanie returned the poker to its slot beside the fireplace, her eyes on her work. "Are you tired of me already, that you want to send me away?"

"That's not the point." Peter wished his voice would stop shaking, but it seemed he'd used up all his ability to control that in the corridor. "The point is, you're not safe here, and—"

"And I won't be any safer anywhere else," Evanie cut in. "What's to stop them following me wherever I go and kidnapping me from there, if they want me so badly?"

Peter opened his mouth and closed it again without speaking.

"Besides." Evanie still hadn't lifted her eyes from the rack of fireplace tools, and her voice was so quiet he could barely hear her. "I don't have anyplace to go."

"You must have lived somewhere," Peter objected, ignoring the tiny flare of interest and—could it be hope?—that blossomed in his chest at her words. "Had a home, a family, friends who've missed you."

"I must have, must I?" Now Evanie's eyes lifted, and Peter took a step back at the quiet, patient sorrow that filled them. "But I don't. Nothing but a shabby little flat, and a job working with girls at a Home. Girls like I was, once. Left on a doorstep, or taken from their parents, or any of a million other brands of 'not wanted'." The unnamable emotion began to kindle deep in the soft brown, pushing the sorrow aside. "And that's all I ever was, until you." She turned aside, her voice catching. "But now you don't want me either—"

"I never said that!"

"Then why won't you let me stay?" Evanie whirled back, her hands curled into fists. "Why do you want me to go away from the only person who ever looked at me and saw anything other than a nuisance?"

"Because I don't want you to die, or worse than that, and I can't protect you!"

"You're doing just fine so far." Evanie's chin was up, the flush of battle turning her face a becoming shade of pink. "Here's what I'll do, Peter. If you can look me straight in the eye and tell me truly that you don't want me here, that having me here makes your life worse rather than better, then I'll let you send me back where I came from. If you can't, if that would be a lie, then here I am and here I stay." Her eyebrows lifted. "What do you say?"

I know what I should say. Peter looked away, fighting to keep his expression from giving away the furious battle being waged within him. I know what I have to say. One lie, just one more in a lifetime full of them, and I can get her away from here. She deserves so much better than this. I can hide her where they'll never think to look, make sure that she has what she needs to start her life over, give her everything she ought to have, if I can just get myself to say...

"I can't." He leaned against the door, not daring to look around at her. "And isn't that just like me?"

I always muff up the important things, always have, always will. You came out of nowhere, you weren't really supposed to matter at all, and suddenly you're the most important thing in my life, and I'm not strong enough, I don't care for you enough, to tell you that lie and give you what you deserve..." He stopped, becoming aware of a minor point about the last ninety seconds. "And I've just said all that aloud, haven't I?"

"I'm glad you did." Soft footsteps crossed the room, stopping within arm's reach of him. "I might never have known it, otherwise."

"I didn't want you to know." Peter swiped angrily at his stinging eyes. "You deserve better than this. Better than me."

"You worry so much about what I deserve, Peter." A small hand rested on his arm, just above the elbow. "Why don't you ask me what I want instead?"

"If you insist." He swallowed hard, simultaneously bracing himself for the answer and trying to clear the annoying thickness from his voice. "What do you want, Evanie?"

The hand's mate slipped around him and caught his other arm, tugging at it until he turned reluctantly to face her.

She stood before him, her face lifted to his and filled with the emotion he dared not name.

"You," she said simply. "I want you."

Peter's mouth opened, but no sound came out. The overall effect made Evanie want to giggle, which urge she stifled thoroughly. *I can't laugh at him, especially not now. It would break him to pieces with how fragile he is at the moment.*

"You..." Peter finally managed to get out. "You..."

"I believe that's what I said." Evanie moved one deliberate step closer, leaving a bare inch of air between their two bodies. "You are what I want."

"You can't." Peter shook his head, half in negation, half in disbelief. "You can't mean this. You have no idea what you're saying. If you knew what I've done, what I still have to do, you'd understand—"

"I know it all already," Evanie broke in, as gently as she dared. "From what you've told me and what I've heard from elsewhere, I think I know about all there is to be known. And none of it has changed my mind one bit."

"None of it—are you *mad*?" Peter seized her shoulders and stared at her, his fingers flexing as though he were longing to shake her but didn't dare. "I've *killed* people! Innocent people, who never did anything wrong, never even knew what was happening to them!"

"And how exactly will your being unhappy all your life do anything to help those people?" Evanie inquired, peeling his fingers loose. "Don't bother answering that. I'll tell you right now. It won't."

"I..." Peter scowled. "Now you've got me all confused."

"Good. Maybe that means you'll listen to me now." Evanie cupped her hands around his, bringing them together between their two bodies, flesh to flesh on one side, flesh to silver on the other. "I never expected anything like this to happen to me. I'm sure you didn't either. But here it is, and here we are, and even if you don't think you deserve happiness, what about me? You were spending all that breath earlier telling me what I deserve, so tell me now, is that part of it?"

"Part of it? No." Peter freed one hand to rest it on her shoulder. "It's all of it. You deserve nothing else but happiness—if I could make you happy, Evanie, I swear I would—"

Got you. "What do you swear by?" Evanie asked, feigning innocent interest. "Wizards, I mean. I know how Muggles swear already."

"It depends. Most of us swear by Merlin, most often his beard, but plenty of other parts of him too." Peter snatched at this gladly as a safe topic, away from the treacherous waters they had just been navigating. "I always thought it made the most sense to swear by his wand, myself, because he couldn't have done all the magic he's famous for if he hadn't had a wand..."

"Merlin's wand, then. All right." Evanie recaptured the wayward hand and looked up at Peter over their intertwined fingers. "Do you swear by Merlin's wand that if you could make me happy, you would?"

"Yes." Peter looked a bit unsettled, but clearly he hadn't seen where she was leading with this. "By Merlin's wand."

"Good." Evanie leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. "That's settled, then. Shall we ask the house-elves what they've made for dinner?"

"Wait." Peter caught her by the shoulder as she started to turn away. "What's settled? We haven't settled anything—"

"Oh yes we have." Evanie smiled. "You swore not fifteen seconds ago to make me happy if it was in your power. Didn't you?"

Peter nodded slowly, watching her as his Animagus form might watch a large, hungry cat.

