

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Waiting Game**

Two women stood side by side on a parapet, gazing out at a star-speckled landscape. The taller had a long fall of black hair pulled into a severe tail at the nape of her neck, while her companion's fiery locks streamed unconfined over her shoulders. She twisted a coppery hank between her fingers restlessly, turning her head every so often to listen to small stirrings within the room behind them.

"Do you think we should have left her behind?" the dark lady asked after a long silence.

"Of course not. We're sworn to save lives, save individualities, where we can, and hers was the only one left to save. I just can't help wondering how well she'll do on her own. Solo work wasn't exactly a feature in her training."

"Neither was it in either of ours, and we turned out well enough." The statement carried neither pride nor humility, merely an acceptance of a long-established truth. "She'll either succeed or she won't. We'll give her what help we can, but in the end it's up to her."

"I know, I know." A long sigh. "I'm still not ruthless enough, am I?"

"You may never be, but I make up for that." The dark lady's smile was sweet, serene, and would have sent any sane person running in the opposite direction as fast as possible. "It's why we make such good partners. She'll either adapt to solo work or she'll find a good partner of her own."

"Or she'll die."

"Yes. Or she'll die." The dark lady leaned against the stone merlon in front of her, leaning over its edge to peer into the depths of the starry night. "We both know there are worse fates."

Her companion drew a breath to answer, then let it out in a sigh and hurried inside in response to a larger stirring than before.

The dark lady remained where she was, listening to her partner's soothing tones smoothing away the sharp fear in the voice of the girl they'd saved from the wreckage of her world. She'd been where that girl was, once. All Legendbreakers had.

Each recruit to their ranks faced the same choice: crumble under the burden of finding oneself the sole survivor of disaster beyond imagination, or use the pain, the terror, the anguish and rage to

fight back. Be one of those who broke, or become oneself a breaker of the patterns.

This girl seemed likely to take the second path.

*And who knows what she may find if she does? The most surprising things survive in this story-filled cosmos of ours...*

---

The tricolored cat scrambled to the back of the couch, putting herself safely out of range of the shrieking, laughing missile that was a fourteen-month-old Harry Potter mounted on his miniature broomstick. Curling up in pretended disdain, she began to wash her side.

*The hardest part of all of this has been the waiting. Though it isn't exactly easy to see some of the people I love most in the world, the people I would have died for—the people I wish I could have died for—*

*She nipped herself on the paw, self-censoring these unhelpful thoughts. When I wish and what I would has nothing to do with what is. I'm a Legendbreaker now, which means my business is helping others, not myself. Though Miss Suzie did say something about rewards...*

*Her dark-haired mentor's calm, gentle words played inside her mind as she continued to wash her flank. "You'd be surprised what you'll find with all the stories touched by Outer Time to run around in. Most often it's something you didn't even know you were looking for, but once you find it, you wonder how you ever got along without it."*

*"Like the perfect partner to go out Breaking with." Miss Eve's more lively voice broke into the recollection, and the cat paused momentarily in her washing to glance over her shoulder at the member of this household who resembled the redheaded Legendbreaker to a striking degree. "M-Murphy knows I was only looking for revenge when I met you, not anything useful!"*

*I can't help but think she was about to say—*

*Another nip to the paw. Whether she was or she wasn't, it's not important now. What's important is that tomorrow is Halloween, and I have a job to do on Halloween. If I can prevent that accidental Horcrux from getting planted in Harry in the first place, not to mention keep his parents alive...*

*She occasionally wondered what Harry would be like if she succeeded in her plan. He looks so much like his father, and sometimes acts like him too. Will he end up just as much of a spoiled brat? Could he even become a bully, the way James was?*

*But whatever Harry might or might not become, he would be neither an orphan nor any kind of Chosen One, and that would count as her first Legendbreaking success. The goal of the Legendbreakers, after all, was not to give everyone the perfect happily ever after.*

*Since most of us don't know how to get our own, I don't know how we manage it for other people!*

Rather, the Legendbreakers fought to give as many people as possible a decent chance at making their own choices, instead of being forced into a particular path simply because "thus it is written."

*Some people will still be unhappy, but some people would be unhappy if you handed them the world on a silver platter. At least this way they're able to choose their own unhappiness, and we can honestly say we tried.*

*She sighed, curling up and letting her tail rest against her nose. So tomorrow I stop Voldemort, preferably in some way that doesn't make it too clear who and what I am, and then I go after that last Horcrux. I don't know why I've left that one so long—it's not as if it will be the hardest to get, that was the one in Gringotts, nor the hardest to destroy, that was the one from the cave, not to mention I took the extra time and trouble to save Regulus Black without anyone spotting me—*

*Her snort made James Potter look at her oddly, and she quickly began to wash her tail. Who do I think I'm fooling? I know exactly why I've left that Horcrux for last, and it's nothing to do with logistics. It's because I can't bear the thought of seeing one of the people who lives in that house, not with what I know he's doomed to become without us. Without me.*

*Why is it that we always seem to be able to save everyone except the people who matter most?*

The question had no answer. The cat had, in the process of her year-long training to become a Legendbreaker, mostly reconciled her heart to the fact that it never would.

*I'll save the ones I can, and try my best not to cry over the ones I can't.*

*But Merlin's memoirs, it hurts to think of going back to Outer Time alone...*

---

Sirius Black Apparated directly to the street on which James and Lily's cottage was located with no regard for whether or not a Muggle might see him.

*The hell with the Statute of Secrecy, my little brainstorm might just have killed my best friend and his wife, not to mention my godson. I'll personally Obliviate every Muggle on this damn island if I have to, just as long as they're safe...*

The cottage was still standing, and no Dark Mark hovered over it, but that might just mean the Death Eaters—*oh please let it be Death Eaters, don't let Lord Dark and Nasty have come himself*—weren't finished inside yet. Sirius bolted for the door, only to have it fly open before he was more than halfway up the walk. James shot outside, wand in hand, to all appearances entirely unharmed and looking as astonished as Sirius felt.

"Padfoot!"

"Prongs!"

"You're alive!" they blurted in unison.

"I was sure they'd got to you and found out about Wormtail—"

"The hell with Wormtail, he's bugged off, he must've been the spy all along—"

"He was *what*?" James blanched. "Talk about handing your wand to your enemy—"

"You're telling me!" Sirius laughed aloud, shakily. "I was sure I was going to find you all dead—"

"You would have if it hadn't been for the cat—"

"The cat?" Sirius took a step back, making sure he had a firm grip on his wand. *If Voldemort did get in and has James under Imperius, he could be talking nonsense to try to warn me...*

"Yes, the cat." Lily appeared in the doorway, pale but otherwise unshaken, holding Harry on one hip with her wand in the other hand. The little boy squealed with excitement when he saw his godfather and launched into a string of rapid-fire babble in which the word "tat" was audible multiple times. "Why don't you come inside and we can try to tell the story in order?" Lily asked over the noise, smiling fondly at her son.

Sirius hesitated for one moment, but even Voldemort himself would have had a hard time holding three people under Imperius at once, especially when two of those people were adults who did not want to be so held. And when the third one was a baby...

*Voldemort's got no idea how babies act. He'd be making Harry all stiff and unnatural. No, this is for real. Somehow, we got a miracle.*

*Apparently, it's all thanks to a cat.*

*No prejudice or anything, but this I have to hear.*

He stepped forward past James, squeezing his friend's shoulder as he went by, and scooped a happily wriggling Harry out of Lily's arms. "Did you see a pussycat?" he asked, bouncing his godson up and down. "What did the pussycat do? Other than somehow save all your lives," he added to the adult Potters.

"That's exactly what she did." James followed Sirius into the cottage and sat down on the bottom step of the stairs leading to the first floor. "Moody would have my hide for it. After all his lectures about making sure you have your wand on you at all times, I jumped up and left mine behind when His Evil Darkness came through that door. Shouting for Lily to run, that I'd hold him off..." He shook his head. "If I'm going to be that stupid, maybe I deserve to die."

Lily reached down and smacked him on the ear. "That is quite enough of that. No one is allowed to put you down except me, not even you. And you're hardly the only one around here who panicked and forgot training. Explain what Patches did instead of dwelling on what would have happened if she hadn't been there."

*Patches. Right.* Sirius vaguely remembered the Potters' cat from previous visits. The little tricolor had always seemed shy around him, which he was used to in cats. *I never thought much of it... but now I have to wonder, was she hiding from me for a reason?*

"I've never seen anything like it." James massaged behind his ears, where his glasses rested. "She ran right between Voldemort's feet and tripped him up. He fell splat on the nose he doesn't have, and Patches turns on a Knut, shoots past me up the stairs, and drops my wand beside me as she goes. Split-second timing, just as good as anything we ever managed on the Quidditch field. It was beautiful."

"Smart cat," Sirius commented. *Too smart... but what am I worried about? Whatever she was, Animagus or transfigured or just part kneazle, she's obviously on our side. Save the worry for real problems.* "Since you're here and alive, I assume you got a hold of your wand."

"Grabbed it just in time," James confirmed. "Stunned his Dark Evilness before he got his breath back, snatched his wand out of his hand, and Portkeyed him to Antarctica by his robes, and I hope he gets frostbite on his bollocks before he figures out how to get back."

"Language in front of Harry," Lily said mildly as Sirius guffawed. "I don't have much to add to that. Patches brought me my wand too, and jumped up into Harry's cot before I could stop her."

"Why would you want to stop her?" Sirius flipped Harry upside down, eliciting another series of gleeful squeals.

"We thought it was better if each of them had a place that was all theirs, where the other one couldn't go." Lily rolled her wand between her fingers, pausing for a moment as she encountered a set of fresh teeth marks on it. "She's never scratched anyone, but it wasn't worth taking the risk that Harry would be the first. He's nearly caught her a time or two on that little broomstick you gave him, and in closer encounters, he's still too young to understand that he can't pull her tail or pat her like he does you and get away with it."

Sirius held Harry at arm's length and examined him. "No scratches I can see. Did he go for the tail?"

"She didn't give him the chance." Lily's green eyes went misty as she relived the moment. "She rubbed her cheek against his, licked him on the forehead, and jumped out his window. I would have stopped her, if only to say thank you, but I think I was still in shock."

"Shock? You? What the—er, what in the world would have caused that?" Sirius's hasty self-correction made James snicker and Lily cover her mouth to hide a smile. "There was only an evil dark wizard in the house your stupid friend told you was perfectly safe—"

Lily's hand made sharp contact with Sirius's ear. He yelped, and Harry giggled. "I don't allow it in my husband, and I'm certainly not going to tolerate it from you. No running down the people I love." She smirked. "Let me do that."

"Yes ma'am." Sirius saluted her with the hand not currently holding Harry. "As I was saying, there was only an evil dark wizard in your house, and your cat only brought you your wands and saved your lives. Nothing in that to be shocked about, is there?"

"Glad you can laugh about it." James had his elbows braced on his knees, his hands now massaging the back of his neck. "I don't think I'll ever put my wand down again."

"I'm only laughing about it so I don't do something else that would scare Harry." Sirius felt his knees start to wobble and elected to seat himself on the hallway floor rather than fall. "Someone's bound to be along soon who can take charge of him, and then I can have my real reaction. Merlin's sodding beard, you two ought to be *dead*."

"I know." James pulled Lily down to sit on his lap, wrapping his arms around her as though to persuade himself through touch that she was actually alive. "But we're not. And it's all thanks to Patches."

"I wonder who she really was?" Lily murmured.

Sirius looked down at Harry, who had discovered the emergency supply of Honeydukes in his front pocket and was attempting to gnaw the wrapper off. "We'll probably never know," he said, rescuing the chocolate and unwrapping it himself before breaking off pieces for everyone. "But just in case she's still hanging around..." He pitched a chunk of chocolate out the open front door. "That's for you, Patches. Thanks for everything."

*And I do mean everything.*

---

*I'd say you're welcome, but I think it would scare you. Not to mention, it would involve lots of long explanations, and the sooner I get out of this world, the better for everyone.*

*Our enemies like nothing better than "restoring" worlds we've Broken while we're still in them.*

Belly down, the cat formerly known as Patches stalked her sweet-smelling prey. It might be silly, but she felt that it would be rude to leave the people she'd been safeguarding for the past year without accepting their final offering.

*Besides, I'm hungry for human-style food, and chocolate is a nice safe thing to eat. It may have trace amounts of salt in it, but there's certainly no bread involved.*

*Not unless your mother is even more overprotective than mine were...*

Clenching her teeth over a wail of sorrow, the cat stretched out a paw and hooked the chocolate towards her. Once she was sure she could remain silent, she picked it up delicately in her mouth and retreated the way she had come, as unnoticed as a shadow.

*One last piece of business. Get in, get the book, get out. Destroy it, and the world is saved. It's*

*even odds whether Voldemort freezes to death in Antarctica or finds some way back in time for the Aurors to catch him, and honestly, I don't care which it is. He won't hurt anyone anymore, and that's the main thing. Harry gets a chance to grow up normal, maybe have brothers and sisters, head off to school when he's eleven...*

*I wonder who he'll meet when he does?*

The chocolate began to melt on her tongue, as bittersweet as this victory she had claimed. The people of this world, a cousin to the one where she had been born, would be happy tomorrow when they learned what had happened to their great enemy. They would go on with their lives, never knowing which of them "ought to have" died, which of them "ought to have" suffered terribly, and sooner or later some other ridiculous story predicament would arise.

*And then I, or another Legendbreaker, will come back and drag them out of their own troubles once again. Or we won't, and they'll go to destruction the way they deserve. Or the Reality Cops will come along instead, and they'll go to destruction the way they don't deserve.*

*The way we did.*

She huddled into her hiding place at the base of a tree, squeezing her eyes shut over the tears she had refused to shed for nearly two years. The people she loved were gone. Their faces, their names, some of the tricks and quirks of their personalities lingered in the inhabitants of this world, in the inhabitants of hundreds of thousands of other worlds that had all come from the same source, but her loved ones had been dispassionately wiped out of existence for the crime of being different.

*And the only reason I survived it was because I was out of the Den, practicing my hunting. Miss Eve and Miss Suzie got there too late to stop the Reality Cops, too late to do anything but stop me from attacking head-on and take me away with them.*

*If they hadn't, I'd have been caught too. I'd have been "rehabilitated." Which is to say, brainwashed. Forced to forget who I am and submerged into the personality of someone I'm not, all in the name of purity and originality.*

*Sometimes I wonder if things wouldn't have been better that way. No more sleepless nights wondering how I'm going to save this world, and the next world, and the world after that. No more painful reminders of my Packmates in the little quirks of the people around me. To just be an idle daydream, a passing thought, a figment of someone's imagination... would that really be so bad?*

She licked her chops as the last fragment of chocolate dissolved. *Someday maybe I'll find out. For right now, I promised to save this world, and that's what I'm going to do. Then I'll go back to Outer Time and take a good long look at what I have and what I want, and see if there isn't some way to make them match up more closely.*

*And if the best answer is to turn myself over to the RC's and let them rehabilitate me, then so be it.*

Rising onto the pads of her paws, she leapt into the air and vanished.



## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Last Horcrux**

*Let me see here. A power-hungry, purity-obsessed madman in my homeworld alters my bloodline for reasons of his own. Five years later and a world away, I'm using that altered bloodline to frustrate the purposes of not only that original power-hungry, purity-obsessed madman but also a completely different group of power-hungry, purity-obsessed madmen.*

The newest Legendbreaker trotted through the front door of the elaborate manor house, feeling the protective charms brush against her skin and, thanks to those alterations in her blood, dismiss her as no threat.

*Isn't irony marvelous?*

For the first time since she had entered this world, she transformed, shooting upwards from the form of a tricolored cat into that of a slender young witch in soft blue robes, arching her back with a quiet groan of pleasure.

She didn't look exactly like the girl who had awakened in Eve and Suzie's house in Outer Time those two years ago. Her hair, several tones lighter than it had once been, hung in sleek waves over her shoulders rather than frizzing out in the unmanageable bushy mass she'd learned to tame with patience and liberal applications of potion. Her skin had grown fairer to match, making the slender vertical scar under her left eye stand out more than it originally had, and her features had sharpened slightly.

*All of which ought to have happened to me when I was thirteen, except that a certain person wanted to keep the other half of my blood-bond looking the same, and the easiest way to do that was to freeze both of us.*

*But that still doesn't explain the eyes.*

Her original brown, tan, and hazel, and her blood-twin's blond, porcelain, and gray, could have combined in any of a million different ways. None of them, as far as she was aware, should have resulted in her eyes turning their current shade of brilliant and startling cobalt blue.

*Subconscious desire, maybe? Or just a quirk of genetics? I know it doesn't matter, but it's going to bother me until I figure it out. And I'm wasting time, which I really shouldn't do. It won't be long before the Death Eaters realize that something's gone wrong with their Master's expedition to*

*Godric's Hollow.*

As soft-footed as though she were still in her cat form, she padded down the corridor, calling up a mental map from a long-ago dream game of hide and go seek.

*Not this turn, but the next one... skip two, take the next... and the very first door on my left should be...*

She stepped into a small, sumptuously appointed room with a floor of polished planks, covered by a rug woven in a sinuous pattern of green and tan. Flipping the rug back at the top left corner, she knelt and slid her hands along the floor.

*I've only done this in dreams... here's hoping it works the same way in real life!*

Deliberately thinking of small and commonplace things, like the taste of chocolate still lingering on her tongue and the sweet, subtly chalky scent now pervading the room, she let her hands go to work. One found a slight irregularity in a plank and pressed down on it, and the other darted into the space thus created and fit its fingers into the slender slots therein. She squeezed and lifted, and a section of the floor came away, revealing a cavity large enough for three adults to crouch side by side had it not been half-filled with bags, bottles, scrolls, cups, jewelry, chests, and one incongruous wooden chair.

*None of which is the thing I'm looking for... where is it?*

Retransforming, she sniffed at the inside of the cavity, then sneezed. *Dusty in there. Clearly they don't allow the house-elf to clean inside it. Speaking of which, can I do something about that? Should I?*

The first was an open question, solvable only through experiment, but the second was far simpler. She was a Legendbreaker, a changer of those patterns which harmed more than they helped. From what she knew of this situation, a change to this pattern could bring nothing but good.

*Especially since the family won't be needing his services after tonight.*

She snickered, cat-style, which let a taste of the room's air into her mouth and the extra-sensitive scent receptors there. *That chalky smell is getting stronger. I should know what it is, I'll figure it out in a second and feel stupid for not getting it before—*

"Tat?"

She kept from yowling in shock only by a strong act of will, and was unable to stop herself from whipping around, paws splayed, ears laid back, tail bushed out.

*That would be baby powder.*

Clinging to the doorjamb, the pajama-clad son of the house regarded her with wide gray eyes. "Tat," he proclaimed with certainty, pointing at her. "I want!"

*Yes, I'm sure you do, but you can't have this one. She bared her teeth and hissed, making the eyes go even wider. Go back to bed and leave me alone. I have work to do, and I can't afford time for sentimentality.*

It occurred to her one moment too late, as his lower lip began to tremble, that she might have mishandled the situation.

*Why can't I ever think before I act? If he cries, he'll rouse at least the house-elf, possibly his parents, and either way, there goes my chance of finishing this cleanly. Maybe I can still fix it, though.*

"Tat," the little boy whimpered, reaching out a hand to her. "Want tat!"

*And honestly, who could resist that face?*

With a mental sigh, she trotted across the room and nuzzled his chest, eliciting a wordless crow and an overenthusiastic pat on the head. *All right, little one, all right. Here's your cat.* She winced away from another eager caress. *Just not quite so hard, please? Let's be gentle...*

The child removed his hand from her back and looked at her solemnly, extending a startlingly fair-skinned arm covered with fine white-blond down. Carefully, deliberately, he stroked his hand down his forearm. "Jeh," he said, transferring the stroking motion to her head. "I jeh."

Her feline instincts took over, starting her purr without input from her human mind, which was a good thing as said human mind was still trying to deal with the ramifications of this little demonstration.

*Jeh. For gentle. And the same movements that our parents used to use to explain to us, when we were very little, how to be gentle with things like cats.*

*But how can he know that? He's not my brother, he just looks like him, and even if he were, my brother didn't come to us until we were both nearly four. This boy's not even one and a half yet. This is a coincidence, it has to be...*

The little boy made an impatient noise and stomped his foot. "No," he declared. "No!" His hand closed around her scruff, not quite painfully but with enough force to make her squeak. "Neenie. I want Neenie!"

For one second, the cat gaped at him in sheer stupefaction. *How can he—this can't be happening—*

Shoving aside useless confusion, she planted a front paw firmly on his bare foot. *Skin to skin. That's the only way to know for sure. Don't hope, don't wonder, don't even conjecture, just find out the truth, then act on what you find. That's the Legendbreakers way, and whatever else I am, I'm a Legendbreaker now.*

*But if this is true, I might still be more than that.*

The child's mind was a welter of emotions and disorganized thoughts, just beginning to sort themselves out into words. Uppermost in it was simple amazement at finding a real live cat in his house in the middle of the night. Underneath that was worry—he knew he wasn't supposed to be out of bed at this hour, and he'd be in trouble if he got caught—and under that was restlessness, a trace of hunger, and late-night boredom, the same combination she was used to scenting from Harry when he woke up fussy in the wee hours of the morning.

*Everything as it should be. Nothing out of place—*

**Neenie!**

*Except that.*

The call had been faint and fading even as it sounded in her mental ear, but she hadn't studied tracking all her life for nothing. **I'm coming!** she called back, sparing one moment to envelop the little boy in a nonverbal sleeping spell. It wouldn't have worked on anyone else, but it didn't have to.

*He would have to fall right on top of me. Good thing he's not too heavy yet—*

Then she was hurtling through the chaotic mental landscape she'd already briefly touched, homing in on the source of that distant, disbelieving voice.

*He must have used almost everything he had to get control long enough to say my name aloud. And if he hadn't—*

She shook this off. *No. No bad thoughts. Not when I'm this close, not when the one thing I've wanted, the one thing I thought I could never have again, might be right here under my paws—*

Abruptly, a chasm yawned in front of her.

She skidded to a halt and assumed the form she liked best for dreamsculpting, a combination of the two she could take in the waking world, human in basic outline but with a furred face and upright ears, angling forward now to catch the sound of hoarse breathing from the bottom of the narrow gash in the dreamscape's rocky ground.

*A pit. He didn't rate so much as a cage from them. For some reason, this blatant disrespect fired her anger as very little had in the past two years. Even the Death Eaters consider us equivalent to animals...*

*But then, you have to take care of an animal you put in a cage. When something is useless to you, when you never want to see it again, you throw it into a hole. And then hide the hole.*

*Too bad they didn't hide this one well enough.*

She plucked a hair from her head and rubbed it between her palms. *Rope*, she willed, and rope it became, soft, supple, and strong. A quick twiddle of two fingers, and the rock at the edge of the pit

developed an upthrust projection, slender but sturdy enough to take more than her weight. Lashing the rope to it and reinforcing her hasty knots with the silent command *Stay*, she began her descent.

Reaching the bottom of the pit took no time at all, and took every second of the two years she'd spent alone. Whenever she felt her mind spiraling out of control, spinning off into horrifying possibilities about what she would find, she forced herself to refocus on two critical pieces of knowledge.

*Wishes have power, nowhere more than inside the human mind.*

*He knew my name.*

Her feet touched earth just as she was repeating her mantras for the seventh time. She decided to take that as a good omen.

The blackness inside the pit was enveloping, but not total. Enough ambient light existed for her partially feline eyes to pick out the slumped figure with its back towards her, its only movement the rise and fall of one shoulder as it breathed. Yet the breathing, the scent, the shape all told her the same story, and her own breath caught in her throat in a little sob.

The figure froze for a long moment, then turned toward her, shifting positions with a care that spoke of great weariness. The eyes that rose to meet hers, though round-pupiled instead of slit, were in all other respects identical to her own.

"Are you real this time, then?" her twin asked, his bantering tone poorly masking the desperate, clawing need in his voice.

"As real as you are, at least," she retorted, following his lead. "Probably more."

*We can't fall apart, not here, not now. I have to go back, finish what I was doing, get him into Outer Time with me, and then we can blubber all over each other. As long as we can keep it light, keep it a little silly, pretend it doesn't mean as much to both of us as we know it does...*

"I always loved that answer. It sounds so very reassuring, and yet it tells me absolutely nothing of value." Her twin pushed himself further upright on the rocks. "So you did get away. We thought you had, but we couldn't be sure. You always were the lucky one."

"We'll argue about lucky and unlucky another time. Can you stand?"

"I'll have to, won't I?" He made the attempt, leaning heavily on the rock wall beside him, but his knees refused to take his weight. "Or maybe not. You know, this is exactly the way I always imagined it happening. You show up out of nowhere, perfectly groomed and in control of everything, and I can't even stand on my own two feet."

"I'll be sure to put laughing at your weakness on my calendar for, oh, let's say never." She crossed the pit in two steps and went to her knees beside him, closing her hand around his, reveling in the

rough skin of his callused palm against hers as she let a carefully rationed portion of her strength bleed into him. "Do you have anything here you need to take with you?"

"You think they'd let me keep anything?" The bitterness in the question was old, the sharpness worn off its edges by time. "My memories and the robes on my back, that's all. And the robes aren't much to look at."

"They mean you're not naked, which is always a good thing. You're unsightly enough with your clothes on." She braced her free hand against the floor. "Try it now."

With one hand clutching hers and the other on the wall, her twin slowly pulled himself to his feet. "Would you look at that. Something's finally going right."

"Don't say that!" She unwrapped the rope from around her waist and smacked him on the top of the head with it before winding it around them both. "You'll jinx it!"

"Shutting up." He transferred his grip from the wall to the rope, but kept his hand around hers as she tugged twice on the rope and mentally ordered it to lift them both back to the surface. It obeyed, and they made the trip in slow and stately majesty.

Once at the top, she had to squirm to get her shoulders out of the hole. For one terrible moment, she thought he wouldn't fit at all, but a little judicious breaking of rock and a fair amount of wiggling and scraped skin later, they sat together on the surface of the dreamscape, still holding hands.

She broke the silence. "It wasn't that tight when I went down."

"No," was all he said, but under the one word she could hear the barely-controlled terror of endless months staring up at an ever-shrinking slice of sky, catching confused glimpses of his host's vision and garbled snatches of sound, wondering, always wondering, if this would be the day when the lips of the greedy mouth above would finally close for good, leaving him forever in the dark.

*It didn't happen. And the longer he dwells on it, the worse off he'll be.* "We need to move. Can you take control here? Was there anything stopping you other than..." She gestured to the chasm behind them, now no wider than the span of her two hands.

He heaved a theatrical sigh. "I suppose I can manage it. What are you going to do? Destroy the diary?"

She beamed at him. "You read my mind!"