"Which makes it my turn to swear." Evanie faced him fully, catching and holding his gaze with her own. "I swear to you, Peter, by Merlin's wand or anything else you like, that being here with you has made me the happiest I have ever been in my life. You could make me leave here, you have that power, but even if there were a life waiting for me back in the world I came from, it wouldn't include you, and you're what matters to me now. If you want to fulfill that vow you just swore, if you want to make me happy, then let me stay with you. That's all I want."

"You're mad." Peter shook his head, but the motion was feebler than it had been earlier. "After what just happened out in that hall, you still want to stay here? What if next time I don't come back early?"

"I may have something that will help with that." Evanie reached into her pocket, remembering the stories Sirius had told her about the magical chains that held his own and his family's pendants. "If I understand it right, they turn hot if the other person wearing them is upset, and cold if they're in danger of death."

"Who could possibly give—no, don't answer that." Peter passed a hand across his forehead. "If I don't know, I don't have to account for it. What are they?"

Evanie opened her hand. The two items Danger had given her sparkled in her palm.

"I see," Peter said after a long moment, cupping his hand under hers. "You know it's bad luck to wear one of those if you're not..."

"I'm here all the time anyway," Evanie pointed out, trying to keep her voice level and only succeeding in making it tremble all the more. "We could ask some of the house-elves to come up and be our witnesses."

"You *are* mad," Peter began, then sighed as he saw the expression on her face. "You're sure these do what you say?"

"Positive."

And even if they didn't, when you give me an opening like that... but no. I tricked my way into staying, so this has to be honest.

Half-consciously holding her breath, she waited.

I can't believe I'm even considering this. Peter stared at the things nestled in Evanie's hand. The Dark Lord would not approve...

Or would he? He chewed on one side of his lip, trying to evaluate all sides of the problem. He's never stopped any of his Death Eaters from taking this step before, and certainly I'm not putting Evanie ahead of my loyalties to him. I'm simply showing how much I value this reward he was kind enough to give me. Not to mention safeguarding her, to make sure she isn't taken from me and I don't have to bother him with such a tiny detail as getting her back. He approves of proper caution, and of valuing things at their true worth.

Besides, what he doesn't know won't hurt him.

Carefully, he lifted the more delicate of the two rings from Evanie's palm. "I attended a wedding or two when I was younger," he said, smiling at her astonished look of joy. "Let me see if I can

remember how the vows went."

I've broken enough promises in my life.

It's time to start keeping them again.

Aletha withdrew her magic delicately from within the shattered prisms of Ron's vision, waiting until she was fully disengaged to indulge in a shiver. *If I never have to come in contact with another Death Eater's magic, that will be quite soon enough for me...*

"Find anything out?" Ron asked, rousing from the half-trance she'd given him with her relaxation spell.

"Yes." Aletha blew out a breath, wondering how to phrase her findings. "Why don't I put it in the standard format? I have good news, and I have bad news."

"Bad news always goes first." Ron sat back in his chair, his face closing down. "You can't fix it."

"I can't put it back the way it was, no." Aletha sighed. "You must have given Master Dolohov quite a look to get him this angry with you. His intention when he threw that spell, as far as I can make out, was to destroy both your physical eyes and your powers of sight, to keep you from ever seeing light again. Your eyes can be rebuilt—Meghan did most of that when she repaired your visible injuries, and I've done the rest—but your brain won't acknowledge the signals they send, and that I don't dare meddle with. I could cause serious damage if I tried."

"Worse than what I was born with? That would be bad." Ron gave her a half-smile. "I'm not just making light of things, Professor, I swear. But what you said is about what I expected to hear, what I've been learning to live with these past couple weeks, and you said there was good news too. So you have to have found out something new."

"As it happens, I did." Aletha let her answering grin bleed into her voice. "Dolohov was very destructive, but he was also very specific, and one or two things Meghan's been showing me have come together with an old memory of mine to create something I think is worth a try for you..."

"Viktor, hello!" Hermione got to her feet as Charlie opened the French door for her visitor, who was clutching a bag filled with books in front of him. "It's..." Her voice stalled on "lovely to see you," and she coughed once and tried again. "Thank you so much for coming."

"You're welcome." Viktor set aside his bag and smiled at the surprise on her face. "I have been practicing my English since we parted, hoping for this day—the accent is better now, no?"

"The accent is better now, yes." Hermione summoned a smile and hoped it didn't look too false. *What is wrong with me? I thought I was over these stupid irrational fears... push through it, that's all I can do now, just push through it...* "How have you been?"

"Busy." Viktor shrugged. "Training, travel, games, more training. The life of a professional is not an easy one. But I hear you have been busy yourself. Was there not a giant attack on London a very short time ago?"

"Yes, but I didn't have much to do with that." *Besides helping direct traffic.* "Some friends of my parents, who travel about trying to contact werewolves and help them live with their problem, stumbled across the giants where one of the larger werewolf camps had been. B—they're quite broken up about it, apparently that p-pack had made a lot of progress in relearning how to live like humans, and the giants killed them all when they moved into the valley..."

Get a hold of yourself! she scolded silently as Viktor nodded at this. *You almost gave Brian's name away, and stumbling over the word "pack" isn't much better! What are you so upset about anyway? Viktor knows how you live, you told him back in your fourth year...*

"You seem upset, Hermione." He pronounced her name easily and correctly, as though he'd practiced it a great deal since they'd last spoken. "Is everything all right with you?"

"It's... hard to explain." Hermione forced herself to breathe deeply, in through her mouth, out through her nose. "Don't mind me. I'll be all right. I just had a... difficult experience over this past winter. But I'm getting over it."

"I see." Viktor nodded again, his hand resting on his pocket. "Are you well enough to see a new invention I have discovered, and perhaps to show it to your... friend? Guard? Whatever he may be, I think he should see it as well. It could be important."

"All right." Freeing her fingers from their twisted grip on one another, Hermione waved at Charlie, beckoning him closer. "Viktor has something he says he wants us to see," she said when Charlie opened the door. "A good thing, I hope, Viktor?" She held back a grimace at the nasty taste on the back of her tongue and switched her breathing pattern. *In through the nose, out through the mouth...*

"I think it is good." Viktor smiled. "I do not know yet what you will think."

He brought his hand out of his pocket and crushed the tiny glass ball it contained.

Hermione screamed.

"How does that feel?" Aletha asked, taking her hands away. "Any discomfort, any pain at all?"

"No, and... wow." Ron turned his head back and forth, blinking rapidly. "I didn't know if that would work, but it really—what was that?"

"What was what?" Aletha frowned. "I don't hear anything."

"It wasn't hearing. Not exactly. More like—" Ron froze. "I have to go," he said, scooping his

pendants out of his robes and moving unerringly to the window. "There's trouble at the Den. Something's gone wrong."

"At the Den? How do you know?"

"Because it's Hermione." Ron flung the window open. "I have to get to her. I promised her that this wouldn't happen again. That I wouldn't leave her alone again." He turned back, his face set in determined lines. "I promised."

"Hold still, then." Aletha crossed the room in three strides, only now starting to feel the burn of the heat through her pendant chain. *He must get it first because they've been so interlinked these past few months.* "Let me make sure this won't fail on you halfway there."

Laying a hand against Ron's face, she solidified the experimental work she'd done, binding it off and informing his body that this was the way it would conduct normal business from now on. "There. That should hold. Go, we'll be right behind you."

"Thanks." Ron backed up two steps, ran at the window, and dived headfirst out of it.

"I am never going to get used to that," Aletha muttered, and bolted for the door, snapping the Imperturbable Charm off it as she yanked it open. "Molly! Boys! Trouble at the Den, we need your help!"

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Facing Danger

Chapter 60: Old Truths, New Beginnings (Year 6)

Hermione's breath sobbed in her chest as she scrambled blindly across the floor of the Den's music room. Her thoughts, already fragmented from her belated identification of the scent which had haunted seven months' nightmares, refused to coalesce, instead shattering and warping more with every passing second.

Him, it was him, he's come back, I always knew he would...

Charlie, I saw him fall before the lights went out, is he all right...

Why can't I remember what I ought to do next...

Hands snatched at her shoulders, and she screamed again, twisting against the frantic grip.

"Be quiet!" a deep voice ordered, and one hand released her shoulder to cover her mouth. "I must know, you will tell me—"

Hermione whipped her head to one side and forward, sinking her teeth into the fingers thus exposed. The vicious, guttural curse which resulted made her hiss in satisfaction, and she lashed forward with a foot as a follow-up.

"Enough!" Her attacker yanked his hand free of her and shoved her to the floor, pinning her down and covering her mouth with the sleeve of his robes. "For what did you want these books? Tell me and I will let you go, but you must promise to stop fighting me—"

"Never," Hermione gasped out as he moved his arm to let her answer. "You—lie—"

"Not to you! Never to you!" In his agitation, her attacker lifted some of his weight from her. "I never meant to hurt you, Hermy-own-ninny, but it is my *life* at stake, I *must* know what you plan to do with—"

Hermione snarled and jerked one hand free, clawing upwards towards the source of the voice. It broke off in a bellow of pain as warm wetness blossomed on her fingertips, and the copper-iron tang of blood filled the air.

Blood. Yes. Her lips peeled back from her teeth, and her breath came in short pants. Blood is good. His blood is good. For what he did, for what he wanted to do, he should bleed and bleed and bleed...

Her hand slid down her side, found what it sought, grasped it tightly, prepared to pull it free—

"No!" shouted a new voice, and the pressure on her chest and legs vanished. Her attacker's panicked yell blended with a loud crash at the other end of the room and her frustrated growl as her upward stab swished through empty air.

"Easy now, Neenie." It was the new voice again, and a new scent to go with it, the scent of one who chased nightmares away and stood between her and fear. "I'm here. He won't hurt you anymore—though it looks like you did more hurting this time!" A thump sounded on the floor beside her, and a rough-skinned hand touched her forehead lightly, then slid down her arm. "Put this away for me? I'll make sure you don't need it."

"Mmm-hmm." Hermione allowed the hand to guide hers, still clutched around her dagger, back towards its sheath. "My head... feels funny. Can't think right."

"Let me try something." The hand withdrew, and Hermione whimpered and reached out for it. "Oh, sorry—" It, or its mate, closed around hers once more, and she relaxed with a sigh. "I'm not leaving, I just needed my wand. Hold still a second, let me see if this works—*Ennervate* —"

Hermione sucked air between her teeth, her mind clearing in a rush. "You keep saving me, Ron," she said, trying for a light tone to counteract the shakiness she could still feel in her voice. "A couple more times and I'll start thinking you like me or something."

Ron laughed. "Or something. You're not hurt? He didn't touch you?"

"Just tripped me up and landed on me." Hermione rolled her shoulders, wincing. "I'll have bruises tomorrow. Is Charlie all right? I saw him fall—"

"Knocked out is all. What'd you do, touch the antidote patch on your potion piece?"

"Yes, exactly, but it must not be the same mix we use, so it didn't give me total protection. But that's still more than I had last time—Ron, I know now, I know who it was in January." She started to sit up, and his arm slid into place at just the right height behind her to support her efforts. "It was Viktor, that's why I've been so frightened of contacting him, why I kept putting it off and coming up with excuses why I shouldn't do it yet, because I knew that when I did he would try again..."

Ron's arms tightened around her. "He did try, and you gave his arse a professional kicking. And that's after half a dose of whatever knockout potion he used on Charlie, and—is it dark in here too? Did he do something to the lights? I can't tell."

Hermione felt a hysterical giggle mounting to her lips and throttled it back. "Yes, it's dark. He couldn't have known he was leveling the playing field for you, could he?"

"Well, I wouldn't say leveling, exactly." One of Ron's arms pulled away from her, and she felt the slight breeze of a waved wand. "Tell me if it's better."

"No... wait, yes." The darkness began to lighten as Ron continued whatever he was doing, until she could dimly see the outlines of the Den's familiar furniture, Charlie's slumped figure near the French door, the slope of Ron's shoulder and back beneath her chin. "How did you know—"

"Just a hunch," Ron said without stopping his wand's three-sided pattern. "It's Fred and George's

Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. They taught me the backdoor charm they built into it in case any of it got to the Death Eaters. Let me know when it's all gone, will you?"