"No, you're reading mine. Or his, but..." He waved a hand vaguely around them. "Same difference. He hasn't got much personality yet, which is probably the only reason I've lasted this long, and I don't exactly have a body of my own to go back to anymore."

*Which answers one of my questions, and raises another.* "So I have to take him if I want you?"

"Well, I was hoping for some role reversal. Though obviously I'll do better for him than that!" He stabbed a finger towards where the hole had been. "We ought to be able to make him a nice little playpen, somewhere he can be happy. Which is something he'd never have a chance to be if he stuck around here, particularly with what you seem to be up to. How far did you get?"

"This was my last stop for treasure hunting. And beyond that..." She smoothed her free hand across the air, leaving in its wake a moving picture of what she had done earlier that evening.

He gaped for one moment at the spectacle of Voldemort prone in the Potters' front hall, then burst into semi-hysterical laughter as it was replaced by James's voice explaining how he'd removed the evening's least wanted visitor. "Neenie, you're a genius! Trip him, drop the wand, and let events take their course from there..."

*Which reminds me.* "Thank you. But there's something you have to know before we move on. Whatever you do, from this point forward, don't use my name. It attracts unwanted attention."

"But I just—no, you mean your full name, don't you? Can I use mine?"

*It's nice having someone around who catches on so quickly.* "No. We can use Fox for you and Neenie for me, and we'll want to come up with something else for us both once we get where we're going, but from now on our real names are basically Taboo."

He shrugged one shoulder. "Never been particularly fond of mine anyway. But you knew that. Shall we go?"

She squeezed his hand one more time. "Yes. Let's."

*Because the sooner we get going, the sooner I can show you our little slice of Outer Time, and get you safely sealed to it. You'll take your four and give your two, and from then on that's where you'll belong. And that means they can hurt you, they can kill you, but they can never do this to you again.*

*Besides, you still owe me a week's worth of dishes from before this all started!*

The thought kept her smiling as they began to do what had to be done.

---

Dobby was a seriously confused house-elf. He hadn't known he had a young mistress, and frankly didn't understand where she could have come from, but there she sat on the drawing room floor, the young master on her lap, a book in one hand and a sock in the other. She was definitely a mistress—a house-elf could always tell these things—but something was strange about the way she was a mistress, and that he didn't understand either.

*It is not necessary for a house-elf to understand,* he reminded himself. *What is necessary for a house-elf is to listen, and to watch, and to obey.*

*Though perhaps, just perhaps, obedience will not be necessary for too much longer.*

The young mistress was smiling. It looked a bit like the master's smile, the one he wore when he was about to crush someone in the gaming arena, but it didn't frighten Dobby the way that smile did. Possibly because the things she was saying had filled his mind so full of bafflement that there was no room left for fear.

"So He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is defeated, mistress?" he asked once more.

"Almost, Dobby. Almost defeated." The young mistress set the book down in the center of the floor, between her and Dobby. "He... linked his life to certain objects with magic. To be sure that even if his body was killed, he wouldn't die as long as those objects were intact. But they're not intact, not anymore, at least not most of them. This diary is the last one."

"So when the diary is destroyed, then he is defeated?" He glanced at the young mistress's face again and decided to take a risk he'd never have dared with the known members of the family. "Should Dobby heat up the oven for it, then?"

She *laughed*. Her face lit up warm and friendly, the young master caught her mood and clapped his hands, and in that moment Dobby would have done anything for her. "No, I'm afraid the oven won't do it. This has to be destroyed with a very special kind of fire. What I need your help with is making sure that fire doesn't get out of control. Usually I would take this somewhere else, somewhere far away from people, but I need to finish this right away, tonight. Which means I have to do it here."

"Yes, mistress. Dobby will be glad to help his young mistress with this."

"Excellent. I thought you would. And once you have..." She dangled the sock for the young master to snatch at, making him giggle. "This will be yours. Always assuming you want it. If you'd rather hang about here, stay faithful to your family—your mistress might get out of being arrested even if your master doesn't—"

Dobby, daring more greatly than before, made a rude noise, and the young mistress laughed again, standing up to set the young master on a chair. "I did have a feeling. The sock it shall be, and then we'll get out of your hair. So to speak."

"We, mistress?" Dobby asked, though the way the young master was clinging to the young mistress had already given him the answer.

"Yes, we. I've taken a shine to this little brat, so he's coming with me." She ruffled a hand through the young master's soft hair and raised an eyebrow at Dobby. "You could, if you think she deserves it, let his mother know that he'll be taken care of. That he's alive, and as safe as anyone can ever expect to be in this crazy mixed-up universe of ours. It may be cowardly, but I'm leaving that decision entirely up to you."

"Not cowardly, mistress." Dobby spoke with authority, bringing the smile to the young mistress's



face once more. "It is a dirty job, and dirty jobs are what house-elves do best. Dobby will make sure his mistress knows that the young master is alive and well."

*And nothing else.*

Being the agent of justice, Dobby thought, felt nearly as good as freedom.

He was sure his young mistress would agree.

## He Nearly Killed the Cat The Rite of Sealing

The pile of ashes which had once been a black-bound diary belonging to one Tom Marvolo Riddle had been returned to the hiding place from which the diary had come. Dobby had taken his sock and departed, and the drawing room at Malfoy Manor looked as luxuriously pristine as it had when the girl called Neenie had stepped through its doorway those few minutes before.

*As if I needed any more reminders what a difference a few minutes can make.*

"Tell me when you're ready to go," she said aloud, turning in place to discover the direction best suited for casting the Threshold spell that would take her home.

*Take us home, and isn't that something I thought I'd never be saying again?*

A small hand rested against hers. **Whenever you are. The sooner the better, really.**

"Agreed. I'd just as soon not explain to a high-ranking Death Eater and his pampered pureblood wife why I'm stealing their precious son and heir in the middle of the night." She gave a quick hum of pleasure as an indescribable tingle along her nerves informed her she had found the perfect position. "Here it is. Hold on tight, now."

If anyone had been there to see them, Neenie knew, it would have looked ludicrous. The brunette witch in her late teens and the tiny blond wizard, hand in hand, stepping with care across an imaginary boundary. By the time the hypothetical watcher realized that the boundary was not imaginary but only invisible, the travelers would also have become invisible, as travel through a Threshold was instantaneous.

*It's often the only thing that saves Legendbreakers' lives, when the people we're trying to help get entirely the wrong impression of us...*

The dim light of the drawing room was replaced between one breath and another with clean afternoon sunlight, tinted slightly green by the number of leaves it passed through on its way to the forest floor. Neenie released her grip on the Threshold and turned to watch her companion, who had frozen in surprise or awe at the sight of their new surroundings.

*Be what you are, she willed, feeling the spell she had set in place in her domain to do just that taking hold of him. Be what you know yourself to be, not what someone else has told you you must*

be...

With what she had heard Miss Eve describe as a flash of darkness, the toddler she had taken from his parents' house was gone. In his place stood a young man in his late teens, his pale-blond coloring unchanged but the sharpness of his features mitigated by the half-incredulous smile on his face.

*He doesn't have my blood at the moment, but we can fix that later.*

She stepped forward, taking his hands in hers and holding them at chest height between their two bodies. "Hello, Fox," she said softly. "Welcome to Outer Time."

"Neenie." His voice was a warm, lyric tenor, pleasant to hear even when thickened by emotion as it currently was. "I don't know what to say—"

"Then don't say anything," she interrupted. "An hour ago, I was thinking of giving myself up. Letting the Reality Cops rehabilitate me, turn me into someone I'm not, just so it would all be over. Now I have you, and I'm ready to tell them in detail what they can do to and with themselves and their blasted rehabilitation."

"I would certainly hope so!" Fox shook his head in vehement denial. "I can't believe you would want to do something like that, Neenie—"

"I was alone." She squeezed his hands. "Now I'm not."

"Now neither of us is," he agreed. "And we're safe here, in this—what did you call it? Outer Time?"

"My slice of it, yes. My domain. Our domain now. But we're not quite safe yet." Neenie withdrew one of her hands from the clasp and tugged Fox towards the west. "There's a ritual you have to perform, to break your ties from the world you came from. It will protect you, as long as you're not stupid, but even more important than that, it will seal you to Outer Time. That way, you can enter worlds at any point you like without being affected by their inner time."

"So does that mean we're time travelers now?" Fox followed obediently in her wake, stroking his fingers along the bark of the trees as he passed. "We could go into another world hundreds of years in the past or right now, this very minute, today—can we even go into the future?"

"Yes and no. Mostly no. I'll explain that later." Neenie looked around at him. "Do you know where we are yet?"

"Should I?" He turned his head, taking in the stately trees, the appealingly tangled flowers on the forest floor, the faintest suggestion of a path underneath their feet. "I should. It's familiar. But somehow it's familiar the wrong way..."

Neenie laughed and broke into a run, Fox keeping pace with her easily. "That's not because it's wrong," she said, the sound of their footsteps becoming more distinct as the path changed from

soft bark to hard-pounded dirt. "It's just because you've never really been here before."

"Never really—" Fox stopped speaking abruptly as their run carried them through the last row of trees and into a grassy clearing.

"I wanted something familiar." Neenie hid her smile at the stunned look on his face. "Something that would feel like home, but not the Den. Either of the Dens. They would have made me miss everyone too much. This..." She gestured towards the snug, half-timbered cottage with its roof of slate tiles. "Well, this just made me miss you, and I was already doing that."

"It's ours." Fox raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun, blinking back what Neenie knew he would claim were only reflex tears. She was smart enough, she hoped, not to challenge him on such a needless subject. "It's our cottage, from our dreamworld. The one place we knew we could always go. And when you needed a place to live, that's what you made yourself. Right down to the sodding flower beds."

"Excuse me!" Neenie planted her hands on her hips and lifted her chin at him. "My flower beds do nothing of the sort!"

Fox choked once and began to laugh. Neenie held her indignant pose for a few more moments, until she was sure he was safely started, then dropped it and began to giggle herself. Shortly both of them were doubled over, Fox on one knee, Neenie on both, gasping for breath and wiping tears of laughter from their eyes.

*Now we just need one to—there!* She watched with satisfaction as Fox flicked one salt drop away from the tip of his finger, following its track with her eyes until it struck the ground. *Step one, complete.*

*Maybe I shouldn't have tricked him into that, but he's not a girl. He can't cry on cue. And it wouldn't be safe to wait on his sealing until he unblocks enough to really cry about everything that's happened this past year for him. I'll tell him what I did as soon as we finish this next bit, since he has to know anyway in order to take the oath properly...*

"Right," she said briskly, clapping her hands together. "I think the next thing we should do is re-twin ourselves."

"What happened to that sealing you were mentioning?" Fox crossed his legs under him and finger-combed his hair back into place. "Shouldn't that come first?"

"Sealing someone to Outer Time takes a lot of steps. Our twinning can actually be one of them." Neenie reached under her blue robes to draw her dagger, then paused. "I don't suppose you have yours back?"

"My—ah, right." Fox looked dubious, but mirrored her motion and stiffened in surprise. "Would you look at that." The hand he withdrew from his robes of basic black held a long, slim, shimmering silver dagger, its hilt set with a translucent green stone. "It appears I do."

"Excellent. We'll need it." Neenie got to her feet. "Now we need the woods for the fire. Pine, yew, and dogwood. The trees here are... not quite intelligent, but they do respond to needs and desires, so I try not to cut them if I can help it. Just put your hand around a dry branch and ask, and it should break off on its own."

Fox looked dubious. "They don't exactly know me..."

"But they know me, and you're with me, so obviously you're all right." Neenie turned and headed for the edge of the clearing before her face could betray the other reason the trees would obey Fox the same way that they did her.

*Because I was so terribly lonely when I first came here that I made a dream-figure of him to walk with me, that whole first season...*

When they returned to the small, bare spot on the lawn where they had often toasted marshmallows and swapped silly stories in a different life, each of them held three small branches in their hands. Neither spoke. The moment seemed too solemn for words.

Instead they knelt, Neenie with her left side to the house, Fox with his right. Together, they placed the branches in the small firepit in the form of a six-pointed star. Neenie lifted a rock to reveal flint and steel, and Fox struck sparks into the small heap of shredded bark kindling beneath the branches. When the fire had caught, he passed his dagger back and forth through the flames several times, then offered it on his open palms to Neenie.

She accepted it and lifted it to her face, meeting first his eyes over the blade, then her own in their reflection. Before she could think too much about what she was doing, she lowered the dagger's point to her scarred cheek and made a quick, shallow slice. The sting made her gasp, but blood gleamed satisfactorily red on the shining blade, and she passed it back to Fox over the heat of the fire, making sure that their hands touched on the hilt.

Fox made the same decisive cut along his own cheek, hissing between his teeth as he did, then held the dagger out for Neenie to grasp with him. They turned it together so that its point was aimed downward into the flames, allowing blood to drip from the blade, and two voices spoke as one.

"My hand in yours,  
"My blood with yours,  
"My life for yours,  
"Now and always."

The fire flared as red as the blood which had been given to it, and Neenie felt the tingling rush of power through her skin as her cut healed instantly. Across the fire, Fox was grinning, the crimson flames flushing his face and seeming to singe his hair—

*No, it's darkening. Turning the same color as mine. And his eyes are darker too—I wonder—*

Neenie let a small throb of purr vibrate through their mental bond as the fire died back a bit, revealing that Fox's eyes had indeed gone the same baffling blue as her own.

*Which means it is partly desire-based. Here, of all places, it would be.*

**I forgot how good that felt,** Fox agreed "aloud" with Neenie's mind-purr. **Or rather, I never really knew, since we were unconscious the first time the bond was activated for us.**

**Agreed.** Neenie shook herself out of momentarily gloomy thoughts about the reason both their eyes had changed in the way they had. **But now we need to go on with the sealing. Is there any blood left on the dagger blade?**

Fox inspected his weapon, releasing Neenie's hand to do so. "A bit," he said aloud. "It's dried on there, and I can't tell if it's yours or mine. Does that make a difference?"

"It's unlikely to be only one or the other, especially after what we just finished." Neenie knee-walked her way around the periphery of the fire pit to join him. "Go ahead and stab it into the ground, then. I'll give you the words."

"Stab it in? Are you sure? I'd think that would be a bit rude..."

"It's that or cut yourself again and let fresh blood flow out on the ground," Neenie retorted. "And whose bit of Outer Time is this anyway?"

"I thought you just got done saying it was ours." Fox pulled back his sleeve and nicked his left forearm, collecting several drops of blood on the dagger blade. "Fresh is always best. So what am I saying?"

*Just in case I needed reassurance that he really is my pesky twin, and not that dream-puppet come back to life...* Neenie drowned her annoyance in amusement and laid her hand on Fox's right wrist, giving him the gist of what he would need to say but leaving the exact wording up to him.

*He could use mine if he wanted to, but as he's just reminded me, my Fox always likes to do things his own way.*

Fox tilted the dagger, letting the blood spill from it onto the earth. "Freely I give of myself, this blood and the tears I shed earlier," he said smoothly. "Blood for the life of my body, and tears for the life of my soul." He gave her a sidelong glance that warned her he wasn't entirely happy she hadn't told him about that part, but would let it slide for now. "Both body and soul I now pledge to the defense of this place, this time, and this person." He laid his left hand over Neenie's, making his final reference abundantly clear. "So I speak, so I intend, and so let it be done."

"So let it be done," Neenie echoed softly. "Fox, that was beautiful."

"Only the truth." Fox wiped his blade on the corner of his robes. "Shall we go inside, then? I gather the rest of the sealing ritual is taking rather than giving on my part."

"That's right, and I could really use a meal." Neenie chuckled ruefully. "If I ever have pets of my own again, I swear I'll feed them something other than dry kibble!"

Laughing, the brother and sister passed through the door of their home.

---

Fox seated himself at the far end of the long, rounded-rectangular dining table and watched his sister fussing in the refrigerator. His mind was starting to send out warning signals that he was approaching the end of his tolerance for strangeness.

*It's a little sad that something this normal can be strange to me. But then, I haven't exactly had a normal time this past year...*

The darkness rose inside his memory, threatening to overwhelm him. *What makes you think this is anything more than wish-fulfillment?* it whispered. *Why should you rate some impossible last-minute rescue? You finally snapped, you're making this up because you can't stand reality, and any minute now you're going to hit some contradiction that blows the whole thing to pieces and open your eyes right back where you started...*

Clenching his jaw, Fox pressed a foot down hard against the tiles under his chair. *There*, he snapped back at the darkness. *Solid floors, no give. This is real.*

*Not necessarily.* The darkness snickered. *All that means is, it isn't a dream. You could always be losing your mind.*

"Not much left to lose," Fox muttered.

"Sorry?" Neenie came to the table, carrying a wooden tray holding two glass bottles, a ceramic goblet glazed in the same warm chocolatey color that the kitchen was decorated in, and a plate done in a lighter tan shade with golden brown around its edge. The liquid in one bottle was clear and the other a garnet red, and the plate held a miniature loaf of bread about the size of two fists put together and a small pile of white crystals.

"Nothing. Just arguing with myself."

"Are you winning or losing?"

"Both, I guess. What is this for?"

"The rest of the ritual." Neenie sat down in the chair at Fox's left and tore open the small loaf of bread, sprinkling one half with a pinch of the crystals. "Do you want me to take the lead on this? You don't look your best."

*Why do I have the feeling that's heavy on the understatement?* "Go for it. As long as it will still work that way."

"It's just like swearing any other oath. You can speak the vows yourself or accept them after I've spoken them. It might actually work better if I start." She held out the half-loaf of bread, gesturing for him to hold it as well. "Freely I give to you, from the gifts of this land to me, this bread and this salt. Bread to give you strength, and salt to give your life flavor. Do you accept this gift, and pledge to spend that strength and share that flavor in the care of this land and its inhabitants?"

"I do accept it." Fox bit off a piece of the bread and chewed thoughtfully. It was dense without being heavy, its outer crust crisp and its interior soft and chewy. The salt...

*Tastes like salt. He swallowed. Would go better with some butter, but I suppose that comes later.*

Neenie poured equal parts of the two liquids into the goblet and held that out as she had the bread. Fox set it down hastily to cup his hands around hers again. *Not to be rude or anything, but I hope this is the last step...*

**Don't worry, this is it.** Neenie winked at him. **I'm sorry to put you through this so soon, but it's necessary to keep you safe here. I'll get you "a little bit of butter to your bread" as soon as you have your drink, King dear.**

Aloud, she said, "Freely I give to you, from the gifts of this land to me, this water and this wine. Water to sustain your life, and wine to give it joy. Do you accept this gift, and pledge to spend that life and share that joy in the care of this land and its inhabitants?"

"I do accept it." **And curse you mildly for quoting silly poetry at me and nearly making me laugh in the middle of a ritual.** Fox brought the cup to his lips and drank the contents in two long swallows. The wine was sweet and fruity, as far as he could tell with the amount of water that had diluted it.

"Can you think of any better way for you to be sure I'm really me?" Neenie laid her hand alongside his as he set the cup down, offering him the comfort of her touch but giving him the option to pull away if he so desired. "I know what you must be thinking, at least some of it. I thought plenty of the same things myself. And parts of this are still going to take a long time to sink in. But the important part is, you're here with me now, and you're sealed to this domain of Outer Time. And to me. No one can ever take us away from each other again."

**Are you sure?** Fox asked silently, a few of the images that still plagued his nightmares flashing through his mind. Faceless, featureless, man-shaped figures, an unnatural and uniform shade of gray, stepping through the door, through the windows, through the *walls* of his bedroom, melting out of the ceiling and the floor even as he heard his little sister shriek from downstairs, heard angry shouts and cries of dismay being cut off sharply, as though hands had been placed over mouths, and then those hands were on him, pinioning him, blocking his every move, cool and slick and feeling like nothing at all...

**They have no power here.** A hand still rested on his shoulder, but lightly now, seeking to soothe and reassure rather than hold and confine. **They have dominion only in the worlds. None in Outer Time, unless we're foolish enough to invite them in.**



**Now I'm positive it's you. Only you would use the word "dominion" while I'm having a panic attack.** Fox looked up blearily at his sister—and when had he ended up kneeling on the floor with his head in her lap?—and managed a smile. **So what do we have to do, or not do, to keep from inviting them in?**

**You remember I told you not to use names? This is why.** Her free hand shaped a complex gesture, and a small square of white cloth came fluttering through the air towards them. She caught it and handed it to him. **Here. Names have power, and names that belong to one particular world, or set of worlds, can invoke that world even in Outer Time, which would give the Reality Cops their entry door.**

**Thank you.** Fox blotted at his eyes with the handkerchief, then unfolded it all the way to investigate the small device embroidered in the corner. **Eagle and serpent, hmm? No symbolism there, I'm sure. I didn't know you did this kind of fancy sewing...**

**I don't. But we have neighbors, one of whom does. They're very nice, you'll meet them soon enough—I think they're out on a job at the moment, but they should be home within the next few days.**

**Neighbors will be nice. If only to keep us from getting on each other's nerves and murdering each other within the first year.** Idly, Fox ran a finger across the small embroidered design, using it to keep himself anchored in this moment of safety while his thoughts ranged backwards, a year and more.

*What was it I heard them saying that I thought was so very important? I know there was something, I used to say it to myself over and over again in that damn pit just so I wouldn't forget, and now I went and forgot it anyway. It'll come back to me, I know it will, but I can't help feeling like it shouldn't wait too long...*

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Chronicled Worlds**

Trying to come up with some topic of conversation that might leave the deeper portions of his mind free to recall the errant scrap of memory, Fox hit on a discrepancy which had been bothering him since he'd first clasped Neenie's hand. **I think you said at one point you were undercover at the Potters' house a year?**

**Almost exactly a year. And that's one of the names you usually shouldn't use, but you couldn't know that yet and I had a hard time with the name prohibition when I started out here too, so my mentors arranged with one of the Chroniclers to get a temporary mask around this domain. I think it's still in place...** Neenie gestured again, Fox following her movements more closely this time.

A design sprang into place in the air in front of them, looking like nothing so much, Fox thought with a mental chuckle, as a map of the London Underground. Neenie made a sound of satisfaction and traced a finger along one of the lines, which glowed more brightly at her touch. **Yes, we're still masked up. We shouldn't push it too far, but if you slip once or twice while you're getting acclimated, you won't bring the wrath of the RC's down on us.**

**Always good to know.** Fox focused his conscious attention on the diagram, tucking away his question about "Chroniclers" for later and touching Neenie's surface mind lightly for the translation of the multicolored lines. *I know it isn't, but it almost looks like...*

**That's IT!**

"Ow!" Neenie clapped her hands over her ears, grimacing. "You didn't have to shout!"

"Sorry, I'm sorry, but I've just remembered!" Fox clambered back into his chair, pointing at the diagram. "Doesn't it look like our magic, the Pack and the Pride, I mean? The way we were interconnected, the times we linked up all the way to do the crazy things that we could do?"

Neenie nodded warily. "What about it?"

"I heard them talking, back... back then, back there." Fox jerked his head in the approximate direction from which they had approached the cottage. "They said all sorts of things about having trouble with us. About us being resistant, more resistant than normal, because of what they called a web of power. And they couldn't destroy it completely, because they were missing one of the

nodes."

"One of the..." Neenie broke off, eyes wide. "They meant me," she whispered. "I was missing, so they couldn't break my bonds..."

"And because of that, they couldn't entirely break any of the bonds." Fox reached across the table and clasped Neenie's hand tightly. "And when they couldn't break our bonds, they couldn't break us. Not entirely."

"What they did was bad enough," Neenie said stiffly.

"No argument. But don't you see? Don't you understand what this means?" Grimacing as his voice started to squeak with excitement, Fox squeezed the handkerchief tightly in the hand not holding Neenie's and pulled himself back under tenuous control. "If they couldn't break us, then they couldn't rehabilitate us. Not the way they'd have wanted to. Which means..."

"Which means the others must still be out there somewhere." Neenie's voice had dropped to an awed murmur, and Fox could see images of their missing family and friends passing through her mind like a slideshow. "Do you think..."

"We can find them? It'll be a job, but I bet we could." Fox glanced around the modest ground floor of the cottage. "Though I think we're going to need a bigger house."

Somehow, this struck them both as exquisitely funny, and they giggled their way up the stairs and into one of the bedrooms overlooking the backyard, which was as neat as though no one had been inside it for a year.

*We never did finish that discussion about time.*

"So, what I was going to ask earlier." Fox plumped a pillow and set it at the head of his personal nest, a neatly folded cocoon of bedsheets an easy arm's length away from Neenie's. "How could you have been undercover at... where you were undercover for a year, and still have had time to set all this up and get trained in being a Legendbreaker? It hasn't been much more than a year since everything happened."

"That's the thing about Outer Time." Neenie's trousers joined her shirt and robes on top of the three-paneled screen behind which she was changing. "It's exactly what it sounds like. Outside the kind of time that we used to know. I spent a year here in training, part of which was building my own domain, and then my mentors sent me into the world where I found you for my first assignment. Part of which was being undercover, as the family cat, for a year. So it's been two years for me, where it was only one for you."

"So, what, the year that you spent here doesn't count?" Fox tossed his own robes onto one of the two bed frames in the room, denuded of their mattresses, which were neatly placed side-by-side on the floor with the two nests built on top of them.

"Doesn't count how?" Neenie emerged from behind the screen in baggy turquoise pajamas and plopped down onto her nest with a groan of relief, shaking out her hair. "It counts for me, I remember it, I learned a lot of important things during it, but no, for you it wouldn't count. You were still on Inner Time, the time of the world that you were living in."

"But you look older." One second too late, Fox realized the inadvisability of saying this to any female, even his easy-going twin. "Not like *old* older, but older the way you should look if I hadn't seen you for a year. Is that just the year you spent as a cat? Or wait, you said once you were sealed to Outer Time, Inner Time didn't affect you anymore..." He moaned theatrically, pressing a hand to his forehead. "I'm so confused!"

"Stop being silly and listen to me and maybe you won't be." Neenie tweaked a piece of his hair between her fingers. "All the worlds we can reach from Outer Time are like books on a library shelf. We can take them down and read them any time we want to, but no matter how long the things took to happen in the book, it only takes us a few hours, maybe a few days, to read all about it. To the people in the book, it took weeks, months, even years for those things to happen. That's Inner Time, and however long it took us to read the book is Outer Time. Does that make sense?"

"Not yet, but it probably will in the morning." Fox covered an enormous yawn as Neenie made another of her gestures at the curtains, which obediently closed, blocking out the sunlight. "Are those worlds you keep talking about like books any other way? Can we peek ahead and find out the ending?"

"Yes," Neenie said softly into the dimness. "Yes, they're like books in a lot of different ways. But we can only peek ahead sometimes, and often, even when we need to know, it hurts."

"Life hurts." Fox slipped into his cocoon and had to repress a snort of laughter at the irony of his blunt statement when compared to his comfortable surroundings. "At least, part of the time it does. Right now? Not so much."

"Mmmm." Neenie's slender-fingered hand met his groping one halfway. "Fox? I'm glad I found you."

"I'm glad you found me too." Fox tapped his thumb, ring finger, and middle finger against the back of her hand in that order, invoking the hand code of their childhood to tell her without words, even mental ones, that he loved her.

*Because I think if I tried to say it aloud right now, I'd cry like a baby.*

*Which I'll probably end up doing at some point anyway, but this isn't the time.*

*Right now... He consciously relaxed each portion of his body, starting with his toes and moving upward until he felt the knots in his shoulders begin to dissolve with the twanging pain of overstrained muscles. Right now, I am going to get the best sleep of my life.*

*And then tomorrow, we can talk about how we're going to get the rest of our people out of*

*whatever hells the Reality Cops decided to toss them into.*

*Alternate realities or not, nothing keeps the Pack and Pride apart for long.*

---

"The worlds really are almost exactly like books," Neenie said the next morning, pulling muffin halves out of the toaster oven. "Don't you remember, when..." She giggled aloud. "When *Valentina Jett* would really be on fire with one of *her* stories, how *she* would say that it felt more like looking through a window and watching people than making things up?"

Fox buried a snort in his mug of tea at this blatant reference to one of their Pack-fathers, who had taken a feminine pen name in order to get his romance novels published. "I remember," he said when he'd swallowed. "But do you mean—"

"I mean that's exactly what was happening." Neenie set the serving plate on the table and scooped two banana nut halves and one courgette pineapple onto her own plate. "It's far less common than people think that writers simply make things up. Almost always, for anything that's interesting enough to make people want to read it, the writer had at least a little contact with another world. They don't always get it right, of course, but who does?"

"So it's all real." Fox helped himself to the other half of the courgette pineapple muffin and half a double chocolate. "All those worlds we used to love to read about, all those people we wanted so much to find out what happened to. They're real somewhere."

"Yes, and you've just touched on the next important thing." Neenie took a quick swig of tea to clear her throat. "Love and desire are very powerful forces. So is belief. Didn't you always believe, somewhere in your mind, that these people just had to be real? Because how could they affect you so much if they weren't even real?"

"I never actually believed they were real," Fox protested halfheartedly, but he had to admit he saw what Neenie was getting at. *You do get emotionally involved with characters when a story is really good. And what's the highest praise that you can give to any author's characters? "They seemed real. I felt like I could meet them on the street. That's my mother, that's my brother, that's my baby sister..."*

"Not with your conscious mind, but somewhere down below." Neenie waved a hand at the back of her head. "And that's where some of the strongest believing goes on. But what I'm trying to get at is that the love, the desire, the belief in these worlds and these characters gives them power. Real power. And once people have power, they don't like it being threatened. Which is where the Reality Cops come in."

"Not sure I follow."

"Of course you don't, I'm telling it all out of order." Finishing her last bite of muffin, Neenie pushed her plate away and sat back in her chair. "Around here, the people that we used to call writers or authors are usually called Chroniclers, because they're the ones who see what's going on

in the worlds and write it down, chronicle it. The most skilled Chroniclers can just look out into nothingness, into the void, and see a brand-new world that no one ever saw before. But a lot of the less skilled ones, the newer ones, take a shortcut, especially when they're learning their trade."

"That makes sense." Fox bit an extra large chunk of pineapple in half. "What is it they do?"

"They focus on an existing world, and a question. Usually a what-if question. What if Cinderella's slipper didn't fit? What if Hercules failed at one of his labors? What if a bunch of modern Americans turned up in the middle of the Thirty Years' War?"

"Tell me that last one's a joke."

"Not even. Going off the rails a bit, if you ask me, but nobody did. In any case." Neenie set down her tea mug, made of the same brown-glazed ceramic as the goblet she had used for Fox's sealing the night before. "Some of the other Chroniclers didn't think this was fair, especially because these Chroniclers, being new at what they did, often didn't see very clearly and would exaggerate some of their characters' abilities terribly. So they decided that, except under special parameters, that kind of Chronicling wasn't to be considered real Chronicling."

"And the worlds discovered by that method, not real worlds. Hence, Reality Cops, to make all those pesky un-realities go away." Fox shuddered briefly. "It makes sense, as long as you don't consider that these *are* real worlds, with real people and real pain that's going to be inflicted on them."

Neenie shrugged. "To most Chroniclers, they're not. The worlds are 'just stories,' the people 'just characters,' and they never stop to think about the disconnect between that dismissive attitude and the very real emotional reactions that their readers have to them. But that's not even the worst of it."

"Marvelous."

She stuck out her tongue at him. "I see your sarcasm hasn't been impaired any. But you're missing a step. The Chroniclers only made rules that said other Chroniclers shouldn't look into derivative worlds, and that if they did, it wasn't for real, just for play. It was characters, people like you and me, who invented the Reality Cops. Which is why it has to be characters, like you and me, who join the Legendbreakers and stop them."

"How could characters invent the Reality Cops if they didn't even know that there were other worlds?" Fox objected. "That doesn't make any..." He trailed off. "No, I've got it backwards, haven't I? Some of them must know that other worlds exist, because the Reality Cops sure as hell do. Exist, I mean. How did they ever find out?"

"Different ways for different worlds. In magical worlds, someone discovered a new kind of magic. In scientific worlds, someone took science places it hadn't gone before." Neenie scowled. "Some of the older Legendbreakers, like my mentors, think that one of the Chroniclers must have spread the idea through the worlds, because the breakout into Outer Time happened so close to

simultaneously in so many different places. But however it happened, it did happen, and this is where my point about love and desire and belief comes back to bite us, because all those things add up to just one thing."

"Power." Fox had no trouble following this line of thought. "The more people in any world who read about, who love, who want to know what happened in, who believe in a particular world, the more power that world and its characters have here in Outer Time. Right?"

"Right. And almost all of those most powerful stories are originals. Which I'm sure is as it should be, but it does end up meaning that the derivative stories get the short end of the stick." Neenie looked thoughtfully at the muffin platter, then broke off the top of the remaining half of the double chocolate muffin Fox had taken for himself. "Most of the time, derivatives aren't powerful enough to worry the original stories, but sometimes they get what I've heard ridges referring to as 'uppity.'"

"Ridges?"

"Legendbreaker talk. Ridge for original, either a world or a character from it. Plenty of ridges are very nice, not pretentious or rude at all, but then there are the ones who spoil it for everybody else."

"Aren't there always." Fox scooped up the remaining quarter of double chocolate muffin. "Food control. So ridges have all the power, or most of it, and—is there a nickname for derivative worlds?"

"Actually, there are two. It depends on what kind of derivative it is." Neenie got up to refill her teacup. "If the breakpoint for the derivative world is something that simply happened, a natural phenomenon that could have gone one way or the other, that's called a spin, for spinoff. If it's someone making a different choice, consciously deciding to do something that they didn't do in the original, that's a tell, for retelling. The RC's tend to be a little harder on tells than they are on spins, but they'll go for either type if it starts getting too powerful."

"Don't tell me," Fox said dryly. "We were getting too powerful."

"Getting up there." Neenie had a slight smirk on her face. "And the best part of all is, we were never expected to go anywhere. We were expected to be a fluffy little tell, a happily-ever-after without a speck of trouble to our names, and somehow we acquired a life of our own." Setting down her teacup, she made a beckoning gesture, and five enormous paperbacks bound in jewel tones sailed in from the back room.

"Holy bricks." Fox got up to peer more closely at the enormous stack of books in Neenie's arms. "Are those all about us?"

"They are, and the series isn't finished yet." Neenie set the books down and gestured again. "But your homework for tonight, and probably for the next week or so, will be these."

The stack this time was of hardcovers, seven of them, the first three fairly slender but the fourth through seventh approaching brick proportions themselves. Fox picked up the first one and examined the brightly colored picture on its cover. "Sounds familiar," he commented, running a finger across the title. "And the next one, and the one after that... wait, is this it? Is this the Chronicle of... of our ridge? Of what we were supposed to be, what they were trying to rehabilitate us into?"

"This is it." Neenie took the first one from him and opened it to approximately a third of the way through, flipping a few pages until she discovered the spot she wanted. "And this is who they wanted you to become, in all his eleven-year-old glory."

"Joy." Fox perched on the edge of the table and began to read. "Quite a piece of work, isn't he?" he commented when he had finished perusing the brief exchange between the two boys.

"And that's him at his least objectionable." Neenie's smirk was back, and bigger this time. "Isn't there something you ought to say?"

Fox set the book carefully aside, then hugged Neenie until she squeaked. "Thank you, thank you, *thank you*, oh best sister in all the worlds. Something along those lines?"

"That works for me." Neenie laid her head on his shoulder as he relaxed his grip slightly, still holding onto her as tightly as she was to him. "I missed you so much," she whispered. "And all the research I did, everything I had to learn, made me more and more afraid that you were gone for good, because there are almost no other worlds with someone like you, someone who's so very different from his source, and I didn't know how long you could hold on..."

"I suppose they figured, since the Pack started on me young, they'd have to start even younger." Fox spoke lightly, stroking Neenie's hair in the same motions he would have used had she been in her cat form. "Pity they didn't realize I'm as stubborn as they come, and a baby's mind wasn't going to be able to cope with me."

"Yes, speaking of which." Neenie pulled back just far enough to meet Fox's eyes. "What are we going to do with him? Is he all right? Have you heard from him?"

"I made him a mockup of his bedroom back in here, once you gave me that bit of power so I could get control." Fox tapped the back of his skull. "Told him it was time to go back to bed, and laid as strong a sleeping spell as I thought I could get away with over the whole thing. I don't know how much longer it'll hold, so we should probably deal with that fairly soon. Unless you think we ought to find something else to do with him?"

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it. For right now, we should certainly make him a little dreamworld of his own, a playpen, like you said before, but we'll have to think about what to do longer-term. If he starts growing up and getting restless, he could be a big problem, because technically it is his body..." Neenie shook her head. "And talk about borrowing trouble. Don't we have enough to think about, trying to work out what's become of the rest of us and how we can find them?"



"At least since we've thought about it, it's less likely to sneak up and bite us on a place we don't want to be bit." Fox hoisted his sister up and spun her around once, making her squeal. "So. Any thoughts on how we should go about finding a handful of Marauders and Warriors?"

"Well." Neenie twisted a lock of hair around her finger, one of her favorite thinking mannerisms. "The first thing we'll probably need is—"

"Pretzels!"

Both twins whirled as a girl about their own age with glossy black hair shot through their front door, making a beeline for the large glass jar of finger-thick pretzel rods which sat on the counter next to the wine carafe. "Pretzels," she moaned, intoning the word as though it were her lover's name. "Must... have... pretzels..."

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The New Neighbors**

Fox blinked several times, but it made no difference. The unfamiliar but handsome young woman, whose skin tone matched the sandalwood sticks which held her black hair away from her face, was still attacking his sister's pretzel jar, making noises of frustration akin to those he was used to hearing from his friends who'd been crossed in love as the stopper refused to yield to her frantic tugs.

"Sorry about her," said a male voice from the door, where a golden-haired young man was lounging against the frame. "We're all out at our place, since the others beat us back by an hour."

"Pretzels!" The girl finally managed to get the stopper out of the jar, but her greedy grab for three of the thick rods was arrested as her eyes tracked a few inches to the left. "Hey, and wine! Hmm. Pretzels, wine, pretzels, wine..." She groaned in indecision, then brightened and pulled the top off the wine. "Got it!"

Triumphantly, she dipped her three pretzel rods into the wine, dunked them up and down a few times, and stuffed them into her mouth.

"Fox, allow me to introduce two of our nearest neighbors," Neenie said in the strangled tone that only ensued when she was trying her very best not to laugh. "The patient gentleman at the door is Lin, and the lady having a completely inappropriate reaction to snack foods is Nima. Lin, Nima, my brother Fox. You've heard me talk about him."

"Pleased to meet you." Lin came forward to shake hands. "We're always glad to find another survivor."

"Foss? Weww—oh, sawwy," Nima said indistinctly through her mouthful of wine-dunked pretzel when she noticed everyone looking at her oddly. She swallowed, set down her truncated pretzel rods, and hurried over to shake Fox's hand in her turn. "What I was trying to say was, I'm a really big fan of yours. The stuff you get up to, it's just great. I'm so glad you made it out, wait till I tell Reyna, she'll flip—do you think I should go get her right now, love?"

"I think she and Jason don't want to be disturbed at the moment," said Lin mildly. "Isn't that why we left?"

"Yeah, you're right. But oh my God. Fox. You're really here. I can't believe it. Excuse me a

moment?" Nima glanced around the kitchen, spotted her pretzels, dashed over to snag them, and bolted back out the door. A few seconds later, a jubilant shriek rang out from the treeline.

"Excitable, isn't she?" Fox asked, turning to look the way Nima had gone.

Lin sighed. "You have no idea. So, we're off duty at the moment. Do you have anything interesting brewing?"

"Something right up your alley, as a matter of fact." Neenie pulled out a chair at the table for Lin. "Nima can help too, if she ever gets done fangirling over Fox. We think it was our magical ties that kept him from being completely rehabilitated, and we were wondering if there was any way to trace those bonds into the worlds to find out what the RC's did with the rest of our family."

"Ah, a challenge." Lin interlaced his fingers and cracked his knuckles, grinning. "You know I can't resist a challenge. Shall we start by examining the bond between the two of you and getting its signature deciphered? Then we can seek for like bonds elsewhere on your series of worlds, unless you think the RC's were likely to get creative in your case, in which case we can expand the search..."

Lin, Fox decided within the first half-hour, would have been his sister's dream man, if not for the obvious attachment between him and Nima.

*And if Neenie weren't already taken herself, supposing we can find Redwing and bust him loose.*

The older Legendbreaker (though his face and body bore no indication that he was much past twenty, some of his turns of phrase and body language gave Fox the impression of someone his parents' age or more) was intelligent, thorough, and a touch didactic, though he managed to make his lessons interesting.

*Merlin knows I've got plenty to learn, so it might as well be from someone who knows what he's talking about.*

Nima, too, had a keen mind under her giggly exterior, and when she calmed down from her inexplicable excitement over meeting Fox, brought a number of good points to the discussion of just how Fox and Neenie could disentangle the pure Pack-magic between them from their twin-bond, so that they didn't end up finding every pair of twins in the worlds and none of the people they wanted.

"Sorry to get so silly about the pretzels," she said, a trifle shamefacedly, after they had their initial plan of attack laid out and were taking a break to have lunch. "We've been on assignment for the past five months, and pretzels are one of the more dangerous foods, because they're basically made out of bread and they're covered with salt. And if you drink water with them, that's three of the six for sealing, so at that point your grip on Outer Time gets kind of tenuous."

"And if you should happen to weep shortly thereafter, or have a bleeding cut, or partake of wine..." Lin's eyes, normally a gray-blue a shade lighter than the twins', darkened with

remembered pain. "We lost a friend that way. He let himself become four parts sealed to the world he was trying to help, and a Reality Cop was able to break his bonds to Outer Time. At which point he became simply another character, and thus subject to the RC's authority."

"Ergo, no pretzels while on assignment." Nima waved another of her favorite snack in the air for emphasis. "And since Jason and Reyna—they're our partners, you'll meet them another time—took all of ours off to their bedroom for uses I don't want to think about, I came running over here to raid Neenie's jar. And met you. Which is really cool to me, even though I know you don't get why. I'll explain it another time."

"Sometime, perhaps, when we are not trying to solve a more important problem." Lin's tone turned this into a tease rather than a serious scold, and Nima poked him in the ear with her pretzel rod in retaliation. "Now, I do think that I have isolated the particular magical trace that we will be able to use to track down the people you seek. Before we turn it loose on a wholesale seeking, though—Neenie, did Eve and Suzie give you any reason why they sent you into the world they did for your first assignment?"

Neenie closed her eyes, mashing grains of rice with her fork as she cast her mind backwards. "I know they said that because it was so early on in the story arc, I could effect a change with very little effort and the RC's wouldn't be able to do much about it. But Miss Suzie did say something about being surprised by what I might find..."

"In that case, I must assume they either knew or had deduced what I see here." Lin tapped a finger against the sapphire stud in his right ear, then sketched a few glowing lines in the air. "The resonance along these bonds is, of course, extremely strong between the two of you, because of the added power in your twin-bond. However, I can hypothesize that a similar, if less powerful, resonance would occur between any two members, and would be highly disruptive to the walls which exist between worlds unless some provision was made for it."

Fox looked at Neenie. Neenie looked at Fox. Both of them shrugged in unison.

"Lin, honey, you're speaking jargon again." Nima administered another poke to her man with her pretzel rod. "What I think he means is, if they tried to put someone from your Pack or Pride alone in a world, the buzz along your bonds would be so strong that it would basically rip the world apart trying to get to the others. Counterproductive much?"

"So they must have done something to stop that from happening," Neenie said slowly, her thoughts visibly taking shape behind her eyes. "They must have... put us into the worlds in pairs? So that the resonance would bounce off each other, and never go beyond?"

Lin nodded. "As I read it, at least two would be necessary to stop the resonance from building to critical levels. Three would be better, but also more dangerous, because three people with strange dreams and memories which agree with one another might start to think something of it."

"So we're unlikely to find three together, unless they had no other choice." Fox was scribbling a list of initials, drawing lines between them with the colored pencils Neenie had found for him.

"And they'd want to break up any particular pairs, wouldn't they? Married couples, boyfriends and girlfriends, brothers and sisters?"

"Absolutely." Lin craned his neck to peer at Fox's list. "The farther apart that they can keep the people they're trying to rehabilitate, the better for them."

"So there must have been someone else in the world where I found Fox," said Neenie, reaching over to appropriate the list. "But who?"

"And not to be a downer, but how do you plan to get these people out?" Nima made an apologetic face when everyone turned to look at her. "Most of you source from main characters, and someone's going to notice if the hero of the story suddenly isn't there anymore."

"Historically, that has been a problem for recruiting Legendbreakers as well," Lin said thoughtfully. "The most intelligent, best developed characters tend to be the main characters, integral to the story's continuing."

"Yes, but stories end." Fox mimed closing a book between his hands. "Whether it's just one or a series, there's always an ending somewhere, unless the author—sorry, the Chronicler—is still actively writing on it. We can get into a story at any point that's Chronicled, right?"

"That's how it works." Nima took a bite of her falafel-stuffed pita. "Though if you know the Chronicler, and they're in a good mood, you can sometimes get into bits that aren't strictly Chronicled yet," she said around it. "It's not terribly common, but it does happen."

"There are also what's called the indeterminate areas." Lin picked up the first book off the hardcover stack and turned to the beginning of the second chapter. "Almost ten years in Inner Time pass between these first two chapters, and the Chronicler gives very few details about what has or hasn't happened in that time. Unfortunately for us, given that most of the people we're interested in play roles in the future development of the series..."

"We can't just pick them out of the world during those ten years," Neenie finished with a sigh. "Too bad."

"Hang on." Fox set down his smoked turkey and cheddar on multigrain, extending his hand for the book. "Can I see that?"

Lin handed across the book, and Fox flicked rapidly through the first chapter, his thoughts keeping pace with his fingers. *We can't just pick people out of the ridge without changing the way it goes...*

"But the world Neenie pulled me out of isn't the ridge anymore, is it?" he asked, looking up. "Nenie caused a new breakpoint in that world, she turned it into a tell, so no one knows where it's going to go now, do they? Somebody could just up and vanish, and no one would think much of it, particularly if that person left behind some kind of note saying that they were going traveling or moving away."

"Assuming it's one of the adults," Neenie cautioned. "If it's another of the Pride, we might have some fast talking to do, since you're the only one where we could honestly make a case that even your ridge self would be better off with us than with his ridge parents."

"In that case, we wait for them to grow up." Fox returned the book to the stack. "Or can we do that? Has this world been Chronicled yet?"

"Probably not, but we have a workaround for that." Nima grinned around another mouthful of mashed and baked chickpeas. "In a world that becomes a tell because of Legendbreaker involvement, we have a free pass for meddling thereafter. Subject, of course, to the usual rule."

Fox sat back down and helped himself to a handful of crisps from the bowl in the middle of the table. "The usual rule being?"

"Simple." Nima swallowed. "You break it, you fix it. Where 'it' can be anything from a mind to a family to a crucial channel-spanning bridge that handles over eighty percent of a country's trade." She winced. "Had some fun with *that* one, let me tell you."

Making a mental note to ask about this story at another time, Fox crunched down on a folded-over crisp. "So we can do just about whatever we want, as long as we don't cause problems for people. Yes?"

"There are subtleties to it in practice," Lin cautioned, "but yes. In the most basic form, that is correct."

"In that case, I think our next step should be finding out exactly who it is that's still in that world." Neenie laid her fork down in her half-finished plate of vegetable curry. "After that, we can decide on a plan of attack, figure out how to demonstrate what's really going on, practice our dream-hunting techniques in case the host personality is hostile and we have to go to stealth mode..."

"Actually, I think your next step needs to be taking a week or two off." Nima laid her pretzel rod against her lips like a finger at Neenie's indignant cry. "No, don't give me that. You're just barely back from assignment, and he's never been." She jerked her head towards Fox. "You can get into Inner Time at any moment you need to, and you know it. What good will you do if you go in tired and bungle the whole thing?"

"But..." Neenie subsided but continued to glare at the other girl. "I hate it when you make sense."

"We can, at least, determine the identity of the person you will find when you do return." Lin twisted his earring between finger and thumb, then slid his hand down the list of initials Fox had written. One set began to glow a soft blue, and four Legendbreakers peered eagerly at the list to see which one.

"Cool," said Nima. "I've always wanted to meet him."

"He may have an even harder time adjusting to this new world than you do," Lin said to Fox and

Neenie. "You had unexceptional nicknames to which you were accustomed, but his nickname is part of your series of worlds and therefore unwise to speak here in Outer Time."

"Yes, but we all had pseudonyms while we were growing up." Neenie smiled, her eyes momentarily distant. "He'll probably pick one of them, or some variant on it. And that reminds me, don't we need to settle our full names too before we go on another assignment?"

"Before we go on *an* assignment for me," Fox pointed out. "And why full names? Aren't the nicknames good enough?"

"For just us, for Outer Time, absolutely. But that's why it's before you go on another assignment." Nima got up and went to the refrigerator, returning with a jar of miniature pickles. "You would not believe how strange people think it is if you hesitate when they ask you your name. Neenie got a pass, because her first assignment was in animal form, but you aren't likely to get that lucky again. So you need a full name, one that's not too obviously related to your source world, and you have to be used to it enough that you answer to it."

"That makes sense." Fox decided he wanted a pickle too. "Nenie, any ideas yet?"

"I've already picked my first name, as it happens. From those same pseudonyms, but a little different." Neenie sketched four letters in the air, then waggled her fingers at them, rearranging the last three. "Apparently the Chronicler of our ridge heard my middle name wrong to start with, and our source world was already going by the time she got the correction out there. So I've just corrected it myself. Not to mention, it makes my nickname a little more plausible, with the long E sound in it."

"Jean. I like it." Fox considered his sister. "It suits you."

"Thank you."

"And, if you wouldn't mind a suggestion for yours, Fox..." Nima flushed, but continued when Fox waved a hand at her. "Your source world generated some spins and tells of its own, and in several of those, your analog had the name Reynard. It's French for—"

"Fox, of course." The young man thus named grinned, showing off all his teeth. "I could handle that. And it would explain the nickname perfectly. So that makes us Jean and Reynard... should we go with White again? Just for old times' sake?"

"Simple names are generally best," Lin said approvingly. "They can be translated or elaborated on as various worlds demand, and will seldom be inappropriate."

Nima rolled her eyes. "This from the man whose driver's license lists him as Lin Quillian. And wasn't it a blast, teaching him to drive," she added to Neenie and Fox. "I'm grateful we became Legendbreakers for that reason alone, because in Outer Time nobody can sue us for damages."

"It was only one mailbox." Lin's shoulders had stiffened perceptibly. "And a plant."

"And a pole," Nima said, tapping her thumb. "And a wall." Her index finger. "And another pole." Middle finger. "And an oak tree, and very nearly a ginger cat." Ring and little fingers. "And that poor lady's tire in the Wal-Mart parking lot. But you did apologize for that one."

Lin rose with dignity, leaving behind the last few bites of his crunchy peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwich, and bowed formally. "It has been a pleasure visiting in your house, and meeting you," he said directly to Fox. "I hope to have the pleasure again soon. For now, I must depart."

He twisted his earring twice clockwise and vanished with a small pop.

"I think I may have embarrassed him." Nima leaned back in her chair. "It is true, though. He's a terrible driver. He even scares Reyna, and she drives like a maniac."

"Yes, but you didn't have to list everything he's ever hit for us," Neenie said, a look of sympathy on her face.

"Oh, that's not everything he's ever hit. Just what he hit in the six months or so between the time we met—met in the body, I should say, but that's another story—and the time Eve and Suzie recruited us for Legendbreaking."

Neenie winced. "I stand corrected."

"But you're sitting down." Nima returned her chair to its usual position and got up. "And since I'm devolving into ridiculous puns, I'd better go too. We're just one domain west of you," she told Fox. "Great to meet you, hope to see you again soon, thanks for lunch, Neenie, and we'll be in touch!"

Fox shook Nima's hand and watched his sister hug her, then with Neenie escorted her to the back door, which was more directly on her way home. Once it was shut behind her, he let out a sigh of relief and reached for Neenie's hand. **High-energy, aren't they?** he commented.

**You noticed.** Neenie gave him a one-sided grin. **I hope they didn't wear you out too much.**

**I think I'll survive, but Nima was right. I didn't want to be a downer, but I'm not up for another adventure yet.** He sat down limply on the sofa pushed up against the half-wall that hid the first few steps to the upstairs of the cottage. **I don't even know when I will be.**

"Take your time," Neenie said aloud, releasing his hand. "That's the best part of being based in Outer Time. We don't have to rush things between assignments. Sometimes Legendbreakers get lazy, but that brings its own punishment with it." She spread her hands wide, indicating the cottage and the domain around it. "If you know that you're fit for work, but you choose to avoid finding your next assignment, your sense of guilt subliminally chips away at your domain. The edges start unraveling."

"And what if you're not the sort of person who feels a sense of guilt over skiving work?"

"Generally, that sort of person doesn't become a Legendbreaker." Neenie plopped down onto a large, furry beanbag. "Katie and Peggy, who live in the domain south of here, notwithstanding."



"Now this I have to hear. You never talk trash about anyone. What's so special about these two?"

"You mean besides doing exactly the amount they have to and never a speck more, constant carping criticisms about other people's work, and one of them actually complaining that other Legendbreakers aren't doing a good enough job and should be forcibly removed from their domains?"

"Yes, I think that would do it, even for you..."