"Of course." Hermione settled herself into the crook of Ron's arm, sitting on one hip and watching his wand move so that she would know the countercharm for the next time. *Not that I want there to be a next time, but the world doesn't work on what I want.*

She frowned. Was she imagining it, or were Ron's eyes focused on his wand more intently than Meghan's cosmetic repairs could account for?

He just said he can't tell if it's dark or light, she scolded herself silently. And you just said that the world doesn't do what you want it to. Be thankful for what you have and don't go expecting miracles!

But I'd love to know how he got here so fast...

"It's gone now," she said when Ron's and Charlie's hair had regained the usual shade of Weasley red and the rest of the Den's colors had settled into their proper places. "Ron, you didn't come by yourself, did you? I mean, did anyone bring you, or..."

"Mrs. Letha's coming on behind me." Ron grinned for a second. "Professor Black, I suppose I should say now. She'll probably have roused Mum and whoever else was home—I know the twins were there, Percy may've been as well—but I came ahead because—"

A groan from the other end of the room interrupted him and sent a chill down Hermione's spine. Deliberately, she flicked her right wrist and tightened her grip on the wand that appeared in her hand. *You won't catch me off guard again, Viktor. It's my turn to have the power now, and I want some answers from you...*

"We'll go together," Ron said quietly beside her. "I won't let him hurt you." He paused, and Hermione watched his eyes travel over her. "Or the other way around, either."

Then you can see—but how—

She swallowed her questions. They would keep. The young man with bloody streaks across his face, now feebly stirring in the wreckage of one of Danger's bookcases, would not.

Ron got to his feet and held his hand down for her. She accepted it, and he pulled her to her feet, then released her, leaving her wand hand free to cast. Side by side, they advanced on Viktor, whose eyes were starting to flutter open.

"*Expelliarmus*," Hermione said coldly, thrusting her wand forward. Viktor jerked, and his wand soared free from its place in his robes. Ron snagged it out of the air and pocketed it, pulling his hand away quickly as if the wand were covered with slime or dung. "Thanks." She swallowed again, trying to keep her gorge from rising as Viktor's scent hit her, but that only made her more aware of the terror-fueled animal rage beating at the back of her mind. *Kill—kill—predator,*

enemy, kill it before it strikes again—

"Want me to start?" Ron murmured.

"Please." Hermione shivered. "I don't know what's wrong with me—"

"If you don't, I do." She had seldom heard Ron's voice so cold. "Here, up you get. You'll feel better that way." He patted the back of his neck. "Less temptation to use any other spell on him, too, and if I start to, you can stop me."

"You wouldn't." She slid her wand away and set her hands on his shoulder. "Not even for this."

"Doesn't mean I don't want to," he muttered, the words changing shape in her ears as she changed her own shape and leapt to her usual perch. "There, that's better." A hand reached up, stroked her ears, and pulled out the pendant chain for her head. **Just for talking**, he told her before she could open her eyes to him. **I'll tell you about it later...**

Neenie nodded, her ear brushing against his, and settled her weight more firmly into its place as Ron seated himself on the floor.

"I used to look up to you, you know," he said conversationally to Viktor, keeping his wand at the ready but not quite pointed at the older wizard. "International Quidditch star and all that. But anyone who would do what you did to Hermione—"

"I vos trying to help her," Viktor said sullenly, pushing himself into a semi-seated position. "If it is this past vinter you mean, ven she and the other girls vere taken. Vot happened today comes out of that day—if it had gone differently, this day would never haff happened—"

"No, because she would've been a bloody werewolf!" Ron snapped. "And you stood by and let them do whatever they damn well pleased—"

"I tell you I vos trying to help!" Viktor blotted at his face with his sleeve, scowling when it came away bloody. "My actions—perhaps vere not the best—"

"Perhaps?" Ron gripped his wand a little tighter. "You *hurt* her. You made her afraid of people she should have been able to trust. Mind telling me how the hell that was supposed to help anything?"

"Because it would haff giffen me a claim!" Viktor's hands were curled shut tightly enough that Neenie wouldn't have been surprised to see blood seeping from his palms. "You do not understand how the Death Eaters vork—anyvon not of their ranks is property, nothing more—the only vay I could help Hermy-own-ninny vos to haff a prior claim, von vich came before she had been made a verevolf—"

"Shut up." Ron's cold voice cut across Viktor's rising hysteria like a slap in the face. "The only way you could help her, was it? Never thought of letting *us* know? Sneaking away and setting off the wards, giving us a clue what was happening outside? But no, that wouldn't have got you what you wanted, and that's what you cared about, isn't it? Getting what you wanted, never mind the rest

of it. Never mind my sister, or her sister, or our friend, who were all going to be turned along with her. Never mind our other friend who *died* that night. As long as you got your *claim* in early enough, you were fine with the rest of it, weren't you?"

"No!" It was almost a sob. "I neffer wanted to be of the Death Eaters, but they giff me no choice, they threaten my family, my teammates, they say Karkaroff's training of me must not be vasted—I do not belieff as they do, I neffer did, but they say to me, they say, if I do not practice my English and charm Hermy-own-ninny vonce again, if I do not find out vy she wants these books from me, they vill break my hands, break them beyond Healing, and I vill neffer Seek again..." He turned his head away, his shoulders heaving.

Boo-hoo-hoo, regular sob story, Ron grumbled mentally. I'm still not sorry for him. Not after what he did to you.

Maybe not, Neenie said slowly, breathing in short pants with her mouth open, tasting the changes in Viktor's scent. But I think this is what I needed, Ron. I needed to see that my monster was human, and that he could be defeated. That I could defeat him myself.

Yes, speaking of which...

"You want to talk about never Seeking again, it's lucky I came in when I did," Ron said aloud, making Viktor look up at him quizzically. "You do realize what would've happened if I'd been five seconds later?"

Viktor shook his head. Ron gave him a pitying look. "And you were there in January, too. You saw what she did to Greyback. Do you think it was just a coincidence she had a silver dagger on her that night? That it came out of nowhere when she needed it, and disappeared again when she was done?"

"I..." Understanding was beginning to dawn in Viktor's eyes, followed by a healthy dose of fear as he glanced from Ron to Neenie, who busied herself washing a paw to hide her agitation. "I had thought she conjured it from her need, that it vos a veapon of desperation..."