---

Elsewhere in the worlds, late in the evening of All Saints' Day, a young man pored over three different copies of the *Daily Prophet*, piecing together what was going on from the bits and scraps of true news the reporter had seen fit to toss into the article in between fits of inchoate jubilation.

*So Voldemort's been found in Antarctica, frozen—ha-ha—stiff. Most of the Death Eaters are either dead or rounded up, with a bit of extra drama at the Malfoys' when both senior members of the household accused one another of making off with the junior member. Padfoot caught up with Wormtail himself, stopped him just before he blew a street to pieces trying to cover his escape. Prongs and Lily and Harry are all safe. And I—*

He knew it was unworthy, knew he should be rejoicing in his friends' good fortune, but he couldn't stop the anger from boiling up inside his heart.

*I get to sit here and put things together from the damn newspaper. Because none of them have stopped to think, if Wormtail was the spy, maybe Moony wasn't? Maybe we should be, oh, I don't know, apologizing to him? Begging his pardon for thinking in stereotypes, for finally letting the werewolf thing get to us, for cutting him out of every damn decision we've made for over a year?*

He swept the papers onto the kitchen floor with one fling of his arm.

*And the worst of it is, I could forgive them better for it if things hadn't gone so well. If they had taken some damage, been hurt a bit by their own bad decisions. But no, they've been saved from all of it. By their cat of all damned things, if the Prophet's got it right. They get to go on with their lives, and what do I get?*

*I know, I know. I get to keep my friends. And I am happy for them, really I am.* He sank into a straight-backed chair, wincing as his own back made a complaint. Thirteen transformation nights without his friends had taken an unpleasant toll on his health. *But this is going to drive a breach between us. I can't deny that.*

*If I thought anything good would come of it, I'd leave. Just pack up and go. See the rest of the world. Maybe even find a new place to belong.*

He looked at the ceiling. "If there's anybody out there listening," he said under his breath, "this would be a good time for a nice big unmistakable omen."

Someone knocked on his door.

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Guided Tour**

"Have I mentioned your timing is fantastic?" Reynard White murmured to his twin sister Jean as they waited on the front step of the small, bland house.

"Oh, Fox." Jean put on a falsetto and fanned herself with her hand, as though overcome by his fulsome compliments. "How can you come up with such lovely things to say?"

Fox grinned. "Practice. Brace yourself, now, Neenie. Here he comes."

The door at which Neenie had knocked a moment ago opened a short way before thudding to a halt on a chain lock. A man whose lined face and gray-streaked hair of light brown made him appear to be the twins' father, though both siblings knew he was only five or six years their senior, gave them a long and searching look. His left hand grasped the doorknob, ready to close the door in their faces. His right was not visible.

*Knuts get you Galleons he's got his wand ready back there. He's not stupid.*

"Mr. Lupin?" Fox took charge, moving slightly to the fore and leaving Neenie to guard their flanks. "Remus Lupin?"

"That's my name." The tone was carefully emotionless, but even with his human nose Fox could catch hints of recent emotional upheaval. "I wasn't expecting visitors."

"We're aware of that, but we'd appreciate a moment of your time, if it happens that you're not busy." Without making a production of it, Fox displayed his hands open and empty, simultaneously turning a few degrees to his left, to reveal that he carried nothing in his right hip pocket.

*It's up my sleeve, but he doesn't need to know that. Especially since we're not here to do anything unfortunate to him, other than mess with his mind.*

"And if I am busy, you'll simply go away?" Feeling edged into the voice now, a healthy dose of skepticism with raw anger underneath.

"If you ask us to go away, we will." Neenie spoke for the first time now, stepping up beside her brother so that the light mounted above the front door fell directly on both their faces. "But we have information that we think you'll want to know, and we're willing to share it."

"For a price?" Lupin asked bluntly.

Fox shrugged one shoulder, pretending unconcern equal to Lupin's, though he had seen the man's eyes widen at the sight of Neenie, heard the nearly silent inhalation of surprise. *He hasn't completely blocked it out, then. We still have a chance.*

"A few minutes of your life spent listening to us," he said aloud. "No threats, no guarantees, no betrayals. If you want to ask us questions when we're done, we'll do our best to answer them."

Lupin eyed them both for a moment longer. Then the door slammed, and there was the rattle of a chain lock being undone.

Neenie's hand closed around Fox's like a vise. **We're in. Praise be to Safkhet.**

**To who?** Fox pried her fingers open. **Also, ow.**

**Oh, sorry.** Neenie used the hand instead to stop a semi-hysterical giggle from making its escape. "Safkhet," she said around it. "She's my personal goddess. All Legendbreakers need one, it helps you break world-based habits like swearing by a particular god or person—"

The door opened before Fox could ask the obvious question. Lupin stood framed in it, his wand now clearly in his hand. "Come inside," he said, stepping back so that they could. "One at a time, and keep your hands where I can see them."

Lifting his chin, Fox stepped across the threshold.

*Showtime.*

---

Remus Lupin could feel his control slipping away from him. *If one more strange thing, just one, happens tonight, be it good or be it bad, I swear I will—I will—*

*And isn't that part of your problem?* murmured a voice in the back of his mind. *You've been so focused on control all your life, you don't even know what you'll do without it.*

*Control is important. Doubly so for someone like me.* With an effort, Remus got some semblance of his polite company face into place. *Without it, I could hurt people, kill them even. Or go mad.*

The voice chuckled. *With it, you'll go mad from boredom. Always assuming you haven't already. You are talking to yourself. Now why don't you do yourself a favor and talk to these nice children instead? I doubt whatever they have to tell you will leave you bored.*

*They're hardly children.* Remus regarded the brown-haired pair across his front room dubiously, Jean sitting on the edge of his best rocking chair with her hands clamped around the seat, Reynard on the floor beside her with his hand over hers. *They may be under seventeen, but it's not by much if they are. I just wish I could figure out who they remind me of.*

*I doubt they remind you of anyone.* The voice had gone soft, almost wistful, Remus thought in surprise. What could a part of his mind be wistful about that he didn't know?

*Unless I really am going mad...*

He cut off this internal dialogue as unproductive and sat up straighter in his chair, watching the way both pairs of blue eyes shifted to him as he did. "You wanted me to listen," he said without preamble. "I'm listening."

*I do know one person they remind me of, though it has to be a coincidence. There are only so many ways people's eyes can be shaped, only so many colors they can be. It doesn't have to mean anything that their eyes look like mine.*

*It doesn't have to.*

*Why do I feel like it does?*

"Mr. Lupin—Remus," Jean began, faltering. "There's so much to tell you. I don't even know where to start."

Somehow, this evidence of his visitors' fallibility put Remus a bit more at ease, and gave a boost to the small seed of attraction he thought might be sprouting. *I've always thought I'd never have a chance with a girl because I was so strange, but maybe a girl who has her own strangeness to deal with would understand...* "Starting at the beginning is usually a good idea."

"God created the heavens and the earth," said Reynard. "Or there was a microscopic bit of nothing which became an awful lot of everything. Or God created the microscopic bit of nothing and sat back to watch it become an awful lot of everything. Oh, I'm sorry, you wanted us to start a bit further forward than that, didn't you?"

Remus managed to catch the laugh before it got away, but didn't quite hide the smile. "If you wouldn't mind. I don't think we have enough time for the rest."

Jean rapped her brother on the side of the head with her knuckles, smiling herself. "Prat."

"It got you over your nerves. You can say thank you later."

"I'll say thank you now. What I'll do later is get you back." Her smile turned into a grin as Reynard grimaced. "That's right, be afraid. Now let me see." Her eyes went momentarily misty with thought, then cleared and focused on Remus once again. "Have you ever heard of the theory of parallel universes? Worlds existing side by side, all of them sure they're the only one, until something happens that breaches the walls and the impossible suddenly comes true?"

"I've read a bit about it." Remus leaned forward, intrigued despite himself. "Are you saying that you come from a parallel universe?"

"Yes. Originally, at least. At the moment, I suppose you'd say we come from an intersecting

universe, one that touches all the worlds we know about, and lets us touch them, within limits..."

Jean, Neenie as her brother called her, spun a good story, Remus discovered. He could imagine, could almost see, the chaotic, cacophonous, joy-filled household she called the Pack, the tried-by-fire trust of the group of friends known as the Pride. He understood the pain in her voice, in Reynard's eyes, as she described that love, that trust, destroyed by a faceless and impersonal force.

*I used to trust my friends that much. I thought they trusted me. And then the war—it has no face, no name, no address where I can find it and destroy it for everything it's done to me. Everything it's taken from me.*

*If I can help them, I should. I will.*

*I just don't understand how I could...*

"I'm terribly sorry about your family," he said as Neenie paused at the end of her explanation of Outer Time and the duties of a Legendbreaker. "And I can only assume that you're here because you need something from me to help save this world. Am I being horribly dense if I don't quite know what it is?"

"No, not at all." Neenie's cheeks turned a delicate pink. "Actually... I've already done it. Saved the world, I mean. More or less."

"Oh?"

Neenie pressed Reynard's hand lightly, released it, and stood up. A moment later, a small tricolored cat stood on Remus's rug, looking up at him with Neenie's eyes.

"I... see." Remus didn't consider himself stupid, and found two and two adding up into four for him without much effort. "I thought what was being reported was a bit far-fetched for simply a cat." He switched his gaze to Reynard. "Did you have any part in it?"

"Not a bit. I was otherwise occupied. Which is what we are here about, in a way." Reynard didn't flinch from Remus's eye contact, but held it steadily as though he were trying to look into Remus's mind. "Have you been having any strange thoughts lately? Thoughts that don't seem to be yours? Dreams, memories, any of that?"

Neenie turned back into herself with a loud crack. "So much for leading up to it gradually, Fox," she snapped. "Why don't you just ask him if he wants to jump up and hug us, if you're going to dive into it like that?"

"You were going round about the mulberry bush, and unless I'm remembering something wrong here, we don't exactly have all night—"

Remus cleared his throat loudly, and was gratified (*not to say surprised*) when both twins jumped, broke off their incipient argument, and turned to look at him with every evidence of respect. "Before tonight, I would have said no," he said. "Unless..." He'd had one or two bad nights earlier

in the year, with nightmares which now sounded eerily similar to the scene Neenie had described witnessing. "Perhaps, if I'd thought about it a bit, I would have said yes. Tonight, I can definitely say yes. Seeing you two—and no offense meant, Miss White, but especially you—"

She flushed a deeper pink than before. "It's Neenie."

"Nenie, then." Greatly daring, Remus crossed the room towards her. "Seeing you makes me feel different. Different than I was, different than I am. Not exactly strange dreams or memories, but something beyond the everydayness of my life. Something more."

Reynard was on his feet in one fluid, easy motion. "Hold on a second," he said, not quite threatening, but with a definite hint that he could become such on a moment's notice if it was required. "First off, you're going a trifle fast, she barely knows you—"

"Fox!" Neenie whirled on her brother. "That's disgusting! I can't believe you'd imply—"

"Think about who you look like!" Fox shot back. "And when we are! It's less than six months to our breakpoint, and you know exactly what happened that day, or you ought to! We've heard the story enough times!"

Nenie paled. "I hadn't thought of that. Oh dear." She shut her eyes. "Safkhet, goddess of wisdom, help me now," she murmured. "Draw me a straight path, for mine is crooked and difficult to see..."

"You can tell me what you're talking about anytime you like," said Remus, though in truth he wasn't sure that he wanted to know. *Whatever's going on here, it's a lot more complicated than I thought. Don't I have enough complications in my life?*

**Do I count?**

Remus stiffened, and Reynard's eyes went to him. He held up a finger in a "give me a moment" signal and turned his back. "I'm *not* making you up," he muttered under his breath, staring at his toes in their worn-out brown loafers in lieu of anything more neutral. "You're the reason they're here, aren't you? I'm just an incidental."

**I would assume so, to the first bit. Don't be so sure about the second. You heard what my girl was saying about Legendbreakers.** The proprietary warmth in the possessive pronoun surprised Remus somewhat, both in its strength and in its quality. It differed sharply in tone from what he thought he was beginning to feel on his own behalf.

*But is it really what I feel, or is it just bleedover from him?*

"Your girl," he answered, limiting the sarcasm in his tone as best he could, "said a great deal about Legendbreakers. Which bit were you referring to?"

**The bit about trying to make things better. Trying to let people live the lives they want. They've got to care about people to do that, care about them a lot. And they do. They may be**

**here looking for me, but they won't want you to lose by it.**

"Well, that's just too damn bad, isn't it?" Temper was rising into Remus's throat now, and refusing to be choked off. "I've already lost quite a bit by them. Like any vestige of respect I might have had for my so-called friends. Because they were so busy cooing over what *your girl* did for them—" The sarcasm got full play this time, and his voice swelled to match it. "—that they damn well *forgot* about me, and even if they came here right now to apologize, I don't know if I'd accept it, because I should have been the *first* person they told about something like this, not a bloody afterthought a full *day* later—"

The front door vibrated in its frame as three deep, booming thuds sounded from its other side. Neenie hissed deep in her throat. Reynard said something brief and obscene. "Decide now, whether you trust us or not," he ordered Remus. "We can get you out of here ahead of them, but you have to want to go. We won't drag you."

"Ahead of who? Of what?" Impatiently, Remus cast a Peephole Spell on the door. "It's just as likely to be Sirius or James as it is to be—"

He nearly dropped his wand. The voice in the back of his head repeated what Reynard had said, with elaborations.

Standing on his doorstep were three vaguely man-shaped figures. Their resemblance to human beings ended there. Human beings had faces, had hands and legs and hair and clothing. They weren't covered in viscous, rippling gray fluid which was never still.

**Not to be a cliché**, said the voice unsteadily, **but those things will do worse than kill you.**

*Don't worry, I'm convinced.* Remus turned around and found Neenie beckoning to him, pointing at a spot in the air which would have looked completely normal if it hadn't been for Reynard's heels disappearing through it. *I assume I go there?*

**That does seem like the safest bet.**

Grasping his wand firmly and sending up a silent prayer to Neenie's goddess of wisdom and any other deity which might happen to be watching, Remus dashed through the area Neenie was indicating.

And found himself standing securely on nothing at all, a starry void stretching away underneath his feet.

"Don't panic!" Reynard flung out a hand, as if to physically stop Remus from screaming or trying to run further. "We're perfectly safe—"

"No, we're not," Remus interrupted, wiggling his wand experimentally. It felt the same as usual in his hand, but unless he was very much mistaken, he was now in the "intersecting universe" Neenie had talked about. Rules might not be the same.



"Watch where you're pointing that thing. Magic works fine here." Reynard moved a pace or two to one side. "And in case you haven't noticed, you're breathing, you're standing upright and not falling, and Neenie's shutting the Threshold now so they can't follow us through—"

"Yes, but we can't possibly be safe yet." Remus turned away to hide both what he was doing and his smile of satisfaction about it. *Sometimes, balance comes in ways we never imagined. Such as the coincidence of an unexpected sight and a familiar phrase.* "We're missing the most important things."

"We are?" Neenie asked from behind him, sounding worried. "What do you mean?"

*If I'm going to go mad, I may as well go mad with style.*

Remus turned to face her and, with great dignity, draped the bright red bath sheet he had conjured around her shoulders. Reynard was presented with a gold one, and Remus displayed his own, with its prominent Gryffindor lion, before twisting it into a rope and tying it around his waist. "Now we're safe," he said with satisfaction. "We have our towels."

**Well played, sir,** the voice approved. **Well played indeed.**

Neither Neenie nor Reynard seemed inclined to pass comment, though this could have been because they were both laughing too hard to speak.

**Though I should point out,** the voice went on, **I'm not a symptom of insanity, since despite what I said earlier, talking to me isn't technically talking to yourself.**

Remus put his wand away and turned his attention inward. *I think I'd already accepted that,* he thought distinctly, shaping the words with clarity inside his mind. *But we never did establish who you are. Some relation of theirs? A flick of the eyes indicated the twins, now holding onto each other for balance. Another version of me, from one of those parallel universes Neenie was describing?*

**Yes, to both.** The voice was growing more distinct than ever. Remus imagined the speaker standing behind him, using a tone pitched only loud enough to carry to his ears. **You wondered why you thought of them as children—you were sharing some of my memories. They are my children, I raised them, and I would have done anything rather than see them suffer like this...**

"They don't seem to be suffering too much at the moment," Remus said dryly, watching Neenie fanning her face with one hand, Reynard blotting his eyes with the corner of his towel.

**Oh, no?** An Arctic chill crept into the voice. **Think again about that story Neenie told you. Now think about where I am, what relation I bear to you, and what that means for the way she must have found her brother. And the way they still have to find all the rest of us. This is reaction, nothing else. Relief at having completed one step of a long and painful task.**

*I... didn't think of that, Remus admitted silently. I apologize. What do you think you'll do next? And what about me? I don't suppose I can go home, not when those things were literally on my doorstep.*

"Would you want to go home?" It was quiet, barely more than a whisper, but it was an audible voice, as both twins' heads jerked up at the sound of it. "You seemed very bitter against your friends, and I can't blame you. It was wrong of them to forget you. Do you really want to go back to that?"

"M—" Neenie cut herself off, both hands clapped over her mouth, as the speaker drifted into view. Reynard seemed about to take a step forward, but pulled back, joy and frustration warring in his expression. Remus noted idly that his ability to be surprised seemed to have been used up for the day, while taking a long look at the translucent figure of his older self, rendered in washed-out color.

*At least I aged well.*

Paradoxically, although the older Remus had more gray sprinkled among the sandy brown of his hair, the lines on his face were less worn, in some cases gone altogether. He stood with his hands thrust casually into his pockets, smiling at his children with pride and love written so clearly on his features that Remus wanted to look away.

*Damn it, now I want to be him when I grow up. He looks happy, even after his world fell apart and he got tossed into my head...*

"Somehow I thought I'd find you two together," the older Remus was saying. "Am I the only other one yet?"

"Yes, but the more of us there are to look, the faster it will go," Neenie said eagerly. "As soon as we're sure the Reality Cops aren't waiting for us there, we'll head for our home domain, we only came to this one because we know they wouldn't dare come here—we'll seal you to our home, you'll be safe then, and we can show you everything we've done and work out who we'll look for next—"

"Ease up there, Neenie." Reynard laid a hand on his sister's shoulder. "You're forgetting something."

"What do you..." Neenie's voice trailed off as her eyes ranged to Remus. "Oh. You're right. I did forget."

"The sealing ritual requires a body," Reynard explained before either version of Remus could ask. "One occupied by a soul which plans to stay both in that body and in Outer Time for a while."

"Outer Time being this general area?" The older Remus circled a finger, indicating the starscape around them. "You mentioned this isn't your own home."

Neenie nodded. "We live south of here," she said. "This domain is my mentors'. They cleared us to use it as an entry point if we were ever being chased, because their anti-RC spells are better than ours."

"They've had a few hundred years longer to get them established." Reynard waved a hand impatiently. "The point is, we've got two souls here, and only one body between them. Now, I felt justified taking over this one I'm wearing, because the resident soul was both young and unlikely to have a decent life in his home world. But you're an adult," he said to Remus. "You had a life, as much as you're currently pissed off at most of the important people in it. You deserve a chance to go back to it, or to say the hell with it and go on to something else."

Remus nodded. A thought had appeared at the back of his mind, but he wasn't about to push it forward yet. More information was needed. "What happened to your original bodies?" he asked. "And your original world, for that matter? Could you still go back there?"

*Or can someone go into it who never belonged there in the first place?*

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Best Case**

Neenie shook her head. "The bodies are gone," she said. "And our world was merged. That's what happens when either we or the RC's change so much in a particular world that its major identifying differences go away. Past a certain point, it can't maintain its integrity anymore, and it just..." She interlinked her fingers. "...merges with the next world down the line. The differences fade out of people's minds when they see it isn't true any longer, and they assume they imagined it or dreamed it."

"We don't do it—honestly, we can't—unless all the people in one world are basically the same, personality-wise, as the ones they're going to be merged with," Reynard added. "Same age, same shaping factors, same fundamental choices. Otherwise we're no better than the RC's, forcing people into lives they never wanted. And it's still not our favorite thing to do."

"It sounds to me like a Memory Charm," Remus said thoughtfully. "At least, in the sense of morality. You merge worlds to maintain people's sense of continuity, to keep them from having too many illusions shattered. Your adversaries do it for their own convenience, and to further their own goals."

"Exactly." Reynard spoke casually, but there was a bite under his tone. "We never like doing it, but we will if we have to. They enjoy it. They revel in it."

"But I'm glad Miss Eve and Miss Suzie arranged for it back home." Neenie's chin came up, and Remus saw with a pang that her eyes were bright with tears. "It's best for everyone that way. How would they explain it, finding the Den empty, finding some of their own children gone, with no trace, no magic, no bodies? Better for it to just be a passing fantasy, a bad dream. The Pack missing, the Pride taken away? No, you imagined it, you made it up. See, here they are, they're just fine. And life rolls on, and no one ever knows that it was real, that we're gone, that we'll never see them again..."

The next portion of Remus's errant thought chose this moment to show itself. He turned to his older self as Reynard offered Neenie a fresh corner of towel for her eyes. "What happened to you six months from now?" he asked, before realizing quite how ridiculous this sounded. "Sorry. My now. Halloween of '81."

"I knew what you meant. And that would be a great many things, but the most important to me personally was meeting my wife." The older Remus cupped his hands at chest level, and a

statuette-sized figure rose from them. "She's Neenie's older sister as well as her guardian, and they look much alike."

"They certainly do." Remus studied the figure, watching the way the brown hair swung as the head turned back and forth, the curve of the lips in a secret smile.

"I... miss her. A great deal."

*Which would sound banal, written down, but isn't at all. It's the tone, I think. Very calm, almost too calm, but with that hint of a catch there at the end of it. As if he won't let himself cry for her, because he's afraid that if he starts, he'll never stop.*

*Am I so wrong to want that for myself?*

"What are you thinking of that you're afraid my cubs won't approve?" the older Remus asked, startling Remus into a jump.

"How did you—cubs?"

"A simple enough derivation. Werewolf, cubs." His older self smirked. "And if you're really going to try to lie to an older and sneakier version of yourself—"

Remus cut off his heated denial and reflected for a moment on the irony of himself winding him up.

Then he explained.

"I don't see any holes in it, though I have an admittedly limited view of the situation," his older self said when the whole thought had been laid out. "Nenie would be the true expert. Shall we run it past her?"

"Would you mind? She..." Remus trailed off, unable to accurately describe his reaction to the girl.

"I'd be more surprised if she *didn't* give you conflicting reactions." His older self looked thoughtful. "And now I have to wonder, if I'd been of her generation, or she of mine..."

"There's probably a story about that somewhere," said Remus, waving a hand at the starry landscape all around them. "Or a world where that happens, if you like that better."

"Probably." His older self chuckled. "Maybe someday I'll inspire Valentina Jett to write it for you, so you can see how it comes out."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that."

Side by side, they approached the twins.

---

*I should know better than to ever think I can't be surprised anymore.*

"I can't believe I'm hearing this." Neenie gave a dubious look to the younger version of her Pack-father. "You want us to—"

"To merge me, yes. Or whatever you call it." He wobbled a hand back and forth in an I-don't-care gesture. "I leave this body for the use of my esteemed colleague here." A slight inclination of the head towards the washed-out figure of Moony as Neenie was used to seeing him, waiting patiently one pace back and to the left. "And you take my wayward soul and slide it into the body of the me who lives in your world, the one you came from, but at the time where I belong."

"I think I see how this adds up," said Fox, a bit of his lower lip caught in his teeth. "Not much was different between our worlds at the point where you are. Maybe a person or two, but you'll catch on to that."

"Absolutely." The younger Moony grinned, momentarily highlighting the resemblance between him and Fox. "I always was a fast learner."

"But your friends," Neenie protested. "They'll be dead, the way they would have been in your world without me—"

"I know it." Blue eyes closed over a momentary sheen of tears. "I'll miss them terribly. I'll always wish I could have done something. But realistically, I can't. I don't have your training, I don't know the things you know, and there's no time for you to teach me. If I'm going to go into this world, I have to play it as it flies. Which means, since there was no saving James and Lily the first time around..."

Neenie felt a breathless little laugh bubbling in her chest. "And here I thought saving them was a good thing."

"It was," said the older Moony, using the firm tone Neenie knew meant there would be no argument tolerated. "We'll discuss it further later. For now, since this young man seems set on his undoubtedly very foolish course of action..."

The younger Moony raised an eyebrow. The older Moony raised one back.

Fox muffled a fit of snickers in his towel.

---

The next morning, when James and Sirius arrived at Remus's home to check on him, they found the house deserted and a brief note lying on the kitchen table, beside a pile of neatly folded beach towels.

*Dear Padfoot and Prongs,*

*The war's over and you have your own lives to live. I'm off to find mine, and wish you both all the*

*happiness you deserve. Don't expect to see me back. My best to Lily and Harry.*

*Moony*

*P.S. The answer is 42. Now find the question.*

"The answer is 42... what the hell?" Sirius dropped the note on top of the towels and looked at James. "You don't think the Death Eaters..."

"No, it's a Muggle thing, that and the towels. Lily likes it, she and Moony used to talk about it for hours." James traced the head of the Gryffindor lion on the uppermost towel thoughtfully. "It's just another way to say that he's off to look for the meaning of life."

"Well, whatever it is, I hope he finds it."

---

The next morning, Remus Lupin awakened with the feeling that he'd had a strange, terrifying, yet marvelous dream, that he'd glimpsed worlds beyond his own and peered into the future.

He forgot most of the details by his second cup of tea, helped along by the series of shocking developments that filled the pages of the *Daily Prophet*. The vague feeling of disquiet he felt when he saw that Sirius Black was being blamed for the deaths of James and Lily Potter, Peter Pettigrew, and twelve Muggles, he put down to anger and betrayal. Sirius had, after all, been his friend.

In later years, as the cubs of the Pack grew up around him, he once or twice experienced a slight jar when he looked into Hermione's face and saw hazel eyes rather than blue. Being a wise man, he declined to spend his time wondering why this was happening or what it might mean. He had more important things to do.

Kissing Danger, as always, ranked at the very top of this list.

---

The next morning, a man called John White sat beside a small fireplace, watching two scenes at once in the flames. On one side, his best friends read his farewell note and (though he knew they'd never think about it this way) brushed the complication that was him out of their lives with a faint sigh of relief. On the other, the young man he had once been prepared to face the hardest six months of his life.

*To date, that is.*

A simple gesture of wiping clean banished both sets of pictures from the fire, and he picked up a double handful of the flames, enjoying the humming warmth they sent through his hands and arms.

*Strange that this power should change worlds with me, when my —he caught himself before*

thinking the forbidden word and instead shaped what he meant in the air with the fire—*my transformative power did not.*

"Thinking about Ani—dammit!"

"Anidammit? I don't believe I know that spell." John turned to grin at his son, who was scowling at him, hair still damp from the shower he'd heard going upstairs. "I didn't feel like breakfast yet. Come sit with me?"

Reynard loped across the room and sat down beside his father, watching the flames shape themselves from human to lion and back again. "It's to do with bodies and souls again," he said, leaning his head against John's shoulder as though he were a much younger boy. "We retain our magic, because we have that in our souls, and any skill we had learned or obtained that was purely magical, we ought to still have as well. But our... transformations had a bodily aspect to them, with all those spells and the potion that we had to take, so we've lost that for now."

"For now?" John gave in to the temptation to run his fingers through the waves of Reynard's hair, letting the seemingly idle gesture say everything he knew his words never could.

"Mmmm." Reynard's eyes were half-closed, his voice going dreamy. "Miss Eve has a supply of that potion, that one-ingredient-away-from-done way you can keep it. She started a dose brewing to the finish for me, and she *said* she would make it a double just in case the first one got spoiled, but now I'm not so sure..."

"That is good news." John returned all except a palmful of the flames to the fireplace and began to work with that amount, molding his material into the two shapes he had seen in his mind.

*The magic of this place seems more personal than the sort I'm used to. Lucky for me, I can keep my preferred weapon and power-source... He chuckled under his breath, sliding the first part of his project onto its proper finger. ...close at hand. And the rest of it... He fastened the second portion around his neck and tucked it under the simple black T-shirt he was wearing with his jeans. Near to my heart. As will be the person it represents, until we find her again.*

"Good mor—oh, I'm sorry." Neenie lowered her voice as she came around the corner and saw her brother's head on her father's shoulder. "Did you sleep well?"

"I slept very well, thank you." John stroked a spot at the corner of Reynard's jaw, making him twitch and mumble something. "This one seems to be tired of me already."

"I *said* ," Reynard grumbled, opening one eye, "I'm not asleep, I'm just relaxed."

"So you always snore when you're relaxing?" Neenie had her arms crossed.

"I was not snoring!" Reynard sat upright in indignation. "Dad would've told me—Dad, was I snoring?"

John pretended to consider this for several long moments, until he judged Reynard's temper to be



rising in earnest. "I didn't hear any snoring," he said. "But then, I'm not as young as I was yesterday. My hearing may be going."

Reynard shot him a glare and stalked out of the room, still complaining under his breath. "...as young as he was yesterday...well, whose fault is that? No law says what age you have to be in Outer Time...just felt funny with us being close to his age..."

Neenie covered a giggle and came to sit where Reynard had been. "Dad," she murmured, nestling her head into the same place on John's shoulder. "D-Dad." Another giggle. "I tried saying the other thing, could you tell? The spell works perfectly. Just a little stammer, a slip of the tongue, and no one would ever know it's because there's something we're not allowed to say."

"I'm glad you thought of it," John agreed. *As the Reality Cops are definitely not welcome in this little corner of Outer Time, and it would be the outside of ridiculous to have them called here by the inappropriate use of my childhood nickname by my own children.*

"Dad," Neenie said again, with deep satisfaction. "It sounds so strange... and at the same time, it sounds exactly right."

"It most certainly does." John slid his arm around his daughter and exhaled a quiet sigh of contentment. For this moment, even with so many of their loved ones still missing, he had everything he needed.

*How many men can say that?*

---

After breakfast, they clustered around one end of the long table, Fox's scribbled list of initials under all three of their hands.

"We're just looking to see who's together in which world," Neenie said for the third time, twisting the hem of her gray shirt between her fingers. "We're not looking at which world yet, or even when in time. Just to find the pairings. Or triplings, I guess, since they'll have to have one with three because I wasn't there. We're all right with that?"

"Easy, Kitten." John stroked a soothing hand across her back. "If you tense up, you'll make this harder. We need a free flow of power among all of us or we might get twisted results."

"Sorry, I'm sorry. It's just..."

"Just what?" Reynard leaned one elbow on the table and propped his chin in his hand. "Just that you've been thinking of us as gone for the better part of two years, and now, suddenly, here we are, live and in person?"

"Well. That might be part of it."

"Because we can always leave if that would help..." Reynard started to get up.

"Fox! " Neenie's outraged shriek had John wincing back. "Don't you *dare!* "

"Not daring. Sitting down. Shutting up." Reynard suited action to word three times, swiping a finger across his lips for the third.

"If you two are quite finished," John said mildly, "we might want to get started with this. I think it will settle all our minds if we have some idea of the scope of the task in front of us."

"Ready when you are," Fox said, extending his hand to Neenie. She took it in her left, and with her right made one of her flowing, runic gestures. John cupped his hands around his twins' clasped ones and drew on the power in the wide gold band engraved with a design of stylized flames that he had materialized for himself earlier that morning.

"Pack together, Pride forever." Neenie swallowed once before continuing. "Where once were many, now are few, but strength we still command. Show us the pairs of those who share our lives, our hearts, our hand."

*Very good. She declares our power, telling anything that might be listening not to take us lightly just because there are only three of us, and states exactly what she wants, invoking the original Pack-oath to make sure she gets the people she's after and no one else. We should be seeing results in—*

John frowned. Had those lines been on the list of initials before?

*No, I don't believe they were.*

"It looks like we have our answer," he announced, and both twins jumped. "A bit deeply into our spellcasting, are we?"

"I haven't done it like this before." Fox slid his hand out of the three-way clasp. "And I still haven't decided how I will do it on my own from now on. Though I'm starting to get an idea. I like what you did," he said to his father, indicating the wedding band.

"Oh, Dad, it's beautiful." Neenie sniffled once. "Though it does make me miss... and why am I crying about it and not looking at the list that will tell me more about where I can find her?"

Three brown heads bent over the single sheet of paper.

"Wait," Fox said dubiously, tapping his fingers against one pair of initials. "What are they doing in the same world? I thought we agreed the RC's would want to break up as many pairs as possible, not leave them together."

"I know." Neenie's brow furrowed. "And these three? That can't be right. We must have done it wrong. Either I asked for the wrong information or someone is trying to steer us wrong deliberately..."

"Not necessarily." John kept his voice light, casual, and was delighted to see that he had not lost

his knack of cutting through the twins' wrangling without having to shout.

*Though it is a bit disconcerting having two pairs of eyes that look just like mine staring back at me.*

"You and your friends worked out a lot of good things, and I look forward to meeting them so I can thank them in person," he said. "And I know I taught you never to underestimate an enemy. Now I'm going to teach you the next lesson. Don't overestimate them either. Just because you've thought of what you would do in their place, doesn't mean that's what they did."

"But—" two voices protested in unison. John sat back and let them argue themselves to a standstill, which took a surprisingly short period of time.

"Why don't we assume this list is good until we get evidence to the contrary?" Reynard said at last, sliding it into the middle of the table. "We were never going to use it as anything except a preliminary battle plan anyway. Now we've got it, and it's not what we expected. So... we'll adjust. It's what we do."

Neenie looked as though she wanted to resume the discussion, but John's slight headshake kept her mouth closed, though not without a sulky look.

*Sulky is good. Sulky is normal. She'll sulk a few minutes, then go off by herself and brood, and be back when she's ready to be a human being again.*

*Or possibly a cat.*

"So what shall we do while we're getting used to each other again?" he asked. "Fox, you said you had an idea for your own type of magic. I had one for you, and I wouldn't be too surprised if they were similar..."

---

One domain north, the woman who had not always been called Eve turned away from her cauldron, breaking the scrying spell she had cast on the surface of the liquid within.

The potion she was brewing was not one which would react well to tears.

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Vital Questions**

*How much longer should we wait?*

John stopped at the top of the hill behind the cottage to catch his breath, pulling his water bottle out of its holster at his waist. He considered himself lucky to have a physique which stayed naturally lean, but his new profession required a higher level of physical fitness than he'd been accustomed to needing.

*Because you never know who you'll be chasing, or what will be chasing you.*

He drank several swallows of water, then poured a handful over his head, shaking off the excess as he would have in the lion's form which was now restored to him, courtesy of Eve's potion. Eve herself had declined to deliver the concoction, sending it by her partner Suzie instead. John was of two minds about the reason for this.

*I could imagine that she's simply antisocial, or that she has something personal against me, but on the whole I prefer the first thing I thought of when Neenie told me one of her mentors was a redheaded witch. After all, doesn't every Legendbreaker have to come from some world, somewhere?*

As well, the information Suzie had delivered along with the potion argued against Eve having a specific grudge against John.

*I still can't believe I forgot. The one factor that has shaped my life more than any other—I brought it up myself, explaining why the twins are my "cubs"—and I never stopped to think how I was going to manage being alone in a house with them, without Danger, when the full moon came around again...*

But, as he was slowly coming to understand, Outer Time was different.

*The massive stone castle floating unsupported in outer space couldn't have given me a clue?*

Domains, the homes of anywhere from one to seventeen Legendbreakers, obeyed the wills of their creators, as long as said creators had enough power to impose that will. Power could come from many sources: from the desire and belief of an individual Legendbreaker, from the mutual respect and understanding between a partnered pair, from the trust of a student for her teachers and the

teachers' answering hope, or from the love of a couple, a family, or anything in between.

*That's to start with. Then they go out and perform their missions, during which they try to improve people's lives. To give people more hope, more happiness, more freedom to choose their own path. If and when they succeed in that mission, some of the power that hope and happiness generates comes to them, and that's what keeps their domains running. A positive feedback loop.*

But wherever the power came from, whether it was hope and happiness or magic or little green apples, as Suzie had reminded Neenie in her bluntest tones, "You run this place. You set it up on a familiar basis with the forest, with the sun, the rain, the wind, the moon, so you don't have to think about it every second of every day, but that doesn't mean you have to let it have its own way with everything."

*In other words, if Neenie doesn't want the moon to be full, then the moon won't be full. Or I should say, if we don't want the moon to be full, since she's given us full co-ownership in the domain already.*

The only hitch was that running the domain with a conscious intervention, such as skipping a particular moon phase, required significantly more power than simply allowing it to continue on its preset course.

*It only makes sense. Even with magic, nothing comes for free.*

Although they were still within acceptable limits on their power usage, he had noted a certain fuzziness in the air on the morning after what ought to have been their last full moon night, and was worried that in order to keep the domain going, Neenie, or Neenie and Fox together, might have to go on a mission before he was fit to go with them.

He chuckled at himself, starting his jog down the hill. *And why, when they were the ones who rescued me, I'm fussing about them going on missions alone, I have no idea. Except that it's normal fatherly behavior, and if there's one thing I can do to help out around here, it's that. Love them, keep them happy, make things as normal as they get with us.*

*But there's only so much I can do by myself.*

And that, John concluded, told him everything. If he was starting to feel the need for other company, then the wait needed to be over.

*Ready or not, Inner Time, here we come.*

---

*What don't we know that we need to?*

Fox lay at his ease in the little nest he'd woven high in a tree a few minutes' walk from the cottage. In his left hand, he held a branch of a precise length and thickness, and in his right a tool his father had made for him, a tiny lance of controlled fire. He wanted to be certain of his moves before he

risked his one and only wand.

"There's the obvious things." He burned a hole in one of the stick's ends, as though he intended to remove its core. "What worlds our missing people are in, what parts of their lives they've been placed in—we don't even know if the ones who are in the same world have been placed at the same time. Might want to check if that would be feasible. But there's some stuff none of us even want to think about."

*Like, what if one of them doesn't want to come? What if one of them was tired of us, tired of Pack or Pride or both, and just never had a chance to say so? Or what if one or more of them did get rehabilitated, drowned in the source personality? We don't know if it was just the Pack-oath that protected me, or if the twin-bond had something to do with it as well.*

"Dad's a hopeful sign on that front." Following the markings he'd penciled onto the stick, Fox burned holes slightly smaller than his fingertips at carefully defined intervals, stopping when they intersected the central shaft. "Though I suppose his bond with Danger—with Mum, I guess we'll have to call her now—could have helped him out. And everybody's going to be different anyway. We can't know for sure about anyone until we get there and talk to them."

*And in that case, why am I borrowing trouble? He blew hard on his stick, sending ashes flying in all directions. We'll either find them or we won't. They'll either still be themselves, or they won't. And they'll either want to come with us, or they won't. But that does lend itself to a problem it wouldn't hurt to think about right now.*

Setting aside his current piece of work, Reynard closed his eyes. Softly, he whistled a few bars of one of the hundreds of songs which had been woven into his life with the Pack since the night he'd arrived, just shy of four years old, a frightened, confused, and badly spoiled little brat.

*All in all, I think I turned out fairly well. Time to see if I can return the favor, or maybe pass it along.*

He opened his eyes. Instead of his treetop nest, he lay now on soft green grass, the ground beneath him softer and more elastic than it should have been. The white-blond boy a few feet away looked up from his game of chase with a tricolored kitten and squealed. "Fox! You back!"

"Told you I would be, didn't I?" Fox made a beckoning gesture with one hand, and the little boy shrieked in delight as the ground tossed him into the air, depositing him with a bounce at Fox's side. The kitten regarded both of them for a moment, then turned to the supremely important business of washing her tail.

The boy put his hand over Fox's, looking at him with a confiding air. "Like you," he said. "Like you lot. No yell, no hit, no mad. P'ay wif me, p'ay wif Neenie." He motioned towards the kitten. "Like you lot."

"Thanks, D." Fox scooped the boy up and tossed him once, eliciting another happy shriek. "I like you too. Now, I have an important question to ask you." He sat up and settled the boy in his lap,

smoothing his hand in a circular motion in front of them, what he thought of as the washing-the-windows gesture.

On the section of air he had "washed," a picture appeared, that of a man and a woman with their arms around each other, his gray-streaked head a few inches above her bushy brown mane, blue eyes and brown smiling out at the world. The boy turned to look up at Fox. "Who dat?" he demanded with no sign of surprise or fear.

*Well, he was raised magic. He must have seen little shows like that his whole life. "That's my mum and dad, D. They're pretty special, and I like them a lot. How about you? Would you like to meet them?"*

The boy looked suspicious, but slowly nodded.

*I'll have to fake it, but at least it will give him an idea. Fox concentrated, calling up all his memories of his parents, then turning his picture three-dimensional and instilling those memories into the dream-figures as behavior patterns. If he doesn't like it, if he wants his own mum and dad back...*

*But I can't imagine he would. He set the little boy on his feet as dream-Danger came to life, dream-John only a step behind her. How could he even know? He never saw them except when his father was punishing him or his mother wanted to show him off. Plus, he's too little to have much of a memory. He'll go with the last person who was nice to him. And since no one ever was nice to him except the flipping house-elf until Neenie showed up...*

He supposed he could have kept the little boy here, a perpetual child in his imaginary playground, but children did have a way of growing up, unless some terrible trauma had convinced them that it was unsafe to grow any older than they were.

*And being smacked around a bit for crying too loudly, along with benign neglect, doesn't count as terrible trauma. It's still wrong on his parents' part, but it won't stall him where he is forever. Which means he's going to grow up, and there's always the possibility that when he does, he'll decide he wants his body back.*

Dream-John flipped the little boy upside down, making him scream with laughter.

*Simplest solution? Get him to agree to what Dad's other self suggested. Then find the best possible situation for him, and send him off. He's still young enough, unformed enough, that he can blend with almost anyone, given enough starting similarities.*

Surreptitiously, he wiggled a finger at the kitten, who broke off her washing and trotted over. "Time for a makeover," he told her, and she let her jaw drop in a cat's smile.

*Neenie amazes me sometimes. I never thought she would have been willing to go that deeply into her mind, to find an actual piece of herself who was still young and convince her to hop over here and play nice with little D. But we were both thinking at that point that this would be longer-term*

*than it's turning out to be, and it wouldn't be good for him to have only dream-people around him for years and years. Even house-elves would be better—they may be squeaky, ungrammatical, and annoying, but they're still people.*

Shaking himself out of his momentary philosophical interlude, he began to reshape Neenie-the-kitten's body, enlarging her to about twice her original size, morphing her skeleton from feline to canine, and turning her fur a shaggy gray. *Just so he isn't too shocked, if he decides he likes what the dream-folks have to say.*

"Watch this," dream-Danger was saying to the little boy now, pointing to dream-John. "See what he can do."

The transformation from sandy-haired man to tuft-tailed wolf had the boy clapping his hands. "Do 'gain," he demanded. "Do 'gain!"

"Can you say please?"

"P'eese?"

Dream-Danger laughed. "Very good. My turn now." She gave him a little push, sending him over to dream-John, who had retransformed. "In three, two, one..."

"Yay!" The boy applauded again as woman became wolf.

"You could learn to do that too, if you came to stay with us," dream-John interjected cannily. "Would you like that?"

The boy looked uncertain. "Nenie come too?" he asked, glancing over towards Fox, then did a comic double-take. "*Nenie?* "

Wolf-Nenie bounded over to him and licked his face, making him giggle and push her away. "Nenie! Yuck!"

*And that's why I picked out the world I did to try and convince him to hop over to. Fox leaned back on his hands, surveying his work with satisfaction. It combines the manor, which is the only home he's ever known, with a strong influence for good from the word go, and adds on the one person he's been bonding with all this time. And when you toss in getting to learn how to turn into a wolf... or, in this case, changing automatically when the sun goes down...*

"It's not a perfect world," he murmured, as dream-Danger got wolf-Nenie chasing her own tail. "But none of them are. He'll be as safe as they can make him, and he'll have the chance to build his life into whatever he wants it to be."

*Which is all any of us can really hope for, for ourselves or for the people we're trying to help.*

He summoned a dream-copy of the item he'd been working on in his treetop nest and raised it to his lips. It was time to see if he'd succeeded.



*Because the next time I face the RC's, they won't get to have it all their own way.*

*I'm a Legendbreaker now, and we don't quit until we get results.*

---

*Where should we go first?*

Neenie, unconsciously anticipating her father and brother, had the list of initials out already and was studying it. Underneath Fox's original, she had rewritten the sets in the groupings their spell had provided, then circled each group.

*Four groups, four circles, four worlds...*

*At least we know the rules, the players, the layout. It's why Legendbreakers try to recruit people from each of the major series of worlds, because no matter how good you are at blending, nothing beats actually being native. Each world in a series is a little bit different, but there are enough similarities that we shouldn't set off anyone's radar too badly.*

But they still needed exact directions, both in space and in time, before they could take on any of these missions. Their ridge covered seven fully Chronicled years, along with twenty or so indeterminate years, and the people they were looking for could be anywhere in that timespan.

*Well, except one. Neenie smiled fondly at the three letters "MLB," which shared a circle with "SVB" and "ACB." It takes a direct intervention by a Chronicler to change someone's age or date of birth. The RC's wouldn't dare. So wherever in the worlds she may be, our little Pearl will still have been born on the first of June, 1983...*

She stopped, blinking at the paper.

*Which ought to be impossible. Unless they have a Chronicler's help, which, please, Safkhet, no. But unless they do...*

"All right, Neenie, focus," she murmured aloud, setting the paper down on the table and doodling absently in the air, her fingers leaving multicolored trails behind. "Nothing says they have to explain where she came from, or tell the truth about how old she is. She never shows up in the ridge at all, so wherever they've stashed her, it's quiet, outside the stream of the story. We'll probably find her flirting with every boy she can find just to pass the time."

*And we know she's somewhere, because she did exist. She was our pest of a little sister. We shouted at her, she drove us utterly mad, and we loved her. She smirked. Score one for our side—a person who's been loved is real, full stop, end of story, and cannot be destroyed by the RC's, no matter how hard they try. They can rehabilitate, but surprise, Pearl hasn't got any source character from our ridge to be rehabilitated to, so they're stuck with her as she is.*

*Unless...*

The glowing tangle at the ends of Neenie's fingers began to pulsate. "They took Fox a long way back on his rehabilitation," she said, needing the sound of a voice, any voice, even her own, to keep the thoughts from spinning inside her head until they exploded. "Almost as far as they could go, because they knew he couldn't be changed any other way. But everywhere within our series, even in the tells where she's older than she is in our main, Pearl was born within Chronicled years."

*Which means they could take her back to the very beginning. Start at the first instant of her existence, and control everything she sees and hears and touches from that time on. How long could her memories of the Pack and Pride hold out if she's being, not just passively attacked the way Fox was, but actively worn down, taught that she doesn't matter, that she came from nowhere and deserves nothing?*

"Which they believe." Neenie swallowed against the foul taste in the back of her mouth. "The RC's and whoever controls them, whoever pushes their buttons and points out the worlds to destroy and the ones to leave alone. Because she's native to a tell and not a ridge, they would say with perfect sincerity that she shouldn't be allowed to go on existing. And they'll try to make her believe it too."

*They don't even have to do the dirty work of grinding her down themselves. I know plenty of people in our world who would love to do it for them, because of who she is and where she came from...*

"And where she came from is Letha." Neenie raked her hands into her hair, making it shine momentarily green and blue, as the next step in the logical sequence came clear to her. "They'll start with Letha, they'll take her as soon as she's pregnant, or maybe even before—Safkhet, what if —"

A sudden certainty crashed through her, and she snatched up the list with her left hand and traced the rune for "time" with her right. *Show me when they were placed*, she demanded mentally, and touched the glowing glyph to the three sets of initials.

Two years appeared, one hovering over "SVB," the other between "ACB" and "MLB."

*That's what I thought.* Neenie set the list down, her throat painfully tight. *That's what I thought. The worst possible time, for both of them. And if we come in openly and at full force, if we kick the door in with swords waving and guns blazing, then the RC's can use whatever weapons they like as well and the whole world could end up destroyed.*

"Legendbreakers work in the shadows," Eve's voice murmured in Neenie's memory. "We do our best work in the unChronicled moments and the indeterminate times. Or if not, if we have to come into the open, we make one small change and let its consequences spread naturally."

"And even then, we have to be anonymous," Suzie's voice took over. "It has to be a case of, 'Who was that masked woman, anyway?'"

*Or in my case, that masked cat.* Neenie smiled thinly at her own joke and sat down at the table,

pulling a pencil out of thin air to do some calculations.

*Once we go into this world, our time is running. The RC's will notice any big interference with their work fairly quickly, and move to stop us from getting the other set of targets. And just to make it more fun, because all of us have had milestones at about a year's length of Inner Time—the culmination of my undercover work, and Dad's and Fox's stints under rehabilitation—that's our most natural entry point, a year after placement for each of our targets, and the RC's will know that and be double-blocking everywhen but then.*

*We may still be able to pull this off, but we're going to have to make it fast...*

---

*Why the hell did Kreacher suddenly decide it would be funny to damn near dislocate one of Buckbeak's wings?*

Sirius Black swore as the hippogriff's viciously sharp beak clashed next to his ear. "Buckbeak! Cool it, for Merlin's sake! I'm trying to help you!"

Buckbeak squealed and kicked out with a hind leg, overturning a table. Sirius cursed again and levitated it to a corner behind him, out of his way. "Hold still, dammit. I can't help you if you won't hold still..."

At last, the wrenched wing was settled back into place, its feathers smoothed down and the bandage tied on over them. Sirius let out a breath of relief, raked a hand through his sweat-damp hair, and sat down on the floor, out of Buckbeak's way. "I'm getting too old for this," he muttered, starting to lean back on one elbow.

The elbow rapped into something hard, prompting the most vicious curse yet. "What the..." Sirius trailed off, staring down at the underside of the table.

Engraved into the wood, stained a rusty brown with what he suspected was blood, three uneven lines of lettering bore witness to a piece of his past he'd thought was nothing more than the pent-up desires of his twelve wasted years.

*Meghan Lily Black*

*Born in this house, 1 June, 1983*

*Daughter of Sirius Black and Aletha Freeman*

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Worst Case**

Fox crossed the border of his domain at his animal form's fastest lope, heading west. No visible boundary markers existed, no sudden changes from one type of surroundings to another as there would have been if he had gone north. Lin and Nima and their partners, including the one he was going to see, clearly preferred a natural-looking domain, similar to Fox's own.

*Which I can only hope indicates our minds work along the same lines. I'd agree to train anyone who came to me asking for my help with something I understood well. Doesn't mean he will.*

*But there I go with the borrowing trouble again. If he won't help me, I'll find someone who will, or I'll work it out myself.*

*How hard can it be?*

He came around a final bend, slowed to a stop, and retransformed. Two small stone towers, round and crenellated on top, were joined at the top by a walkway which arched down on either side, giving the impression of a very grand gateway to a nonexistent castle.

*Like the builder ran out of money after he finished the front door, so he never went any further. I suppose Lin and Nima live in one, and in the other one...*

Movement outside the right-hand tower caught his eye. A man was standing up from his seat beside the door.

*A couple years older than me, or that's what I'd think if I'd met him in Inner Time. Black hair and fair skin, which usually means blue eyes, and enough height to him, along with enough breadth on those shoulders, to take care of himself if he has to.*

The man fit Neenie's description of "medium-sized, dark, and charming," and he certainly wasn't Lin, so at a guess, Fox had found the person he was looking for.

"You Jason?" Fox asked, strolling forward, hands loose at his sides.

"Who's asking?" The voice was soft, but held hints of carrying power beyond its apparent size, along with a trace of a musical accent.

"Name's Fox. New neighbor of yours over to the east."

Hooking his thumbs into the pockets of his cargoes, Jason looked Fox up and down. "Bit short for a full name, isn't it?"

"I've got Reynard for fancy, but that might get confusing with your lady around. And there's no point in tacking the White onto the end when it's just us. That answer your question?"

"It does." For the first time, Jason smiled, and Fox understood his sister's third descriptor perfectly. "So what can I do for Neenie's twin?"

"How did you—"

"Reyna's been a fan of yours from way back." Jason's eyes, up close the expected vivid blue, homed in on Fox's right hip pocket. "Might I guess you're looking for some help with that?"

"Why don't I just wear a sign on my forehead?" Fox extracted the item he'd created and held it out for Jason's inspection. "Twelve and a half inches long, made of hazel wood, dragon heartstring coiled around the central shaft. I had some fun getting the finger holes right without burning through it."

"Some nice work on this." Jason turned the wand-flute over in his fingers, hefted it once or twice, then after glancing at Fox for permission, held it to his lips and blew. The pure, sweet tone which emerged won another smile from him. "Very nice work. Don't think I could improve on it. So it's not craftsmanship you're looking for help with."

"No." Fox wanted to hesitate, wanted to take another breath, to delay in any way he could, but his baby sister and his other set of parents were depending on him. "I hear you can teach me a song that controls time."

The smile vanished. "I'll know why you're asking first."

"Are you familiar with our ridge?" Fox took his flute back and traced his finger down its length, finding the rune for patience he'd carved near its end.

"Tolerably so."

"End of our hero's fifth year," Fox began, and walked Jason through the steps of their preliminary plan. Jason listened in silence, his face giving away nothing.

"So you see, it's really our best shot," Fox finished. "Only it's going to take five seconds at the very least to set it all up, and there just isn't that kind of time in the scene. Besides, we can't be seen doing it. I thought the most obvious answer was a momentary time stop. Get everything ready, then restart the scene and it all plays out the way people expect. Or so they think."