"Oh, it's that all right." Ron held up a finger and thumb, six inches apart. "About that much desperation, in goblin-wrought silver. And she had it in her hand when I came through that door. If I hadn't Banished you off her when I did, she'd've had it in your throat or between your ribs, and nobody'd have doubted for a second she was defending herself, because she was. So isn't there something you ought to be saying about now?"

"My life is yours," Viktor said indistinctly, staring at the floor. "Vot there vill be left of it ven they find out I haff failed."

"Would you *stop* that." Ron scooped up one of the fallen books from the bookcase and flung it at Viktor, hitting him in the chest. Viktor grunted indignantly and looked up. "You're not Marked, are you? They can't trace you by that?"

"The Mark is only for the inner circle, the most willing and trusted. I vos neither." Viktor blinked at Ron. "Vy do you ask?"

"Because the world isn't made up of England and Bulgaria," said Ron, Neenie giving him a short burst of purring as she caught his drift mentally. "There's plenty of other places you could go, places you could hide out until the war's over. We'll help you get a message back to your family, warn them to go into hiding themselves or tell them where you're going so they can join you, and let your teammates know they'll need extra security for a while..."

"You would giff me that sort of chance?" Viktor rubbed his bitten fingers. "After vot I did to Hermy—to *Hermione*?"

Let me take this one, Neenie said, slipping down from Ron's shoulders.

If you're sure...

I am.

Ron reclaimed his pendant chain, and Hermione retransformed, raising her head to look Viktor in the eye without—

Not without fear, not quite, but without that awful, gut-wrenching stuff I was having earlier.

Maybe because now I understand better.

"I don't know what I would do if someone threatened the people I love," she said, seating herself beside Ron. "I don't like to think about it even. It's been too close recently. What I suppose I'm trying to say is, Viktor, we were friends once, and you didn't do any of this because you wanted to hurt me, so I don't want to hurt you either. I just want you to go away. Please." Her voice cracked, and she clamped down on it angrily. "Go far, far away from here. Find a safe place, if there are any left. Play Quidditch, found a training academy, do whatever you want to do. Just go away, and don't come back." She let a bit of her remaining fear, and the anger it fueled, seep into her voice for her final word. "*Ever.*"

"I vill not. And..." Viktor hesitated, watching her from the corner of his eye. "For vot it is vorth, Hermione. I am sorry."

"Not worth much," Ron murmured loud enough to be heard, and drew his wand as Viktor started to get up. "Hold it. I didn't say we were done."

"But—"

"I've got a little present of my own for you." Ron got to his feet smoothly, drawing Hermione up with him. "Now I'll just point out I'm being kind to you, doing this myself. She's got brothers, and they're a lot meaner than I am. She's also got fathers, and they taught the brothers everything they know about mean. And let's not even bring up the mothers, or her little sister, and mine, and their friend, who were there that night and saw what you did to her..."

The sheer panic on Viktor's face laid the last lingering ghost of Hermione's fear. It simply wasn't possible to be afraid of someone who looked so terrified himself.

"We discussed it a lot, my mates and I." Ron twirled his wand between his fingers. "What would be right for the bloke who would do what you did to our Neenie. Some of the suggestions were nastier than others, but this is the one I always liked the best. Sort of poetic, but practical too." He grinned. "*Retexo calui!*"

A burst of white light shot from the tip of his wand and englobed Viktor, then vanished. Viktor blinked several times and shook himself, grimacing as he shifted his hips. "Vot does—"

"Ah-ah." Ron wagged a finger. "You'll have to find out for yourself. Now, out." The finger indicated the French door, by which, Hermione saw with some surprise, Charlie was no longer lying. "You'll get your wand back once you're past the wards."

Viktor rose with as much dignity as was left to him, straightened his robes, and crossed the room, Ron and Hermione turning as a pair to keep him in sight. At the French door, he paused as though he wanted to say something, but Ron's wand was unwavering, and Hermione's last sight of Viktor Krum was of his upright back as he stepped through the door and walked away.

Ron stepped up to the door, watching for a few moments, then pulled Viktor's wand from his pocket with his left hand and Banished it after its owner. "And... there he goes. Good riddance."

"You *can* see again, can't you?" Hermione burst out, no longer able to contain herself. "Letha did something, she found a way to lift the curse, or work around it—"

"Work around, not lift." Ron turned back to her and looked at her, long and hard, his eyes moving up and down her figure appreciatively. "It's complicated, you'll probably understand it better than I do, but the upshot of it is, yeah, basically I can see again." He tossed his wand into the air and caught it. "Be back playing Quidditch in the fall, even."

"You'll need to be sure you're fit, then," Hermione said, fighting to keep her tone even so as not to give away what she was about to do.

"Suppose so." Ron's expression turned wary. "Why?"

"I think we should test your fitness." Hermione's smile would no longer be denied. "Your reaction time, and hand-eye coordination."

Ron tucked his wand away. "Sounds good." He set his feet shoulder-width apart and braced. "Say when."

"When," Hermione squeaked on a bubble of laughter, and sprinted across the room to throw herself at him. "Ron, oh, Ron, I'm so glad!"

"That's funny, me, too." Ron scooped her off her feet and spun her in a circle, laughing with her. "You weren't expecting to have to be my eyes forever, were you?"

"I would've if I'd had to, but I'm just as happy I don't." Hermione kissed him lightly on the lips as he set her back on her feet. "So how did she do it? And why did you say you couldn't tell if the room was dark? I'd think if you could see even a little bit, you'd have been able to see the room was dark—Viktor must have had a personal light spell to see through it—"

"Can we forget Viktor for a little while?" Ron dropped onto the couch where Hermione had been sitting earlier. "And I said I couldn't tell if the room was dark because I couldn't. Still can't. It's to do with what I'm seeing now, and what I'm not, and that goes straight into how Professor Black fixed me up."

Hermione sat down beside him. "I'm all ears."

"The point of it all is what Dolohov intended his spell to do when he threw it at me," Ron began, running his wand through his fingers. "He intended me to never see light anymore, and he's one bloody talented wizard, so I don't see light anymore. That's why I didn't know the room was dark. But—here's the part you'll probably understand better than I did—Professor Black says light has... cousins, sort of, things that aren't quite light but act a lot like it. One's up high, it's what makes you get a sunburn, and the other one's down low and either related to heat or it *is* heat. I didn't quite catch that part."