Jason nodded. "You're a troublemaker," he stated, the same way he would have said that Fox's hair was brown. "I thought you might want the song for a silly prank, a joke on your sister. It seems I've underestimated you, and for that I apologize."

"Not necessary, but accepted all the same."

"Thank you. I do know the song you're seeking, and it was written originally for a wind instrument, so there's a stroke of luck for you. But it's a dangerous thing one way and another to be meddling with time. If you slip, play it so much as one note wrong, you could shatter your bonds with Outer Time forever and strand yourself in a world too dark for your liking."

Jason raised a hand when Fox started to speak. "I mean that as no slur on your abilities, merely as a caution. The best of us can flub, all the more when much depends on it. And even should you play the tune note-perfect, you'll still be calling the attention of the RC's. They've no desire for anyone to be altering time in the worlds they've touched but themselves. But none of that matters to you at all, now does it?"

"My family needs me."

"And there's an end to it." Jason nodded. "Come inside. I'll lay the wards so you can learn the song without freezing everything around you, and teach you how to do the same before you go."

"Thanks. I owe you one."

"What else are neighbors for?"

---

Kreacher the house-elf fussed around his mistress's room, removing the knickknacks she kept on a small table near the window.

*Mistress will not notice the small change, or if she does, it is easy to say that a leg of the table is wobbling and must be replaced. Mistress does not need to know where the table is required, not when the knowledge will only pain her and give her grief. The table will be required only for a little while, for a few short months, and then it can be returned and all will be well.*

He hated deceiving his mistress, especially on so vital a matter as this, but he knew that she would never understand. The new master who had stepped out of the magical portal in the air nearly a year ago, the master who had added to Kreacher's power from his own so that the plan could be fulfilled, might be able to explain it to her.

*Perhaps Kreacher will ask it of him, the next time he comes.*

But until that day, or even if that day never arrived, Kreacher would continue to do what the house-elves of his line had always done.

*The masters must be served. Served and kept safe, yes, safe from the terrible world, from the dangers that lie out there. If they are not kept safe, perhaps they will die, die and leave none to come after them, and what would Kreacher do then?*

He smiled gloatingly and levitated the table out of the room. Thanks to his new master, it was not

a dilemma which would arise.

*The Mistress will be shocked at first, but that is why she must not know until all is in readiness. Kreacher is tricking her, that is true, but tricking her only to give her what she most desires. When she has it safe in her hands, in her arms, she will ask no questions...*

---

"This is impossible."

Sirius Black knelt beside the same table Kreacher had once removed from this room, staring at the date carved into its underside, a date more than thirteen years in the past. The date, according to the other lines of carving, when his daughter had been born.

"It's just flat-out impossible." Even to his own ears, he sounded like a man trying to convince himself, and hurried to put reasons to the impossibility. "For one thing, the timing doesn't work at all. I'd been in Azkaban for a year when this kid must've been conceived. Unless you're going to argue I was able to sneak out for a quickie..."

But as he laid his fingers against the name carved next to his own, the name of the one girl he'd known at Hogwarts who had ever intrigued him for longer than the time it took to get her into bed, a memory floated to the surface of his mind. Hazy, incomplete, but persistent, it coupled the stark stony chill of his prison cell with the warmth, the taste and the touch, the smooth skin and full lips of a woman named Aletha.

*And even there, it was good. It was always good with her.*

"Which means..." Sirius traced the jagged lines which formed Aletha's name. "I know it means something, but I'm not good at the logic stuff. You really need Moony for that."

*Make it like a story. You like stories. Aletha was there, with you, in Azkaban. It's impossible, it must have been a dream, but it was still good. Except...*

"Except that not even dreams are good, in Azkaban." Sirius's hand closed into a fist. "So it wasn't a dream. It happened. But that doesn't make it less impossible!"

*So find the possibility. What else do you know about it, other than that it happened?*

"There was a kid. A little girl. Meghan Lily." Sirius tried to imagine her, and found it surprisingly easy. *She would have had my eyes and her mother's smile, and never slowed down for anything, and she would have been the world to me from the first moment I held her in my arms...*

Shaking off the reverie, he moved to the second line of the carving. "Why would she have been born here? Aletha was a Muggleborn, Mother wouldn't have let her cross the threshold, not even if she was carrying my child—maybe especially not if she was carrying my child."

*Perhaps more to the point, why did Aletha, or so we assume, feel the need to leave a record of her*

*daughter's birth somewhere that wouldn't be easily seen? Somewhere that obviously hasn't been seen, or Kreacher would have—*

"Kreacher." The word emerged from Sirius's throat in a low growl as all the impossibilities suddenly became possible. "Kreacher did this. He *bred* me, the way I'd breed a dog if I liked its bloodline, because he wanted to make sure he'd have a new little mistress after Mother went two-dimensional. Or a new little master, he wouldn't have known at the time, but that puts it all together, doesn't it?"

*Because house-elves can get around Apparition barriers set for wizards and witches, and take passengers with them. And when they want to use it, they have pretty formidable magic. Strong enough to put me and Aletha into some kind of trance, where we'd just reach for each other and not stop to think if it was possible or not. Strong enough to bring her back here afterwards, and keep her here, keep her hidden, until Meghan was born. Probably a while after, maybe a few months, to make sure the baby was healthy and likely to survive. And then...*

"Then Letha would have worn out her welcome." A red mist was starting to fill Sirius's vision. "Kreacher would have... disposed of her. Probably enjoyed it, too. And then gone back to raising his little mistress to be exactly what he thought she should be."

*Which raises one very important question.*

*Where is Meghan now?*

Sirius was on his feet without intending it. "I've got to search," he mumbled, starting for the door. "Search everywhere..." He stopped, his eyes lighting up. "No. No, I don't. I'm in the direct line, dammit, it's got to be good for something, and this is it. Kreacher can't refuse an order from me, no matter how much he'd like to, so he's damn well going to tell me what he did with my daughter or I'll follow through on all those threats I used to make about stuffing him down the toilet—"

"Black!" The shout echoed through the house. "Black! Are you here?"

"Perfect timing as always, Snivellus," Sirius grumbled under his breath, yanking the door open. "Up here, Snape! What do you want?"

The Hogwarts Potions Master appeared with a slight pop at the end of the corridor, giving Sirius a quick once-over. "Simply to be sure you had, for once in your life, obeyed orders. Has anything... untoward occurred in the last hour?"

"Other than Kreacher going off his head and just about yanking Buckbeak's wing out of its socket, no." *And my finding out that he's been raising the daughter I never knew I had. Kreacher, not Buckbeak. But that's none of your business.* "Why?"

"Because your godson was quite distressed about you earlier tonight, to the point of invading Dolores Umbridge's office to attempt to contact you by Floo. He was caught, but had the opportunity, and the wits, to communicate to me the source of his distress without Umbridge



understanding him." Snape's lip curled. Clearly he hated admitting Harry had any wits at all. "He seemed to be under the impression that you had been captured, and taken to the place where the item is kept that the Order has been guarding."

"Nobody's firecalled here that I know of, but I've been up tending to Buckbeak..."

The implication hit Sirius like a Bludger square in the chest. *I am going to kill Kreacher. That little bastard, he did this on purpose, to get me out of the way—and Harry'd never leave a friend in trouble, he'll have found something to get him to the Ministry if he thinks that's where I am—*

"Get a hold of anyone you can call who's free," he instructed Snape, charging past the other wizard, down the hall towards the stairs. "We have to get to the Department of Mysteries, and we have to get there now."

*I'm sorry, Pearl. I'll find you as soon as I can, but Harry has to come first.*

In his distraction, Sirius never noticed the shift in his mental nomenclature.

---

Aletha Freeman righted the table she'd been able to convince Kreacher that she needed for the proper care of his "little mistress," returning it to precisely the place it had been and beginning to restack it with the piles of nappies, wipes, bags, and other paraphernalia necessary for dealing with the needs of a three-month-old baby.

*I don't know if anyone will ever find it. Or Kreacher might see it himself first, and then no one else ever will. But I had to do something, had to leave some record, make some effort to tell the world we existed...*

In the cot, Meghan stirred. Aletha hurried to her daughter's side and gathered her up, treasuring the warmth, the weight, the scent of her, and trying, as she had tried since the day her Pearl was born, to convince herself that the most unthinkable thing a mother could do was also the best.

*If I'm going to do it at all, I have to do it soon. She's healthy, getting stronger every day, it won't happen on its own. And I've seen the way Kreacher looks at me. If he doesn't think I've outlived my usefulness yet, it's only a matter of time. Am I going to let him win? Meekly lie down and die, and let him have my baby—*

Meghan, catching her mother's mood, began to wail, and Aletha hushed her, stroking a finger along her cheek. "You're a miracle, little one," she whispered. "I'm so sorry it has to be like this. You deserve better. You deserve to be happy."

*You deserve to live, to grow up free of all this. You deserve a father who would love you, who would love me, who would be true to both of us...*

Relentlessly, her mind presented her with images of Sirius, laughing as he pulled off another crazy stunt on his motorcycle, staring at her in wonder in a broom closet at James and Lily's wedding,

smiling with incredulous delight as he reached for her in a tiny room of stone. She winced away, her hand still cupping Meghan's face. *It wasn't true. None of it was true. It was all lies, all a cover for what he really wanted, who he really was...*

**No!**

Aletha jerked in surprise, nearly losing her hold on Meghan. "Who's there?" she demanded, turning to scan the recesses of the tiny attic room where she'd been sequestered for nearly a year. "Who are you?"

**Mama.** The voice managed to convey in the inflection of the single word an impression of rolling eyes and much-tried patience. **Is me .**

Very slowly, Aletha looked down at the baby in her arms.

Who closed a lid over one of the silver eyes she had inherited from her father in an unmistakable wink.

"Well." Aletha took two careful steps backward and sank down into the wooden rocking chair, grateful it was no farther. "I don't know why this surprises me so much. I've survived learning magic was real, learning an evil wizard wanted me dead for no fault of my own, learning the only man I loved was a lying spy—"

Meghan's tiny hand shot out and grasped her mother's finger. **No,** she repeated more firmly than before. **Dadfoot good. He love you. Was a trick. Was Wormtail. Wormtail bad. Dadfoot good.**

"Wormtail." Aletha considered this, and the fragmentary image which floated into her mind of the infamous street scene, Peter Pettigrew secreting his wand behind his back. "I see. But how in the world could you know—"

Meghan arched her back, her feet and her free hand thrashing in temper. **I not know how, but I not want you think bad 'bout Dadfoot! Dadfoot love you. Love me. He come. He stop Kreach. Or you stop Kreach. Touch—**

"Easy, love, I know you're angry, but I can't understand you." Aletha held her daughter close, kissing her hair and rubbing her back as she would have for any baby fit of anger. "What do you want me to touch? Touch you?"

**NooooOOOOOO!** The mental shriek turned into a verbal one, and Meghan began to flail in good earnest, her face darkening with fury. **No, no, no, no me! No me! Him! Him, him!**

"You want me to—to touch Kreach? What good will—"

"The Mudblood calls Kreach?" a voice croaked from behind her.

---

Sirius laughed, ducking Bellatrix's Stunner. "Come on," he taunted, dodging towards the small dais where an archway stood, a tattered veil hanging from it. "You can do better than that!"

*You're not going to stop me now. Not now that I know I'm not alone. I'm going to get my godson out of this, we'll find my daughter, and I'll finally have the family I always wanted...*

Bellatrix's second spell struck him full in the chest.

Sirius's vision wavered, and he thought he heard a high clear note, as from a flute. Then he was standing next to himself, everything around him frozen in its tracks. The other him had just started to fall backwards, towards the veil, surprise and fear mingled on his face.

*This can't be good...*

The flute was still playing, a lower note now, then a middling one. Between the other Sirius and the archway, a second arch appeared, this one seemingly made of nothing but shimmering light. From its other side, a man stepped out, a man who resembled—Sirius looked back and forth, just to be sure—

"Moony? But you're not—"

"I'm sorry, Padfoot. No time." His friend caught the arm of the other Sirius and pulled him backwards through the shining archway, a flick of his left hand creating the illusion that the missing body was still in place, as the flute continued to play. "We'll get Meghan. That's a promise. I'm sorry we couldn't—"

The melody ended. The arch of light vanished. Sirius registered his illusion-self plummeting through the veil, Bellatrix screaming in triumph, Harry calling his name and trying to follow, but his mind could process only one complete thought.

*I'm dead. I'm dead. My body's gone, and I'm dead, and I'm never going to find out what happened to my little girl...*

---

Meghan wanted to howl, wanted to scream at the top of her tiny lungs, but she knew her temper would do her no good. She had already lost her chance to explain to her Mama Letha how she could stop Kreacher from hurting her, and her mouth wasn't ready yet to form the words which would command Kreacher to leave her Mama Letha alone.

*Mama Letha ought to be able to tell Kreacher to leave her alone herself. But he won't listen to her. I don't know if that's because she and Dadfoot never got married in this world, or because the new master he likes to talk about made him stronger so he doesn't have to listen to anyone except a Black by bloodline—*

*Or what if it's a little of both?*

Ever since her brain had developed to the point where her teenage mind and powers could reawaken, she had been gathering all the information she could find, preparing herself to battle for her own and her mother's lives. Once or twice, when she had scanned her Mama Letha more deeply than usual, she had felt hints of something far down in the back of her mother's mind, something different.

*And that something different reached back to me. It knew me. It wanted me.*

*I think that might mean—*

"Give Kreacher his little mistress," the house-elf ordered, coming forward from the usual spot where he Apparated into the hidden attic room. "Kreacher will not hurt the Mudblood. She gave good service, birthed a strong mistress, and Kreacher is grateful."

"Over my dead body," Mama Letha snarled, holding Meghan tighter.

**Mama, no!** Meghan screamed through their blood link, but it was too late.

"As the Mudblood wishes." A hideous grin split Kreacher's face, and he gestured.

The heart thundering in the chest against which Meghan was pressed shuddered once and stopped.

Meghan wailed and clutched at her mother's hand, her infant body's automatic response to feeling the arms holding her go limp, but her mind was searching frantically for that hint of something which had known her.

*If I can just find it—if it's just there—*

*Please, please, let it be there!*

---

Aletha gasped in horror as her lifeless body crumpled to the floor beside her, cushioning her weeping daughter. "No!" she shouted, stretching out her hands, trying to reach back through the implacable veil which separated the living from the dead. "No, please, it can't end like this! I don't care about myself, just don't let this happen to my baby—please, someone, help her—"

Kreacher's grin widened as he started forward to claim his prize.

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Truest Friends**

Sirius sucked in a breath and opened his eyes. He was lying flat on his back, which made sense as the last thing he remembered was falling, but didn't explain the very sore condition of his chest or the stranger bending over him.

*Wait, he looks an awful lot like—*

"Confirm we have that mask in place!" snapped a voice which solidified Sirius's tentative opinion.

*Doesn't make it make any more sense, but at least now I know who he is.*

"Confirmed," chorused two other voices which belonged with the first one, though they did nothing to reassure Sirius of his continuing sanity.

*The hell with sanity, what about my life? That looked like a Killing Curse from this end...*

The not-stranger bent over Sirius again. "All right, Padfoot?"

"I... think so." Sirius experimented with sitting up and found an arm in place to help him. Upright, he looked across into eyes of brilliant blue and found his confidence slipping again.

*He can't be. They can't be. We were all split up, scattered across a hundred thousand worlds, miracles on this level just don't happen...*

"Moony?" he said tentatively.

"For now." His friend grinned at him. "Not that I'll be different when we get out of here, but I travel under a different name nowadays. And speaking of traveling, we need to move. Our time is running. Are you good to go?"

"Let me find out." Sirius flexed fingers and toes, rolled his shoulders and arched his back, hoisted his hips off the ground to get his knees under him and assess his body's level of readiness. "As long as we're not talking long-distance endurance running, I should be set. Just came off a battle here, so I'm a little winded."

"We saw," said the boy of the teenage twin pair who had been standing sentry against whatever might come out of a world of endless clouded gray during the brief conversation. "Not bad

fighting. For an old man."

"Old man?" Sirius spluttered. "I will have you know I could spot you two spells and still whip your arse all around a dueling ring, you little upstart! Who taught you everything you know, huh? Who was that?"

"If we could break up the festival of testosterone, please?" The girl tapped the back of her left wrist impatiently. "There are still people left to find, and we need to get there first."

"Well, if *someone* would give us the coordinates, *Neenie*, then we could go!"

Neenie made a face at her brother and flicked her fingers in the air. The numbers which sprang into existence meant nothing to Sirius, but she studied them for a few seconds, then nodded. "Not too far. A quarter-mile at most. This way."

"Then let's go." The boy set off in the direction his sister had indicated at an easy jog. She followed in his wake, the two men bringing up the rear.

"Just tell me one thing," Sirius said once he found his stride.

"I will if I can."

"Did I die back there?"

Moony raised one eyebrow in the mannerism Sirius had never been able to duplicate. "Do you feel alive?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"No buts. You feel alive, therefore you are alive, therefore, no, you did not die back there. Your body died for a moment, which gave us all a good scare when we thought we'd mistimed it, but I think in the end this may be best for everyone."

Sirius shook his head. "I'm going to want a whole carpetload of explanations after this."

"Once we finish what we came here to do, you can have them. And it looks like here we are."

Neenie had halted beside a piece of their gray surroundings that looked, to Sirius, no different than any other piece, and was sketching a rune on it. When she had finished, though, she stepped back and a glowing rectangle faded into focus around the complicated character, reminding Sirius of an open door with too bright a light on the other side.

"On the other side of this, you'll be twenty-five again," Moony said, motioning to the door.

"You're looking for a lady and a baby girl. Find them, bring them back to where you came in, and we'll pull you all three back out, and we can head home and start on those explanations. Do you need to know anything else?"

"You mean *my* lady and baby girl, don't you?"

Moony's smile was savage. "However did you guess?"

Sirius felt an answering smile bare all his teeth. "Oh, I am going to enjoy this one."

Drawing his wand, he bolted through the door.

*Kreacher, you are mine.*

---

Kreacher didn't think he'd been this happy since the day the Mistress and the Master had learned that their second son was going into the service of the Dark Lord as the first should have done.

*The Mudblood is dead now, as dead as the body that Kreacher made for the foolish wizards to find in the meadow outside Hogsmeade. Her true body can be Vanished, and the little mistress raised up in the proper way, until one day when the Mistress is mourning the end of the House of Black, Kreacher can give her the greatest joy in the world by telling her that it is not so...*

The little mistress, after one or two wails of fear when she felt herself falling, had quieted, nuzzling her face into her mother's chest as though expecting a response. Kreacher shook his head sadly. "Poor little mistress," he crooned, reaching for her. "Come to Kreacher now. All will be well..."

A shriek of fury greeted this, and a tiny brown hand slapped his away. Kreacher was not entirely pleased, but kept his reaction under control. There would be time to redirect her spirit and fire into the proper channels. "Little mistress must come to Kreacher," he said firmly. "Kreacher must clean up this nasty mess, so that the House of Black will be properly clean and pure again."

"Bit late for that, isn't it?"

Kreacher stiffened in shock. His little mistress crowed and stretched out her arms to the speaker.

"Kreacher, from this moment on, you don't do anything unless I specifically tell you that you may," the implacable, impossible voice went on. "You don't move, you don't talk, and you especially don't do any magic. Do you understand? You can nod your head if you do."

Against his will, Kreacher felt his head bob up and down.

"Perfect. Come back over here towards me and stand against the wall, where I can see you."

Turning to obey this order, Kreacher got his first look at the person whom all logic said should still have been imprisoned in his tiny stone cell on the island of Azkaban. His Master Sirius looked better than Kreacher remembered seeing him nearly a year before. He was clean, which always helped, but most of the sanity had returned to his eyes and he held himself like a man with a purpose.

Kreacher would have felt much happier about this had he not been so uncomfortably aware that the action his master had most purpose for at the moment was his, Kreacher's, painful and untimely death.

---

*I'm never going to find out what happened to my little girl...*

"Sirius!"

He whipped around and stared at the figure which had materialized behind him. "Lily?"

"You were expecting maybe Nearly Headless Nick?" Lily Potter smiled and held out her hand. "You don't need to be afraid for Meghan, Sirius. She's safe, safe and happy. I can show you if you like..."

Sirius took a step back. "I don't deserve it," he said hoarsely. "After the way I failed you with Harry? Twice over, now, by dying like this, just when he needs me most?"

Lily sighed. "You always were stubborn," she said. "Do you really think we're holding a grudge over that old a mistake? We were all tricked, and we all suffered for it. And even if we were still angry with you, which we're not, we certainly wouldn't use your daughter against you. She doesn't deserve that, even if you think you do."

*This is not the way this conversation was supposed to go.* "You can really show me what happened to her? And it isn't bad?"

"It isn't bad," Lily confirmed. "A bit confusing to start with, but not bad." She chuckled. "It may also make some sense out of that little byplay you just caught with Moony. So do you want to see it or don't you?"

"Do. Absolutely do."

"Then..." Lily wiggled her fingers at him.

Sirius hesitated for one more second, then grasped her outstretched hand.

*She feels warm. Warm and real and alive.* He barely noticed the archway room around them vanishing into fog.

*I always thought she and James would hate me for bugging up and getting them killed, then not being able to take care of Harry the way I said I would. I played it over so many times in my head, I tried to apologize and they wouldn't listen, I begged them to forgive me and they turned away...*

*I guess I was wrong.*

The fog cleared to reveal what Sirius thought might be a disused attic from his family's townhouse. A rocking chair, a cot, and a small table piled high with nappies bore silent testimony



to the room's current use. Sirius swallowed a curse as he recognized the table.

*That's the one. The one Aletha carved her message into. But it was down in Mother's room...*

"We've gone back in time," Lily said quietly beside him as the room's occupants swam into focus. "Back to the fall of 1983, the last day Meghan spent in this house."

"Wait. What?" Sirius stared in shock at the man striding across the room to the woman and child on its other side. "But he—but I—but how—"

"Hush." Lily's hand covered his mouth. "Listen and learn."

---

Sirius went to one knee beside his wife and daughter, gathering Meghan into his arms and turning his eyes resolutely away from Aletha's motionless form. *Almost thirteen years back in time, and I still got here two minutes too late. Nothing I could possibly do to Kreacher would make up for this...*

**Dadfoot**, said an exasperated voice inside his mind as Meghan nestled down onto his shoulder, pressing her face to the side of his neck. **No be silly. Mama Letha all right now.**

"Oh, sweetheart." Sirius ran his fingers across the fine nap of Meghan's hair. "I only wish she were."

"Wish I were what?" murmured a faint, yet clearly audible voice.

**See**, Meghan said smugly. **Told you.**

Sirius resisted the urge to deal a firm swat to the small behind resting on his hand. Instead, he looked down.

Aletha's eyes were open, and she was smiling at him. "Hello, stranger," she said, shifting to her side and making a face. "Oof. I am going to have some beautiful bruises tomorrow."

"You're going to have a tomorrow to have bruises in." Sirius supported her as she sat up, then lost his internal battle for control and pulled her into the tightest hug he could manage with one arm. "Letha, my God, you're alive, I thought I'd lost you again..."

"You nearly did." Aletha laid her head on the shoulder Meghan wasn't using, her arms locked around him and starting to shake in reaction. "I know what it feels like now to have my heart stop, Sirius. Kreacher did that to me, he stopped my heart, and the other me, the one who belonged here, that killed her immediately, but I would have died too if Pearl hadn't saved me..."

"That's my girl." Sirius pressed his cheek against Meghan's, feeling her wordless glow of satisfaction. "Started you up again, didn't she?"

"Yes, and pulled me forward inside the mind, pulled me to the surface. I was buried very deeply,

so it took some doing for me to find my way out, but I managed it in the end." Aletha's hand caressed his hair, slid down to the back of his neck, and stopped. "And you seem to have been through the same thing. With slightly less finesse in the method."

"Beg your pardon?"

**Moony do it**, Meghan supplied, planting one small foot on Aletha's bare arm so that she could speak to both parents at once. **He can do's that with his fire. Zap! And Dadfoot's heart go thump thump thump 'gain.**

"Zap." Sirius snickered. "I like it."

"It means you're alive." Aletha rose onto both knees, her arms still around Sirius. "I like that very much."

"Me too." Sirius angled his head forward and planted a light kiss on her lips, then gently disentangled her hands. "I don't think we should stick around any longer than we have to. Do you need anything from here?"

"No. Absolutely not." Aletha looked around the attic with a shudder, then stopped. "Except possibly information."

Sirius followed her line of sight. Kreacher, still standing against the wall, was glaring daggers at all three of them. "Information about what? He got a bug in his brain and decided he wanted to be more pureblood than the purebloods. Even they haven't gone to forced breeding that I've heard of."

"Yes, but in that case why choose me?"

"To make sure I'd go for it? I don't know. Look, Letha, we don't have time for—"

"*And* he keeps talking about his 'new master'," Aletha interrupted. "His new master did this and his new master did that. His new master had such a clever plan to make sure Kreacher got his new little master or mistress, and gave him precise instructions on how to keep it all a secret, right down to waiting until I gave birth, then using the leftovers from that and some bits of household rubbish to make a fake body that would fool any investigators looking into my disappearance. Don't you think that warrants a few questions?"

"Well. When you put it that way."

---

"I'm not understanding any of this, Lily." Sirius rubbed his hand across his forehead. "What in Merlin's name did Letha mean, 'the other me'? How many of her are there?"

"That we need to be concerned with? Only two." Lily put her fingers in her mouth. Sirius, recognizing the signs, covered his ears.

*How did I know she'd still be able to do that same damn whistle?*

Two other forms materialized out of the mist that eddied around the edges of the attic room. One was male, topped with a shock of messy hair, and moved with a smooth swagger. The other was female, nearly as tall as the male, with an aureole of hair around her head and beautifully statuesque curves.

Before Sirius knew what he was doing, he was moving forward, first at a walk, then at a run. The woman in front of him matched his every move, until with a rush they came together, clasping hands and staring into each other's faces.

"I never knew until today," Sirius said awkwardly. "If I had—"

Aletha shook her head, cutting him off. "It wouldn't have made any difference."

"I know. I just wish—"

"Don't we both." Aletha lowered her eyes. "I don't suppose..."

"I couldn't remember your face," Sirius interrupted. "In Azkaban. I couldn't remember anything about you. Your eyes, your hands, the smell of your skin and the feel of your hair, nothing. Only that you existed, and that you had said you loved me once."

"Why, Sirius." The gaze was still downcast, but the voice had warmed considerably. "That sounds like a compliment."

"It was meant for one, so that's good." Sirius surprised himself with a rusty laugh. "God, Letha, I don't think I ever stopped loving you. And it tears me apart knowing what you had to go through, knowing it was because of me."

Aletha finally looked up. "I knew the truth before the end," she said, her eyes beginning to sparkle. "So I didn't die hating you, if that's any consolation."

"It could be." Sirius drew gently on their linked hands, pulling her towards him. "If it's going to go on."

"Don't you mean if we're going to go on?" Aletha freed one hand to indicate the ongoing scene in the attic room. "She doesn't need us anymore, and ghosts always made me so sad."

"Same here. But you're avoiding the question. Are you planning on sticking with me?"

"Judging by past history, I'd say I have more right to ask that question of you."

"Well then." Sirius gestured expansively. "Ask away."

Aletha smiled. "I don't have to," she said softly. "Not anymore."

Hand in hand, they turned to watch the beginning of their daughter's future.

---

"You're going to answer me now, Kreacher," Sirius said grimly, sitting down on the floor in front of the glowering house-elf. "Who is this 'new master' of yours, and what did he tell you to do?"

"Kreacher... Kreacher..." The house-elf was clearly fighting with all his might.

"Answer me!" Sirius snapped. "That's an order!"

"Kreacher does not know!" The answer exploded forth, and Kreacher covered his face with his hands and began to rock on his feet. "The new master keeps his face always masked, he speaks in a voice Kreacher has never heard, but he *is* a master, though not in the direct line! He told Kreacher where to find the Mudblood—"

"Don't interrupt him," Aletha hissed as Sirius bridled at the term. "He's on a roll."

Kreacher's confession continued to pour forth, unabated. "—and he told Kreacher what could be done with her, how the House of Black could be continued, how Kreacher could save it from total destruction, and he gave Kreacher power, power of his own, power to resist orders that did not fit with the great plan—he said that the power he would gather from the things that Kreacher would do, that power would pay him back for the power that he had given to Kreacher, so Kreacher did not need to be afraid of accepting power from a master—"

"Enough," Sirius said, and Kreacher fell silent except for his gulping sobs. "Didn't work out quite like you expected, did it?"

"Be fair." Aletha bounced Meghan on one of her knees, smiling lopsidedly. "I don't think he had any right to expect you to come quite literally out of nowhere and mess up his perfect plan. Which reminds me, I've been meaning to ask, where exactly *did* you come from?"

"It's... a long story, and I'm not sure of all of it myself. Probably quicker just to show you." Sirius got to his feet and held a hand down to help Aletha up. "What should we do with him?"

"Hmmm." Aletha tilted her head to one side, considering. "Why don't we just order him never to tell anyone about this, to clean it all up and pretend it never happened, and let him spend however many years he's got left thinking about his failure?"

"You do have an evil mind." Sirius chuckled. "I knew there was a reason I loved you. Kreacher, you heard the lady. Do what she said. That's an order. And now, ladies..." He bowed to Aletha and scooped Meghan out of her arms, settling her onto his left hip and hooking his right elbow through Aletha's left. "Shall we depart?"

---

"Worlds that grow out of other worlds. People who try to make them stop, and people who try to let them grow." Aletha shook her head, watching the boisterous reunion in Outer Time. "Am I

wrong to be glad I'm not her?"

"If you were her, you'd have had about a dozen more years of life experience at this point," James Potter pointed out. "Not to mention, one less highly unpleasant year with a house-elf. I know you were always complaining about Kreacher, Padfoot, but I never realized he was that bad."

"He wasn't. I didn't like the sound of that 'new master' business." Sirius scowled at his other self. "He'd better not forget that just because he's happy to be back with all of them. It's the sort of thing that comes back and bites you in the end."

"Don't worry." Lily had her best secret smile on. "I've... had a word with someone. She'll make sure he doesn't forget. Now, are you two ready?"

Sirius and Aletha glanced at each other, then turned as one for a last look through the veil at the slender, graceful girl who spun for sheer joy on her tiptoes, then posed with one foot effortlessly pointed over her head.

"She was never really ours, was she?" Sirius asked after a moment.

"We loved her." Aletha pressed his hand. "That makes her ours."

Turning their backs on what might have been, they faced their friends. "We're ready," said Sirius. "Lead the way."

Aletha looked back one more time to blow a kiss.

---

Meghan shivered and looked around.

"What's wrong?" Neenie asked, turning towards her sister.

"Nothing. I just thought... no, it's nothing." Her hand rose towards her cheek, touching a cool spot on its curve. "Just a chill, that's all."

But when no one was looking, Meghan kissed the fingertips of first one hand, then the other, and blew on both.

*Just in case I wasn't wrong.*

Shaking off what might have been, she went to join her family.

## He Nearly Killed the Cat The Next Steps

Meghan pulled back the deep red shower curtain and shrieked, nearly dropping the towel she had wrapped around her. Neenie, coiled into the most compact ball her feline form could make, looked up with an inquisitive mew. *Is something wrong?* she seemed to be asking.

"What are you doing in there?" Meghan sank down onto the side of the bathtub, pressing her hand against her chest. "You scared me!"

Neenie stood up human and stepped out of the tub. "Sorry about that," she said. "I didn't know anyone else was planning on using this bathroom. It's cool in there, and comfortable. The curves on the tub fit my body just right." She looked her sister up and down. "Which is more than I can say for some people."

"You're just jealous." Meghan stuck out her tongue. "I always knew when I finally caught up with you, I'd have plenty."

"When you finally caught up? Pearl, you were three years younger than us. You were never going to catch up unless something strange like this happened."

"Or until I got old enough to use an Aging Potion without anybody stopping me."

"Which would have been seventeen," Neenie pointed out. "At which point, you'd also be old enough to do anything else you wanted to, so why would you bother?"

"If you have to ask, you'll never understand." Meghan indicated the door with her eyes. "Do you mind? I was practicing hand-to-hand with Fox and I'm all sweaty."

"Get un-sweaty, just don't take too long. I'm going downstairs to start dinner. Did Dad and Uncle Pat and Aunt Carrie say when they'd be back?"

"I don't think they knew." Meghan frowned. "Dad, my Dad, said they were going to see a woman about a world. That could mean anything." The frown turned into a scowl. "It's not fair I'm not allowed to use my name for him anymore. And I know, I know," she added before Neenie could say anything. "It's too close to his nickname and it would be dangerous and it would bring the Reality Cops here. But I'm still allowed to be annoyed about it, aren't I?"

"If you want to be." Neenie sketched a small attic room in the air between them, getting a shiver

from Meghan. "But since I don't think you really want to go back there..."

"Tell me again why magical people are the best," Meghan said in an unnaturally high voice, standing up to dip a little curtsy and flutter one edge of her towel like a skirt. "Tell me again why I should only ever talk to magical people and never, never to those nasty people who aren't. Tell me again why I have to stay safe in my attic and never, never, never come out." She dropped the mannerism. "I'd have been almost like Rapunzel, wouldn't I? Locked up in her tower to keep her safe."

"Except it wouldn't have been any prince climbing up to get to you there." Neenie populated her attic room with stoop-shouldered, thick-lipped, dull-eyed young men in robes. "It would've been the pick of the magical world, which isn't saying much."

"Amen." Meghan's smile went dreamy. "You and I found the two best ones around. Which of them are we going to get first?"

"I don't know yet. I think it's part of what Dad and your Mum and Dad went to see... whoever they went to see... about. And that didn't make any sense at all, did it?"

"The sad part is, it did." Meghan shook her head, looking grieved. "We've been sisters too long."

"Any time you want to get away from me, you know where the edge of the domain is." Neenie stepped out into the hall. "What do you want for dinner?"

"How about... food!" Meghan bounced up and down and clapped her hands. "I want food!"

"Your towel's slipping," Neenie said dryly, and closed the door on Meghan's yelp of dismay.

*It is nice to have Pearl back, and Aunt Carrie. Nima and Reyna are wonderful, but they live one domain over in their little towers, not here in the cottage, and I was starting to get overwhelmed by boy.*

*Still, I miss Danger.*

Neenie sat down on the top step of the stairs, welcoming her sadness for a few precious moments, the only ones she was likely to get this day when someone wasn't asking her what was wrong.

*I have to stop myself from snapping back every time I hear that question. What's wrong? What's not wrong? We aren't all here—we haven't even figured out where we all are, and we're leaving two of the most important people until the end! Shouldn't we try for them next? Wouldn't that give us more power, a better chance of finding the rest of the Pride, if we had the Pack all together again?*

She sighed deeply. *And then I feel unworthy, because it doesn't work like that. Legendbreakers have to balance their knowledge and their gut feelings to figure out which missions to take when, and we know the other two missions we have left are both more difficult than Danger's, because they involve characters who are very visible in the ridge at the point we'd reached. Danger was*

*never seen in the ridge at all, but the RC's still can't do anything to her, because they need her in the world to balance the other person who's there—and no one in their right mind would argue that he's not visible!*

"So Pearl has the right idea after all," she said aloud, trying to rally her mood. "Is it going to be my mate, or hers?"

*Not that we can decide anything until the Pack-parents get home.*

*I wonder where they did go?*

---

"Thank you for having us," Patrick Black said to his hostess, accepting a cup of tea. *Not the most creative of names, but it served me well before. Besides, you can't really do much with the ones Mother and Father gave me. I always wondered if our family went in for such ridiculous first names because the last name is so plain...*

"You're always welcome here." Suzie glanced over her shoulder. "Despite what my partner's conduct might lead you to believe. She doesn't usually hide from visitors, I promise."

"We're not offended," Carrie assured her, taking a lump of sugar for her own tea and passing the bowl across the table to John. "Not after what we've been hearing from Neenie these past few weeks."

"I beg your pardon?" The tone made it an honest question rather than an offended outburst.

"My girl has a quick eye." John stirred his tea gently, the spoon never coming in contact with the sides of the cup. "Not to mention, she went straight from training with you and your partner into a particular household from our ridge. It would have been difficult for her not to make the connection."

"True enough, and nicely said to avoid unfriendly attention." Suzie regarded the small pastries on the plate she had set out, eventually selecting something that looked to Pat like a miniature pecan tart. "She, and you, have it right. Eve was originally the birth mother of one version of your son." Her eyes indicated Pat and Carrie.

"What happened to her?" Carrie asked, setting her teacup back into its saucer. "How did she end up here, in Outer Time?"

"You've all studied your ridge?" At three answering nods, Suzie went on. "Then you know that your greatest enemy didn't intend to kill her that night. It was a snap decision, made when she annoyed him by begging him to spare her son. In her world, he decided the other way. Instead of killing her, he threw her aside into the wall, stunning her enough that she couldn't move, but leaving her alive and aware while he murdered her child, with her husband already lying dead downstairs."



"I can see how that might leave her with a few scars," Pat said under his breath, his hands gripping one another under the table so that he didn't shatter the delicate teacup by trying to handle it while he was this angry.

"She doesn't remember anything from the rest of that night," Suzie confirmed. "It's probably best that way. We know she was functional enough to remember her wand when she ran out of the house, but only because she has it now. Her next memory is from a day or two later, somewhere in a forest. She was staring into a pond, wondering if it would hurt to drown, and it came to her that death was only a doorway, a passage into a new world. If she could work out a spell which would take her outside of her world, wouldn't she find the people she'd lost there? And maybe, would she be able to bring them back?"

"People have been wondering that as long as there have been people." John picked out a small muffin for himself. "I assume, since she's still alive, that what she found was Outer Time."

"It was. And when she learned that there were a great many worlds like hers, and painful things happening in all of them, she decided that she wanted to do something about it." Suzie smiled ruefully. "Her first thought was just to kill as many versions of her enemy as she could before he killed her instead, and she managed that a few times, but finally she hit a world where he got wind of her before she finished working through his safeguards. Which was where I came in."

"Was that happenstance?" Pat judged his temper, and his tea, to have cooled enough that he could safely drink it now. *The tea, that is, not the temper.* "I can't imagine, with all the thousands of worlds on our series alone, that you would just have happened along at the perfect moment to save her, recruit her, whatever you call it."

"I may have been watching her," Suzie allowed. "Letting her burn off the worst of her anger before I approached her. If I'd come to her too soon, she would've rejected me, and gone out to get herself killed deliberately. Which would have been a terrible waste."

"But instead, you waited for the right time." Carrie swirled her teaspoon three times through her tea, then set it down in her saucer with a sharp clink. "Did you wait with our world too?" The cold venom in her voice sent a chill down Pat's spine, even when he knew he wasn't the one being targeted by it. "Let them get to a certain point, then step in to play hero?"

"Carrie!" John spoke sharply, drawing all eyes to himself. "That's uncalled for."

"Tell me you haven't wondered it yourself," Carrie shot back. "Tell me it doesn't seem a little too convenient that they got there in time to snatch up your Neenie and turn her into one of them, and to stop the whole world from being merged back into the ridge, to keep it on our main instead, but they couldn't make it in time for the rest of us..."

"We have rules, as I'm sure you're learning." Suzie's voice remained as calm, as mild, as ever, but an underlayer of pain was beginning to emerge. "One of those rules is that Outer Time has to remain consistent for everyone, Legendbreakers and RC's alike. Once they have entered a world, whatever they do there before we arrive is real. It happened. We can't step back through Inner

Time and stop them from ever coming in, no more than they can do that to us."

"I thought they could blockade times," Pat objected, frowning. "Neenie and Fox have been fretting about it, worrying that we might not be able to get to their friends at any time except the one the RC's want us to."

"That goes to another rule. Whoever makes a significant change in a particular world 'owns' it after that. It runs by their rules, which means by the rules of the team or solo working there." Suzie crumbled a bit of her tart shell between her fingers. "Of course, if that team or that solo isn't paying attention, someone from the other side can slip in and make another change, and that flips the 'ownership' of the world. And the set of rules which apply there."

"Which explains, when the twins came to get me, why the RC's had to knock." John rapped his knuckles twice against the table as illustration. "The RC's had taken the world first by rehabilitating me and Fox there, but Neenie took it back with her very neat little coup, and it was still hers when they came to my door. And they knocked, which meant the RC's had to do the same."

"I... think I understand. And I apologize." Carrie looked directly at Suzie. "It hurt you, didn't it? Not getting there in time. Having to merge our world, even when there was an undamaged version of our main that you could slide it into so that no one's memories would have to be altered. I thought you didn't care, but really you care too much. And it hurts you."

"Every time." Suzie's voice was quiet and somehow brittle, as if without her iron control it would shatter into bleeding shards. "Every time I see a little boy cry because he woke up from his beautiful dream of a family. Every time I see a little girl have to be brave when yesterday's magical door is today's prosaic closet full of coats. Every time I see a man and a woman who could have been happy together, who could have given thousands of other people happiness from theirs, forced to settle for second best. They are the people I fight for. The people I try to help. And as hard, as un pitying, as I've had to learn to be, every time I fail hurts like the first time."

Pat reached for Carrie's hand, only to find it already seeking his. *We've lost a lot, but we've found a lot too. And we are going to find the others.*

*We'll have to know what that pain she's talking about is like sooner or later, but I'd just as soon it be later!*

---

John lingered after the Blacks had said their goodbyes, flashing a *Go on without me* hand sign in their direction. "May I ask a personal question?" he said, turning to Suzie.

"No one's stopping you."

"Were you once..." John wove a crown out of fire and sent it to hover over Suzie's head, just brushing her long black hair. "If it's none of my business, tell me so, but I couldn't help wondering. Especially when you brought up a little girl and a magical door."

Suzie exhaled a long sigh. "Yes," she said on the end of it, her voice barely audible. "Yes. I was, once." She looked up at the crown, her eyes gleaming in the firelight. "And I will be again. When my work here is done."

"Are you working as a Legendbreaker to regain your place, then?" John recalled the fire and wove it around his teacup, reheating the liquid within. "I didn't think things went that way."

"They don't. Not precisely." Suzie twisted a lock of hair between her fingers. "The place was never truly lost to me. It was given freely, and nothing changes that, not even my refusing it once. Not while I live and can change my mind. But when I finally make that choice, decide whether or not to accept that gift, I have to do it with all my heart. If I still value other things more highly, if I would hesitate at that door, then it's better for me to wait and work until I can be sure of myself. Until I can accept the gift as freely as it was given, and give everything that I am in return."

John looked up from his teacup and met Suzie's eyes. "Do you miss them?" he asked quietly. "Your family, your friends. The ones you lost, who passed through the door ahead of you."

"With every breath I take." Suzie's voice cracked on the last word, but she swallowed and went on. "But even though it took me a long time, I understand now that I was wrong to turn away. I have to believe that means we won't be apart forever. That they've forgiven me for being silly, all those years ago."

"Have you forgiven yourself?"

"Still working on that one." Suzie managed a smile. "And I see why you run your Pack. Not much gets past you, does it?"

"You've met our cubs, and Pat. It was a matter of survival. As for loss, and pain, and forgiving yourself..." John stared into his teacup, at the reflection of his own eyes.

The eyes which remained stubbornly blue, with no trace of brown.

"The more me I become, the more I miss her," he said softly. "And the more important it gets that we continue to increase in power. That we make no mistakes. If we can't rescue her, I don't know what I'll do. I do know that I can't live without her, not long-term."

"And I know you mean that as a fact, not just a trite saying." Suzie's voice had lost all traces of tears, returning to its usual briskness. "So how is it that you think I can help?"

"You and Eve were Neenie's mentors. By extension, the mentors of all of us, all the Pack, and the Pride too when they get here. That's a strong bond in Outer Time, isn't it?"

"Not many are stronger." Suzie selected a chocolate meringue, breaking it in two and offering half to John. He accepted with a nod of thanks. "We lent her the power to begin her domain—"

John quickly swallowed a mouthful of meringue. "That's what I thought she'd said. How do you mean, you lent her the power? Does she need to repay it?"

"Yes, but not directly." Suzie seemed more interested in dissolving her meringue with drips of tea than in eating it. "Because we taught her Legendbreaking, because she works by basically our rules, we get a share of the power she receives from her missions. And because she taught the rest of you, we get the knock-on effect from that as well."

"Do you also receive power from us internally? From the way we interact with one another, now that there are more of us?" Under the table, John crossed his fingers. This was the important question.

"Yes, strong positive interactions within Outer Time do count to help maintain a domain, and to repay us, since the type of power is the same. With as many of you as there will eventually be, you might almost have a self-sustaining domain... but then again, it will have to be larger than usual to support all of you, and then you're back into needing an outside power source." Suzie rescued the last piece of her meringue from the sea of chocolatey tea in her saucer and popped it into her mouth. "Nothing's free," she said around it. "And being human, pesky creatures that we are, we wouldn't accept it if it were. We'd always be looking for the catch, or at least for some way to pay."

*Exactly what I was hoping to hear.* "So, theoretically, if we were to do something which dramatically increased either your or Eve's personal happiness, it would add to your power, which would go a long way towards repaying Neenie's loan, perhaps wiping it out altogether. We could keep more of the power that we generate ourselves, more than we gain from missions. Which would make us stronger when we enter worlds, more sensitive to the RC's following us or getting ahead of us, generally better Legendbreakers all around. Yes?"

"Yes." Suzie frowned at him. "What are you thinking of?"

Helping himself to another cup of tea, John explained.

---

Still hand in hand, Pat and Carrie crossed back into their own domain, walking in dreamlike quiet. The late afternoon sun slanted through the leaves, turning the scene a delicate emerald, with occasional glimpses of ruby.

*Autumn's coming. Not here quite yet, but on its way.*

"It's the same time of year that you came to take us home from Inner Time," Carrie said aloud, breaking the stillness. "Wasn't that a strange little time loop, with your other self finding out about mine, and about Pearl, the same day that he died?"

"I'm just glad I thought to look at that carving your other self did before we left. We might have set up a time paradox if not." Pat held up his right hand, his eyes tracing the faint scar between wrist and thumb. "I saw blood on the letters in my time, so I left blood on the letters in yours, and bound a knowledge spell into it just in case one incarnation of me, or of him, wasn't up to figuring out the riddle."

"I don't suppose there ever was a Pearl without Kreacher's 'new master,'" Carrie murmured, leaning her head against Pat. "In the unaltered ridge, I mean. I've looked all through it, and there's not even a hint."

"She never had another her sharing the body, not the way we did, did she?" At Carrie's headshake, Pat sighed. "Which makes it official. No Pearl in the ridge. What about you?"

"I may or may not have been. It depends on precisely which world is being Chronicled. But there is that sad bit about me in one of the tells of our main, the one where Danger sees through the worlds into the ridge..."

"I like our version of 1 June, 1983, much better, thanks awfully." Pat kissed the top of his wife's head. "Screaming, bug-eyed monster and all."

"That's not a nice way to talk about your daughter."

"What daughter? I meant me!"

Laughter streamed behind them as the Blacks made their way home.

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Wakening Powers**

Meghan leaned her head back, letting the water cascade over her face and scalp. She had set the shower two degrees off scalding, just the way she liked it, and had already discovered one distinct advantage to Neenie and Ray's cottage in Outer Time, as opposed to any other house she had ever lived in.

*The hot water never runs out. Which means I could stay in here all day, if I wanted to. Or at least until my fingers start turning into prunes.*

She emerged from under the spray, blew the water off her face, and reached for the body wash in the purple bottle hanging in one of the mesh bags against the shower wall.

*I wonder if it was Neenie or Ray who decided to get us all the scents we like best? Or maybe it was the domain itself. When we were sealed to Outer Time, to this piece of it, it learned about us and made the cottage the way we'd want it.*

Whoever was responsible, each member of the Pack now owned an individually scented toiletries set, one which matched either a favorite scent of that person's or some scent which represented them.

*Mine smells like ocean wind, because that's the scent of my magic. But it has just a little bit of lavender in it, because I've always loved lavender, the smell and the color both.*

She scrubbed her hands briskly together, then applied the resulting lather to all areas which needed it, sighing with pleasure as the suds and the blistering hot water removed the sweat she'd worked up proving that her body had been successfully age-adjusted to match her siblings'.

*Some of my muscles are a little stiffer than I'm used to, but I'll stretch out. And it's nice to be finished with my growing, and to be... She looked down at herself and giggled. Yes. Well. Mama isn't exactly small there, and it looks like I got that even if I didn't get her height.*

*I hope my Captain likes it.*

*I hope he likes all of the new me.*

*We'll find out, as soon as we get to him.*

The last of the suds disappeared down the drain. Meghan shut the water off, pulled back the shower curtain, and scooped up the towel she'd left on the toilet lid.

*But that has to wait until we decide we should. Our other friends might need us more. If the RC's are planning to do something to them... I know they're supposed to be all about putting stories back to the ridge, about making them all come out the same, but I don't have a good feeling about Kreacher's "new master." He doesn't sound like a proper RC one bit.*

She emerged from under the towel and smiled one-sidedly at her steam-blurred reflection in the mirror. *And how sad is it that I'd prefer my friends to be stuck with the people who took us away from each other to begin with?*

"But we know them, or Neenie and Fox do, and Uncle John, and they're teaching the rest of us." Meghan began to dry her lower body, noting in passing that the body wash had, as advertised, also removed the coat of prickly fur which usually afflicted her legs. "We know what they want, how they work, what they will and won't do. Legendbreakers have been fighting them for a long, long time."

*But Kreacher's new master is an unknown. Either he's not an RC at all, or he's a renegade one, because he made me exist, and I was never part of the ridge. He has his own agenda, and we have to guess what that is before we can start to counteract it.*

"We'll manage it," she said with a confidence she didn't quite feel. "That's what we do."

*Both because we're Legendbreakers now, and because we've always been the Pack.*

*I just wish we were the Pride again too.*

"We will be." On a whim, Meghan planted her finger in the middle of the mirror, then rapidly drew a set of eight interlocking ovals from that central dot. The result could have been described as either a complicated flower design or an intricate Celtic knotwork pattern. "We're all interwoven, just like this. And no matter how long it takes, we'll find our way back to each other."

*But it had better not take too much longer.*

*I want to see the look on my Captain's face when he realizes I'm all grown up, and he's out of excuses...*

Giggling evilly, Meghan began to get dressed.

---

Ron Weasley fell from nightmare into nightmare, and couldn't decide which was worse.

His first had been a particularly nasty one in which he was a helpless passenger in his own body for the majority of his sixth year, watching the numbskull who did seem to be in control waste his time with Lavender Brown, fail miserably at most things magical including learning to Apparate,

and finally spend his seventeenth birthday falling victim to a Love Potion meant for Harry and nearly dying in the office of the fat Potions Professor who had inexplicably replaced Mrs. Letha.

Now, he was once again struggling against the faceless figures who had plucked him out of his room at the Burrow, trying to remember what had come next when the scene had occurred in actuality. *They hauled me off to the Den—maybe I can give them the slip on the way—*

He tried, but his enemies were too fast for him, and there were too many of them. For one second, he broke free, long enough to shout his most overwhelming question at Harry, likewise furiously embattled.

"Hermione?"

"Gone out!" Harry dodged a blow and lashed out with his fire, driving two of his enemies back. "Haven't seen her..."

The second blow got through, and Harry crumpled. Ron yelled and tried to force his way to his friend's side, but hands closed around his arms and another pressed something against his face, and then it all began again. He awakened in his bed in Gryffindor Tower, on the first day of his sixth year, unable to do anything for himself and thoroughly unimpressed with the so-called intelligence which was directing his actions.

*Maybe it's like one of those games Hermione plays, he remembered thinking at one point, desperate to find something, anything, to pass the time and give himself an illusion of control. If I can find all the differences, I get to go on to the next level...*

Unfortunately, it sometimes seemed that it would be easier to catalog what wasn't different than what was. Pack and Pride were non-existent concepts in this world, and though most of the Pride's members still existed, with the nucleus of himself, Harry, and Hermione as strong as ever, Ron didn't think he was likely to extend a hand of friendship to Draco Malfoy anytime soon. Luna, too, seemed more distant and difficult to understand, but he supposed that could be because her being sorted into Ravenclaw meant he was around her less.

*You lose your immunity to the mad things she says when you don't see her as much. She's a bit like a disease. In a good way.*

Neville was starting to emerge from the shell that Ron imagined five years without the Pride had built around him, but the key word was "starting." He could see glimpses of the coolly confident Captain he knew so well in this awkward boy, but thought it was going to take a miracle to turn the one into the other.

*A miracle, or a lot of bad things hitting him. Like what happened to me. I never wanted Krum to hurt Hermione, or me to get blinded, but both of those grew me up a lot, shook me out of being stupid and sleepwalking through life. I learned to look around, notice what other people want, think about more than myself. That's not what Neville needs, he needs to learn to trust himself and just get it done, but bad things happening might give him that chance.*



One large difference between the two versions of Neville, Ron had no doubt, was a certain dainty Gryffindor third year. If he was careful to do it only when his directing intelligence was busy with some knotty problem (*like getting his homework done—I know I'm not the most disciplined person in the world, but he makes me look like Hermione*), he could rummage in his other self's memories without causing alarm, and the first place Mr. Padfoot figured in them was as a sort of real-life bogeyman in their own third year.