"Ultraviolet and infrared." Hermione started to grin. "And because they're not exactly light the way Dolohov would think about it, Letha could make you able to see them, couldn't she?"

"Just the low-down one, the one that's heat." Ron held out his hand and regarded it. "Still can't see colors, but like you said, that just means I'll never have to bother about Mum getting me maroon everything. And I can see in the dark now, because it's not dark to me. I spotted Charlie through the window as soon as I'd landed, he was still good and bright so I knew he was alive, and then I saw you with Krum on top of you, going after that dagger—"

"Yes, thank you for that." Hermione shuddered briefly. "I don't need any more nightmares than I already have."

"I've got your back. You know that." Ron slid an arm around her. "Really we've got each other's at this point, with all the saving back and forth we've been doing. What's it stand at now?"

"Let's not keep score," Hermione murmured, laying her head on Ron's shoulder. "Except to say we both win."

"Works for me." Ron bent down towards her, the scent of him finally at peace with himself eddying around her and relaxing her more fully than she had dreamed possible an hour ago.

"You could probably learn to see if people are telling the truth," she murmured when her lips were free again. "Harry and Draco and I can smell it on people, when they're nervous and trying to trick us, but we aren't always close enough to get the scent. You could learn what the heat-patterns for nervousness and lying look like and do it from across a room, couldn't you?"

"We'll have to try it and see." He ran a hand through her hair. "Later."

"They get five more minutes in there," Molly said, her severe tone at odds with the fond smile on her face. "Just five more minutes, and then I want them out."

"You just want to fuss over Ron, don't you, Mum?" Fred asked.

"Of course not, don't be silly." Molly went to one knee, gazing anxiously at Charlie, who was sipping from a cup of potion Aletha had provided. "Are you feeling better, dear?"

"Headache's almost gone," Charlie reported. "Still not happy I missed what Krum was up to, but I won't be caught that way again."

"Here's hoping he kept the grenade idea, and the Peruvian Darkness Powder, to himself." George was looking in the direction of the village, his hand hovering near the grip of his wand. "And didn't decide to go play any tricks on his way out."

"Play tricks?" Fred scoffed. "He'll be too busy trying to figure out what Ronniekins did to his precious man-parts. One of the neater spells I've seen, if I do say so myself."

Charlie looked up from his potion. "Did you help him find it, then?"

"We did." George chuckled. "And assisted also in the tweaking to make the punishment fit the crime."

"What's it do?" Charlie swigged the last of the potion and handed the cup back to Aletha, who Vanished it neatly.

"Reverses the physical signs of interest." Fred was about to make a demonstrative gesture, realized his mother was standing three feet from him, and contented himself with a simple swirl of the hand. "If the lady is lovely, he will be, shall we say, stricken with performance anxiety."

"But should he see someone whose charms are a bit lacking," George took over, "his anxiety will be of a different sort entirely."

"That of a man who has a wand in his pocket, perchance?" Aletha asked dryly, as Molly turned away to hide what was definitely a blush and might also have been a stifled laugh.

"You have guessed it." George bowed to her. "And the more extreme the attraction, or un-attraction—if that's even a word—"

"The more extreme the reversal of the reaction," Fred finished.

"Fascinating." Aletha regarded the spot where Viktor Krum had vanished. "I'd like a copy of your work, if you don't mind. It might have some bearing on a problem I'm investigating on my own."

"As soon as we get back to the shop, it's yours," George promised.

Peter sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the broad band of gold on his finger.

Why did I agree to this again?

To make Evanie happy, yes, of course I want to do that, when she's happy she makes everything cheerful around here... to make sure I can keep her safe, of course I wanted to do that too, and everyone knows it's bad luck to wear a wedding ring if you haven't taken the vows... not to mention that no magic contained in one will work unless you've said the words together...

But still. A month ago, I didn't know she existed, and now I've married her. Am I mad, or is she?

Or are we both just making the best of a bad situation?

He sighed. *Whatever it is, it's a marriage in words only. That's all it can be. No matter what she says about... caring for me, I won't force anything on her she doesn't want.* A snort of half-rueful laughter escaped him. *As if I even knew how, except in theory!*

The bathroom door creaked, and Peter quickly climbed over the barrier in the center of the bed so as to leave Evanie's side free for her. "Ready for lights-out?" he asked, surprised by how easily a smile came to him. *She really is quite pretty—not for all tastes, maybe, but just to mine...*

"Not quite." Evanie sat down where Peter had been sitting himself a few moments before. "There's one thing I want you to do first."

"What's that?"

Evanie drew a deep breath and set her hand on the barrier. "Take this down," she said softly. "It's time for us both to stop being afraid."

Peter started to object, to point out all the problems, to ask if she was sure.

Then he looked into her eyes.

"All right," he said a bit hoarsely, and drew his wand down the length of the barrier.

Much later, with Evanie's head resting against his shoulder, Peter slipped into sleep and awakened, or dreamed he awakened, to see three women dressed in blue sitting beside his bed. All three smiled at him and pressed a finger to their lips, cautioning silence.

"All sins are forgivable when they are truly repented," the first one said, brushing back her blonde hair.

"Gold is worth more than silver as long as it is true," said the second, her brown hair falling over her shoulders.

"No child is truly a mistake, even when one is an accident." The third winked at him, the embers of the fire highlighting the ruddy glow of her hair.

"Bear these truths in mind," they said together, and vanished as Peter startled awake.

"Mmm," Evanie said sleepily beside him. "All right, love?"

"I... yes." Peter laid his hand against her skin, marveling again at the impossible gifts this night had brought him. "Yes. I'm just fine." Her heart beat under his palm, slow and soft but picking up speed to his touch. "Love."

What a very strange dream...

I really should say no to this. Aletha studied the small, nervous faces in front of her, Dobby putting on a brave front, Winky openly twisting her apron, and Echo and Cissus standing in front of their parents, holding hands. *What with my private project for Remus and Danger that the spell Ron cast on Krum may help me with, my last week of preparing for teaching Potions to seven years of Hogwarts students, and helping everyone except the Pack and the Pritchards move out of Headquarters, I have enough on my plate already...*

But then again, how can I say no to this?

"Let me make sure I have this straight," she said, sitting down on the floor to bring herself more on a level with the house-elves. "House-elflets mature at the rate of one month to a human year because of long-standing magic on the race. Without it, you two would grow up much more slowly—still faster than humans, since we're larger than you are, but only about half again as fast, approximately three years to our two. Does that sound right?"

All four house-elves nodded, the elflets more fervently than the adults.

"It certainly makes sense, and if you'll let me check it for myself?" Aletha extended a hand towards the twins, but looked at Dobby and Winky.

"We is..." Winky clutched her apron tight and went on at Dobby's approving nod. "We is giving our permission, Miss Letha. You is allowed."

"Good work, Winky!" Dobby congratulated his wife as Aletha blinked her eyes into her Healing-Sight. "Echo and Cissus will be learning the right way for free elves to speak from their mother soon along with their father!"

Aletha lost most of Winky's somewhat scornful answer in her exploration of the intricacies of the magic she could see glowing around and inside the elflets. *They were right—it is a spell. But what*

a spell! Whoever set it was a master, and—yes, there—apparently not an evil-minded master, since he appears to have left a fairly simple mechanism for what Cissus is asking me. Now to make sure there are no subtle booby traps involved...

It took her a few minutes, but eventually Aletha satisfied herself and returned to full awareness of the world around her. She coughed, breaking up the nearly ultrasonic argument between Dobby and Winky, to which both elflets were listening wide-eyed. "Good news, not bad," she said, leaning back on her hands. "What Cissus would like to do shouldn't hurt him at all, and I can do it easily. But I do have to ask." She turned to the little male house-elf. "Why?"

Cissus blushed dark green. "For Bernie," he said indistinctly, staring at the floor.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"It's for Bernie." Cissus looked up, his eyes wider than usual and his hands closed around the hem of his shirt. "She's all by herself except for us, and we're already growing up past her. If I stop growing so fast and just grow a little bit fast, I can stay her friend for a longer time, until it's safe for her to go home and have human friends again."

"And I wants to—*want* to," Echo corrected herself, hiding a smile behind her hand, "stay growing up fast so I'll be ready for Miss Ginny when she and Master Harry will get married. They will need a very good house-elf, because Miss Ginny will still be in school when she has her first baby, and Daddy and Mummy both say that human babies need a *lot* of taking care of."

"That they certainly do." Aletha arched her shoulders, stretching. "Well, I can't say you're rushing into this, any of you. You've obviously given it a great deal of thought. I do just want to point out, I'm not at all sure I could replicate this spell, and it might be harmful to you, Cissus, if I were to try. Once it comes off you, it's off for good."

"I know, Miss Letha." Cissus glanced back at his parents. "Mummy and Daddy say it's okay if I stay little for longer."

Want to keep your baby a baby for as long as you can, don't you? Aletha exchanged a look of purest sympathy with Winky. *Human mothers know that one too—and that's one set of emotions that have joined up a bit better than I might have wanted them to, thank you very much...*

"All right, then," she said aloud. "If you're ready, we should be able to do this right now, and then if you two would like to see a real human baby up close, we can go out to the Den. One of my cubs' friends brought her little boy to visit there..."

"He's so tiny," said Ginny in wonder, studying the bundle in Hermione's arms. "And I'm so unoriginal, aren't I? Everyone must say that."

Selena chuckled. "Yes, they do, but given how he arrived, I'm just as glad he wasn't bigger."

Ginny winced in sympathy, as did the other Pride-girls gathered around Hermione. "Yes. How was that?"

"Awful," Selena said bluntly. "While it was happening, I was ready to swear up, down, and sideways I'd never let Roger come near me again. But when it was over..." She reached out to stroke her son's face. "I wondered why we hadn't done it sooner."

"Oh, don't cry," Hermione said, swaying back and forth in her seat as little Zachary Cedric Davies wrinkled his face in preparation for a fuss. "What's the matter, hmm? Are you hungry, or tired, or —"

"His tummy hurts," said Meghan in a tone of certainty. "May I?"

"Please." Selena looked down the room at the Pride-boys, who had withdrawn in a group at the advent of this small and unsettling being. "If he starts crying, we'll never get them over here."

Meghan reached over and touched Zach's forehead, and the wrinkles in the small red face smoothed themselves out. Hermione sighed in contentment and cuddled the baby closer. "Your turn next," she assured Ginny, who was watching her jealously. "I know you need the practice."

"He will be the cause of many changes," Luna murmured, her eyes unfocused in Zach's direction as the boys began to drift down the room, Harry in a tentative lead. "Some intentional, some painful. Some both, and some neither. Be prepared for all, and fear nothing."

Be prepared for all, and fear nothing.

Great advice. Wish I could follow it.

Harry Potter couldn't sleep.

It wasn't the knowledge that his dream career of Auror, with the substitution of Letha for Professor Snape in the Potions position at Hogwarts, was suddenly back within reach, though the accompanying and disquieting thoughts regarding Snape's new position at Hogwarts weren't helping.

Given that I know he'll be there this year since Professor Dumbledore told me I'm back on Occlumency lessons with him, and given that there's only one slot consistently open and Snape's always wanted it more than he does Potions...

But Harry thought he'd have been able to get to sleep even with the specter of Snape as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor hovering over his head. Likewise, Ron's restoration to full functioning was a cause for celebration rather than loss of sleep. And the naming of this year's Gryffindor Quidditch captain...

I would've liked it, but McGonagall's right. The DA will keep me busy enough, and I'm the only one

who can run that. And since they don't want to give any one student too much to do, they tend to name someone who isn't a prefect as Quidditch captain, so since Ginny was named a prefect for her year, that really does leave only one candidate.

The look on Draco's face when McGonagall presented him with the golden C had been marvelous, and Harry had worked for nearly an hour in front of the mirror until he was sure he had it down for the first Quidditch victory party of the year. It would, he thought, be only appropriate.

But none of that should be stopping me sleeping. So what is?

Eventually he surrendered to the inevitable and got up, putting on his glasses to survey the dimly lit bedroom. Ron was sprawled on his stomach, arms lolling over either side of the bed, drooling onto his pillow. Draco slept in his usual neat curl, eyes darting back and forth behind closed lids. Neville rolled over as Harry watched, mumbling something in which only the word "shrivelfig" was audible.

It's them. Or not them exactly, but something related to them.

Restless and anxious to find his answer, Harry wandered out the door and down the silent corridors, ascending and descending stairs as his legs saw fit, until he found himself at the half-open door of the Pride-girls' bedroom.

If they didn't want anyone looking in on them, they'd close it.

He poked his head inside.

Meghan had her cuddly lion tucked neatly under one arm, but that was the only neat thing about her; the rest of her surroundings looked like they had been hit by a small Bed-Linens Bomb. Luna lay quietly on her side, one arm flung over her eyes, as though even in sleep she saw things she didn't want to see. Hermione, much to Harry's silent amusement, had her thumb in her mouth. Ginny, like her brother, slept on her stomach, but unlike Ron, there was no sign of drool.

Though maybe it's not the best idea for me to be peeking at Ginny while she's sleeping. I know Mrs. Weasley wouldn't like it, and neither would Letha or Danger...

Feeling virtuous, Harry pulled his head back out of the girls' room.

Danger stood in the corridor beside him, wearing a dressing gown and an inquisitive look.

Harry got his mouth shut over his yell of surprise just in time.

"Couldn't sleep, Greeneyes?" Danger asked, and at Harry's headshake chuckled under her breath. "Neither can I. Why don't we go sit together in the drawing room."

"All right." Harry padded after Danger, letting his experiences and thoughts add themselves together in his head. "It still feels weird to have to look down at you," he said as they turned into the room where the restored Black Family Tree hung in state.

"No weirder than it is for me to look up at you." Danger sat down in one of the armchairs and sighed. "Growing pains, love?"

Harry started to deny it, then stopped to think. "Maybe," he said after a moment. "I held Selena's baby when she brought him to the Den the other day. He's so little, but he's already changed so many people's lives. I was a baby like that once. And in another two years, I'm going to *have* a baby like that."

"Frightening, isn't it?" Danger's arms rose, as though she were cradling an infant at this very moment. "No one's ever ready, from what I understand. No matter how much you want a child or how long you've waited, it's still a surprise when that little bundle lands in your arms and you look down and think: 'Wait, I made that? I don't know how to make things like that. Are you sure it's mine?'"

The half-panicked look on Danger's face drew a quiet laugh from Harry, and in its wake his thoughts coalesced. "I think that about the Pride sometimes," he said, watching Danger tuck her feet up under her. "'Are you sure it's mine? Can't somebody else lead it?' And about the DA. 'Shouldn't a grown-up be doing this? Why are they letting me take the lead? Don't they know how often I b—er, mess things up?'"

"You do have something of a talent for bugging up," Danger agreed calmly, grinning as Harry choked. "I have heard the word, you know, Harry. I've even used it a time or two, when it's called for. But the thing about your talent is, it's quite time-specific, and so far it's always gone offline when things start getting—thank heaven your godfather isn't here, and don't you dare start making puns—but when things start getting serious."

"But how do I know that'll last?" Harry objected, poking at the upholstery of his own armchair. "How do I know it won't come back online at the wrong moment and make everything worse?"

"You don't. Know, that is. It's a matter of trust." Danger came across the room to sit on the arm of Harry's chair. "We all trust you, Harry. Pack, Pride, Order, DA, we trust you. Do you think you can trust yourself?"

"I can try." Harry twisted at a bit of the upholstery. "What happens if I fail?"

"You try again. And again. And again, until you get it right." Danger stroked his hair. "That may sound familiar."

"Just a little." Harry abandoned the upholstery and laid his head against Danger's side. "I'm scared, Danger," he said indistinctly into her dressing gown. "I don't think I can do this."

"I know you don't, but consider where you are while you're saying this." Danger pulled back enough to look Harry in the eye. "You're at the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix, a building we know has already been somewhat compromised, about to head off to Hogwarts, which is even more so. You didn't ask to go to one of the new secondary bases, and unless that was someone else I saw with Ron, Hermione, Draco, and Neville looking over five sets of O.W.L.

results this afternoon, you haven't decided to skip your sixth year of school. You're scared, but you're still going forward. Do you know what that makes you?"

"Stupid?" Harry suggested.

"In some senses." Danger smacked him lightly on the back of the head. "But I was thinking brave. Harry, you know us. You know we don't lie to you. Would you like to hear what I see when I look at you?"

Harry nodded, his vocal cords having temporarily tied themselves in a knot.

"I see a young man I am incredibly proud to have helped raise." Danger's voice wavered, but her smile never did. "A young man who will take on a burden too big for anyone to carry alone, simply because if he doesn't, people will be hurt. I see a young man I love with all my heart, and whom I will help to the utmost of my ability, as will a great many other people. And..." She brushed her fingers across her cheek and laid them on his. "A young man who will, in the end, surpass us all in what he can and what he will do."

"I don't see that," Harry whispered.

"I know." Danger lowered her hand to clasp his. "Will you believe that I do, and let that be enough for tonight?"

Harry regarded the handclasp for a long moment, his own longer, sun-browned fingers wrapped around Danger's slenderer, paler ones. "All right," he said finally. "For tonight, it's enough."

"Then I'll tell you the last secret of growing up." Danger squeezed his hand. "When you have enough for tonight, you have all you'll ever need."

"Can I get that in writing?" Harry muttered, and Danger laughed.

Hand in hand, mother and son climbed the stairs towards their bedrooms. At the door of Harry's, they stopped, and Danger went to her tiptoes to kiss Harry on the forehead, over the line of his scar, as she had done when he was a baby. "Sleep well, Harrykins," she said, giving him a brief, hard hug. "Tomorrow we start all over again."

Tomorrow we start all over again. At least it isn't from scratch.

Harry watched his Pack-mother out of sight, then headed for his own bed and burrowed under the sheets.

Tonight, I'll sleep, and that's enough. Tomorrow will take care of itself.

A hand emerged from the tangle of linens, holding a pair of round-framed glasses, which it set carefully on the nightstand.

It always does.

THE END

(for now)