*Which means there can't ever have been a Meghan. And I've not seen any signs of Mrs. Letha either...*

Mr. Moony had taken his proper turn as Defense Professor in that same year, but no memory that Ron could find indicated he might be married, and when he had once or twice managed to insinuate a question to the top of his other self's mind, asking Hermione about her family, the answers had been fairly conclusive. If she had an older sister, named Danger or anything else, she didn't know about it.

*I want her so much. I wish she was here right now. Cat or human, I don't care, I'll take anything. Really, I'll take any one, anyone who remembers what I do, who could tell me I'm not just some mad idea Ron Weasley happened to dream up in his delirium while he was recovering from drinking poisoned mead...*

The hand wrapped around his was female, but it felt wrong for Hermione. The fingers were too rough, as if whoever this girl was, she routinely hung onto things that scuffed up her skin.

*Like broomsticks, or Quidditch balls. At least I know it's not Lavender, she's always so careful about the way she looks you'd think Witch Weekly was waiting around the corner to take her picture. But who else would be—*

"The twins said they'd walk Mum and Dad out," murmured a quiet voice. "And Harry and Hermione left with Hagrid a while ago. So now it's just us. Just me and my big stupid brother."

*Usually I'd give you a knuckle rub for that, but I'll let it pass this time, because I was being stupid, not to know who you were.* Ron debated letting his sister know that he was awake before remembering, with a rush of anger, that it wasn't his decision. He hadn't been able to so much as blink his own eyes for six months.

*But wait... I don't feel him in here, not like usual, I think he might still be asleep...*

"If only I knew if you really are *my* big stupid brother." Ginny laughed under her breath. "Which would sound absolutely mad to anyone else, so I'm saying it to you while you can't hear me. And even if you could, I don't know if you'd be able to answer..."

"Try me?" Ron croaked, and had to physically force himself to stay in the bed, not to try to jump upright and cheer. *I'd fall on my face, and I can't waste the time, I don't know how long this will last, I don't even know what she's talking about yet, but if she means what I think she does—*

Ginny's fingers tightened around his until he thought he heard his bones creak in protest. "Redwing?" she whispered.

*And we have a winner.* Ron turned his hand in her grasp until he could squeeze back. "Hey, Lynx. How's it—"

A distinctive choking gasp had him opening his eyes and pushing himself upright in the bed, shaking his head. "Oh no you don't. Don't you dare. Please, Ginny, don't..."

Ignoring this, Ginny dived at him, clutching at him like he was a giant red-haired Snitch and burying her face in his pajama-clad shoulder.

*Wasn't I just the one saying I'd learned to take a little notice of other people?* Ron closed his arms around his sister, holding her against his chest as her shoulders heaved with the force of her sobs. *She's been through the same thing I have, and now she's found out she's not alone. She needs to have a reaction. The least I can do is hold her through it.*

*I'm allowed to hope she gets it over with quickly, though.*

"We may not have long, Gin-Gin," he said when he felt the first bout easing off. "I'm not alone in here, there's another... well, another me, not a very bright one either... and don't even start," he added as the patterns of her breathing changed momentarily from crying to laughing. "I'm not nearly as bad as I used to be. But I think he's still asleep, the poison may have hit him harder because he's supposed to be in here and I'm not... what about you? Do you have another..."

"Another me? Yes, I do, but we've come to an agreement." Ginny sat up, drying her eyes on a corner of Ron's bedsheets. "I won't push forward when I'm not wanted, she'll let me use the body when I really need it, like tonight, and in return, I'll help her get something she wants."

"What's th—oh." Ron cut himself off as Ginny giggled. "Should've known. You never do change, do you?"

"Not unless I'm forced to." Wrapping her arms around herself, Ginny shivered. "What *were* those things?"

"I don't know, but I do know one thing." Ron eased Ginny's leg over so that her knee was no longer digging into his thigh. "Hermione wasn't there. Harry said she'd gone out."

"So... maybe she was never caught?" Ginny hazarded. "This Hermione doesn't act much like ours. But then, nobody does."

"Nobody could." Ron shut his eyes for a moment, trying to deal with his fierce stab of loneliness and desire. *It's not impossible,* he told himself. *If she's out there somewhere, she'll be looking for me, for us. And she won't give up until she finds us. Until she finds me.*

*Just like I'll never give up until I have her back, no matter how long it takes, no matter what I have to do...*

A stirring in the back of his mind warned him that his time had just run out. "Blast, he's waking up. You'd better go, Lynx. See if you can come up with a spell to put him to sleep or in a trance or something, so we can do this again without my nearly getting killed."

"I'll do that." Ginny kissed him on the cheek. "Your nearly getting killed is a bad thing. Happy birthday, by the way."

"Thanks." Ron hugged her tightly, then watched her out of the hospital wing. The sleepy mutters of confusion were growing stronger, but he refused to be hurried.

*Stupid git could do with a bit of confusing.*

When the door had stopped swinging behind Ginny, Ron lay down once more and closed his eyes. He might not have Neenie or Fox's dreamsculpting magic, but they had taught him a few tricks to avoid nightmares and wake refreshed.

*And I can use them again, now that I know for sure they're not just a dream themselves.*

*See if I can't do this little berk who's hosting me a favor along the way. He sat up enough to flip his pillow over to the cool side before snuggling back in. She may not be my girl, but she's far and away better than anything else he's had his eye on, and he knows that on some level. He just needs to swallow his pride and admit it, end things clean with Lavender, and make his move when she's the one who needs help for a change...*

It occurred to him as he was drifting off that Hermione seldom needed help with anything, but he was sure the universe would provide a proper situation when the time came. The universe was good like that.

---

A shadow passed across Pat's face, and a slight thump shook the floor on which he was napping in the sunlight in his dog form. Lazily, he opened one eye.

Fox, also four-legged and furry, took a running start and leaped over him again, as Pat realized he must have done in the first place. And then again, and again...

Pat sat up in time to frustrate the fifth jump attempt and yawned elaborately. *Something for you?* he asked in the silent speech of animals, canine dialect.

Rearing onto his hind legs, Fox retransformed. "Just helping to christen the latest improvement we've made on the cottage," he said. "It's tradition, after all."

Likewise retransforming, Pat frowned at his nephew. "I'm sorry?"

"Quick brown fox." Fox indicated himself. "Jumps over." His hands indicated the relative motions, his left lying still for Pat and his right bouncing back and forth for himself. "The lazy dog." Two spread hands and his own, cockier, version of his father's look-I-did-a-funny grin made it clear

this descriptor was meant for Pat.

"Lazy dog, hmm?" With all the speed of his animal form pouncing on a pesky rat, Pat knocked his nephew onto his back and pinned him by the shoulders. "Now who's the lazy one?"

"You are," said Carrie from the doorway. "Mentally lazy, for going with the obvious insult and not bothering to think about what he's trying to tell you by it."

"Tell me with it?" Pat looked up at his wife. "What would he be trying to tell me with—"

"Put together what he said to you." Carrie brought her palms together in the air, as though squeezing the air out of a concertina. "Then think about what that sentence is used for."

"Put it together." Pat let Fox up, if only because the squirming was getting distracting. "Quick brown fox... jumps over... lazy dog..."

Unbidden, his hands rose into a familiar position in front of him, palms down, fingers slightly curved. As he spoke the sentence over again, the fingers began to move, dancing lightly through the air.

"Do I have to spell it out for you?" Fox said, grinning.

*Spell it... spell it out... test it out, try it out, type it out—*

"You didn't." Pat looked from his nephew to his wife and saw the same smug smirk on both their faces. "You did not."

"We made a music room for me, and for her and Dad," Fox pointed out, hooking a thumb towards his aunt. "We're fixing up a dance studio out back for Pearl. And every room was a library when Neenie lived here by herself, but we'll convert one of the upstairs rooms once you two and Dad and Mum decide where you want your own place built. Why shouldn't we make you a spot where you can do what you like best?"

Pat scrambled to his feet, beaming. He'd missed his hobby more than he'd realized until this moment. "Lead me to it. Brat," he added for form's sake in Fox's direction. "You need to learn how to just tell people things."

"But that's no fun!" Fox dodged his uncle's headlock and started up the stairs, Pat and Carrie behind him.

Immediately to the left of the upper landing of the cottage stairs, an area which had until today been a blank wall now sported a door. Fox indicated this with a bow, then stepped back and allowed Pat to open it himself.

*All the comforts of home. Always excepting the one who sleeps down the hall in my bed.* He turned back, as he often did these days, to give Carrie a quick kiss before plunging into his family's latest gift to him.

*The masculine writer's paradise. A big soft sofa in case I need a nap, plenty of bookshelves for reference, leather and glossy wood for the desk chair and desk, and on that desk...*

"It's perfect." Reverently, Pat stroked a hand down the battered metal frame of his typewriter, the one he'd taken over from Danger all those years ago, after she'd taught him how to use it.

*I pounded out a lot of bad feelings on these keys. Got rid of most of my anger and hate that way, and the rest I channeled into my bad guys. And then I got to beat them up too, when it came their time in the story, and kill them in all the nasty ways I couldn't do to any of my real enemies.*

*This old thing is probably the only reason I didn't turn as homicidal as I was reported...*

"We reproduced as many of your alterations as we could remember," Carrie said from the door. "The magical erasing on backspace, the automatic paper reloading, that sort of thing."

"You may have missed a couple, but I can always put them in later." Pat plunked himself down in the desk chair, leaned back, and put his feet up on the corner of the desk. "How do I look?"

"You're seriously opening yourself up to that?" Fox snickered. "And you can't make that old pun anymore, because it'll call the RC's if you do!"

"Don't say that," Carrie hissed, flicking her nephew's ear with a forefinger. "I thought you knew better than to—"

"I do believe I heard a challenge," Pat said idly. "Don't let the door hit you anywhere sensitive on the way out."

Carrie gave Fox a look which promised retribution and started down the stairs, her feet impacting solidly on each tread. Fox shrugged one shoulder and pulled the door most of the way closed. "Enjoy yourself," he said through the remaining crack, before his footsteps skipped lightly down the corridor.

Pat barely heard. Already, his hands were rolling a piece of paper into the typewriter, setting themselves over the keys, preparing to let the stories now clamoring within his mind have their freedom.

*But which one should I start with?*

The light, teasing tones of his nephew's voice echoed back through his subconscious and answered this question for him.

The vision took hold, and he began to type as in a trance, spellbound by what he saw.

---

Hermione stormed down the seventh floor corridor, anger mounting ever higher in her heart as her mind replayed the bit of conversation she'd caught between Harry and Lavender Brown before

Potions.

*"Is Hermione Granger still visiting him?"*

*"Yeah, I think so. Well, they're friends, aren't they?"*

*"Friends, don't make me laugh. She didn't talk to him for weeks after he started going out with me! But I suppose she wants to make up with him now he's all interesting..."*

*Him, meaning Ron. And yes, of course I want to make up with him. I always want to make up with him, even when he's been the world's biggest idiot. Which he has fairly often. I keep seeing bits of something better, something more in him, but then it's gone and he's the same stupid prat he's always been...*

*Why can't I get him out of my heart? Why has it always been him? She turned a corner blindly without noticing the tiny girl slumped against the wall, snoring over a jar of frogspawn. I wish it wasn't. I wish I could just take everything I feel for him, all that irrational rubbish that my heart keeps coming up with, and hide it somewhere it'll never be found.*

In the opposite wall, a door began to form.

*Or maybe I'm the one who ought to hide. Find somewhere I can go and leave my feelings behind for a while. Talk to someone who'll understand about... about liking, caring for, the most unsuitable person in the world, the one person you wish you didn't, and the one person you know you always will...*

The door solidified fully as Hermione looked up. Somehow unsurprised, she crossed to it, pulled it open, and stepped through it.

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Secret Desires**

Pat blinked free of his vision and reread the short segment of story, frowning in confusion.

*This isn't our Neenie, but this never happened in the ridge either. The "girl" with the frogspawn and the bits about Lavender say ridge sixth year to me, but I'm positive Hermione never found the Room of Hiding. Especially not when someone else was already in there.*

*If this is what writing—sorry, Chronicling—is like in Outer Time, I'm a bit worried for what might happen if I get back into it on a regular basis.*

*But for right now, I want to know what she's going to find in there as much as she does. I know what it ought to be, but somehow I don't think it will...*

He placed his hands on the keys again and prepared himself for another rush of story, but it came more slowly, more patiently this time, as though it were now confident it would be seen and could move at its own pace. Sentence by sentence, he recorded what he saw, pausing every so often to stretch his fingers or his back. Outer Time or not, he wasn't as young as he had once been.

*Maybe if I forget that I should be getting old, I won't be.*

It was his last thought fully conscious of himself before he dived once more into Chronicling the scene before him.

---

Hermione gazed around her in wonder. She remembered the Room of Requirement as it had configured itself for DA meetings, an area about the size of a typical Hogwarts classroom, its walls lined with bookcases and its floor studded with large cushions. This room was vast, vaulted and walled in stone, and filled with heaps of...

*Well. Everything.*

*Scratched, dented, battered, and broken everything.*

This seemed to be where the Hogwarts house-elves stored things that the students had damaged beyond repair, but which might still be useful in the future, and where the students stored things that they didn't want the house-elves, or the teachers or prefects, taking away from them.

*But most of it looks like it's been here a long time. Like things people thought were so important that they had to hide them away, and then they went and forgot all about them.*

She giggled. *Harry and Ron would think I was trying to teach them something if I said that, but really it's just the truth.*

*But oh, just look at all the books...*

Her heart sang at the sight of the teetering piles, but she knew better than to dive right in. Even without Ron's cautionary tales about eyes being burned out or stories you could literally never stop reading, even without the far more graphic example of Ginny and Tom Riddle's diary, she knew that most of these were probably commonplace books which had simply been stolen for a lark, or for revenge, and tossed here to be out of the way.

*Either that, or someone's been writing in them. The way Harry and Ron wrote all over Harry's Care of Magical Creatures textbook. Back when we still had Care of Magical Creatures, of course.*

Lost in thought and memory and wonder, she began to meander up and down the aisles, marveling at the incredible variety of things which Hogwarts students had thought it worth their while to hide. *Is that a stuffed troll? How did anyone ever get that into the school in the first place? And there's the Vanishing Cabinet Sir Nicholas had Peeves break in our second year, to get Harry out of trouble with Filch. And is that a—*

"Er, hello."

Hermione shrieked and whirled around, yanking out her wand. The boy standing a few paces behind her held up his hands, looking alarmed. "Sorry. Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

"Who are you?" Hermione lowered her wand, looking him over. He was about her own age, with straight brown hair and a fine-boned, heart-shaped face, and she had a feeling she knew him, though she couldn't bring his name to mind. His robes were emblazoned with the Hufflepuff crest, which might account for it.

"Call me Mal." The boy smiled, charming and nervous at the same time, and suddenly Hermione placed him. He was the image of Tonks, Tonks as she appeared when she wasn't using her Metamorphmagic.

*I guess she has a little brother she never told us about. Or maybe a cousin. A cousin would make more sense, I think she'd have mentioned if she had any siblings still in school...*

"And you're Hermione," Mal continued, stepping forward and extending his hand. "Hermione Granger."

"Yes, I am." Hermione shook the offered hand, wondering why she felt like she was waiting for something, and it wasn't until Mal released her that she realized what he hadn't said.



*He didn't say, "You're Hermione Granger, Harry Potter's friend." Or, "You're Hermione Granger, the smart Muggleborn." Or even, "You're Hermione Granger, the girl who got Viktor Krum to take her to the Yule Ball." When he looks at me, all he sees is... me.*

She couldn't decide if that worried her or thrilled her.

"So what brings you into the Room of Hiding today?" Mal asked, tucking his hands into the pockets of his robes. "Got something you need to hide?"

Hermione laughed. "Only myself," she said. "Everything just got to be too much, and I needed a place to get away from it all..."

"And the Room provided." Mal nodded. "It does that. Now me, I'm working on a project. Not everything that's in here is so broken it can't be fixed, at least I don't think it is." He pretended to loosen the collar of his robes. "I'm going to be in a lot of trouble if I'm wrong. I made a promise. To the sort of person you don't want to disappoint. And if I don't deliver..."

"What is it you're trying to fix?" Hermione drew her wand again. "Maybe I can help. That is, if you'll let me."

"Let you?" Mal stared at her, open-mouthed. "*Let* you help? I've admired your wandwork since... well, forever. Never thought I'd have the chance to tell you, but you're here and I'm here and..."

*And he blushes easily. Which Tonks doesn't, but then, she's an Auror. She's seen things I can't even dream about.*

"What I'm trying to say is, yes, I'd love to have you help." Mal made a grand gesture indicating the Vanishing Cabinet. "With this. It's a shame that it got broken in the first place, it's a priceless antique, I don't know why they let Peeves stop around here with all the trouble he causes..."

"They may not have a choice." Hermione started back toward the Vanishing Cabinet, looking it up and down. There was a good bit of cosmetic damage, but she suspected Mal had deliberately left that in place to remind himself that the underlying spellwork still needed repairs. "I did some reading on poltergeists for extra credit back in my third year, for Professor Lupin, and if I remember right, they're usually emotional manifestations. They appear in places where people have a lot of extreme feelings, either good or bad."

"Extreme feelings? At Hogwarts?" Mal put on an astonished face and clapped his hand to his chest. "I would never have guessed!"

Hermione laughed again, some of the troubles which had been weighing her down dissolving with the sound. "It's true. So Peeves will be here as long as we all keep having feelings. Which is to say, as long as we're all human."

"Yeah. All human." Mal seemed interested in his shoes. "I know who you hang out with," he said without lifting his head. "And where you come from. The war seems pretty easy to you, doesn't it?"

I mean, not the fighting. Not people getting hurt, or going missing, or dying. But figuring out who's right and who's wrong, deciding which side to support."

"Yes, it does." Hermione paused with her wand raised for a standard diagnostic spell. "Was it not that easy for you, then?"

"I don't know that I want to be on either side." Mal sat down on a ripped ottoman, pulling absently at the stuffing. "My family is strong for one of them, but I... it may sound terrible to you, but I don't really care. Not enough to go out and risk my life over it, not unless I had to. I hate seeing people get hassled, get hurt, over things they can't help, but how is my getting killed going to fix any of that? So I'm staying in school, keeping my head down, and hoping it will blow over by the time I leave." He looked up, molding a piece of stuffing between his fingers. "And now you hate me, don't you?"

"Why should I hate you for having an opinion?" Hermione ran her fingers along the door of the Vanishing Cabinet. "It's different from mine. That doesn't make it evil, or automatically wrong. Maybe another time we can talk more about it. For right now, do you want to show me how you've been trying to fix the magic on this?"

Mal got to his feet and drew his wand, shaking his head. "I like you, Hermione," he said, coming to stand beside her. "But I don't understand you."

"The world would be dull if we understood each other all the time." Hermione tapped her wand's tip against Mal's, then performed her diagnostic spell, the preliminary motion allowing him to see the results as well as herself. "Oh my goodness. That is a lot of damage, but I can see where you've cleared a good bit of it away. How long have you been working on this?"

"Most of the year," Mal admitted in a mumble. "When I could get away, that is. Our common room isn't exactly near this place."

"No, it's not, and the secret passages always seem to know when you're in a hurry and decide to go somewhere else that day, don't they?" Hermione smiled, and after a moment Mal smiled back. It was a singularly sweet expression, but shy, as though he didn't use it much.

*What he said about me goes double from me to him. I like him, but I don't understand him a bit. Still, there's no harm in just helping another student with a project. And it will give me a rest from listening to Ron talk about Quidditch and Harry obsess over Draco Malfoy.*

She ignored the feeling that she'd just thought of something significant in favor of raising her wand once more, using it to point out a section of her diagram. "This is where I'd go next. You see how it interlocks with these other pieces? If we can clean it up, make it work as it was designed, then these three parts over here will all be easier, because we'll have a clear entry point..."

Mal followed the line of her wand with his gray eyes, nodding in agreement and occasionally interjecting a comment or question. These, to Hermione's surprise, were usually intelligent and to the point.

*But then, if he didn't know what he was doing, he'd never have got so far as he did on his own. With both of us working on it, we should finish much sooner than he would have alone.*

*Well. She sneaked another look at the boy by her side. Maybe not that much sooner. We might hit some unexpected snags. And of course we'll want to thoroughly test it before we declare the project finished.*

Pushing these thoughts aside as well, she vanished all the sections of her diagram except the one they were concerned with, enlarged it, and transferred it to a blank bit of parchment from her pocket. "All right. Let's see where would be the best place to start with this..."

Two brown heads bent over the diagram together.

---

Pat pounded in the five asterisks he used to denote a section break, hit return twice, and sat back, picking up the first few pages of his latest manuscript. Carefully, paying attention to details, he read it over, and at the end of it had come to a conclusion he didn't like.

*Better run it by the rest. Just to be sure I'm not seeing things.*

But when he showed the section to his wife and daughter, and to his niece and nephew, both the conclusion and the unhappiness with it were unanimous. Fox, in particular, returned the sheets of paper to their Chronicler by one corner, as though they were covered with a noxious slime. "Not your writing," he assured his uncle, flexing his fingers. "Just... *him*. You understand."

"The sad part is, that's a plausible person for him to be." Neenie held out her hand for the papers again, and Pat handed them over. "As plausible as ours, anyway." She poked her brother in the ribs, sticking out her tongue at his growl. "And probably through the same mechanism. Early intervention, just with a different person."

"I wonder if there's a world out there where it happened that way?" Carrie asked, slicing apples for the dinner of bread, fruit, and cheese which was in its final stages of preparation.

"I bet there is." Meghan twirled twice on one foot and nearly lost her balance. Fox caught her before she could fall. "Thanks. Dad-dy..." She scowled at the elision the protective magics on the domain had forced, then rolled her eyes and went on. "Do you think you could Chronicle it, the world where he is that way for real, not just for pretend? Go looking for it, and let us know what happened in it, how things came out that way?"

"I can always try." Pat rubbed his hands together. "You know how I love a challenge."

Neenie flipped to the first page of the manuscript and let out a small gasp. "Uncle Pat! Look at this!"

"What?" Pat came to look over her shoulder, as did Fox and Meghan on her other side.

"Look where she's thinking about Ron." Neenie's finger traced along two lines. "She thinks she sees something in him, 'something better, something more.' Couldn't that be..." She let the words trail off, her face alight with hope and fear.

"It would explain why you were drawn to Chronicle that world, instead of any other," said Carrie, coming to have a look for herself. "But this is definitely off the ridge, which means the RC's may be showing up there to start fixing things at any time. And if they get in before we do, then we'll have to start over from the beginning looking for those two, and possibly for the others as well."

"They caused it," Fox murmured.

"Beg pardon?" Pat asked, already feeling the stirrings of further Chronicling at the back of his mind. *It should go on like this for a few weeks, until Harry starts to notice that both his best friends and the girl he's falling for have secrets they're not telling him. And then maybe a big blowup, in the hall outside the Room...*

"Our two, our missing two who are in this world. They made this happen." Fox mimed with his fists a pair of magnets being attracted to one another. "This change, this pulling together, it fits us. It's something you'd expect to see in a spin or a tell of our main. But it doesn't fit the ridge. Our two must have hooked up somehow, and that resonance Lin told us about, the reason they put us into the worlds in pairs, it's ramped up to a level where it's affecting the world, taking it from the ridge to a tell."

"Which might explain why this pair is together." Neenie's hand rested, apparently carelessly, on the front page of the manuscript, but Pat could see one of her fingers lying squarely over the name of the person she'd mentioned before. "If they can do that kind of, pardon my language, damage inside a world, imagine what they'd do if they were apart. They'd have the walls down within three weeks."

"There may be another reason," Carrie said, sliding an arm around her niece. "These two are from a family with a long history of both bravery and devotion, to causes and to the ones they love. By giving them each a family member to care for, the RC's may have hoped to bypass their desire for their mates, which would otherwise be just as overwhelming." She grinned, the quick fierce flash of teeth which Pat found eternally alarming and just as eternally stirring. "We see how well that worked, now don't we."

"So we've got our next pair picked out for us." Fox drew his flute out of his pocket and played a quick liquid run of notes, looking at the papers still in Neenie's hand. A set of numbers and pictographs formed in glowing green on the air in front of him. "Should we try to run it ourselves, or wait for Dad? And who's going?"

"As much as I love to be out there doing, I think I'd be better in the stands for this one," Pat said reluctantly. "I need to finish Chronicling, don't I, now that I've started?"

"There's no law about it," said Neenie, setting the papers aside. "But worlds that aren't Chronicled to the end are more likely to be invaded by the RC's. Of course, correlation isn't causation. A lot of

times, the reason the world stopped being Chronicled is because the RC's got to it, so there was nothing left for the Chronicler to see."

"Best explanation for writer's block I've ever heard. 'The little gray men came and took my story away.'" Pat shook his head. "Why do they do that? What do they get out of it?"

"Existence?" Meghan suggested. "If they didn't destroy worlds, they wouldn't have any reason to exist, and here in Outer Time, if a thing isn't needed, it goes away."

"As far as any of the senior Legendbreakers have ever been able to tell, the RC's don't act on their own." Neenie sat up straighter in her chair, unconsciously adopting her lecturing tone. "They're directed by... well, by a lot of different people. Some of them sincerely think that spins and tells are dangerous to the ridge, that they somehow suck energy out of it and endanger its life, so they devote themselves to destroying other worlds in order to, as they think, save their own. And some of them are just in it for the nasty fun. But all of them need exactly what we do. They need power. They just get it in the opposite place."

"Basically, upgraded de... black floaty soul-killing things," Pat self-censored at Carrie's look. "Living off people's pain and unhappiness, and making their own if they can't find exactly the flavor they want. As if there wasn't enough of it out there already."

"Which is why the Legendbreakers' work is so important." Carrie held out her other arm to Meghan, who came and laid her head against her mother's shoulder. "The more stories that have happy endings, the more people will start to believe that happiness is possible. And once they believe it, they'll go looking for it, and that's the first step towards finding it."

"So," Fox said, a little over-brightly. "Are we heading out on this mission right away, or are we waiting for Dad to get back from wherever he's gone off to? Personally, I say we should wait for him, unless the situation goes critical. The more of us we can put on this one, the better, and we don't have to worry about wrecking the ridge anymore, because it's just turned into a tell."

"Will you keep an eye on things for us, Uncle Pat?" Neenie picked up Pat's manuscript and gave it back to him. "It's... kind of important to me that we get this one right."

"I know it is, sweetheart. Don't worry, I'll keep a close watch for things going wrong." Pat flipped to the last page of the manuscript and frowned at the blank space under his section break. With his left hand, he scribbled the letters P-E-N in the air, and plucked the required implement out of that section of space. "Should have a couple quiet weeks there at least," he muttered, beginning to write down his notes. "Can we link it up with Outer Time, make it run real-time relative to us?"

"Usually that only happens when someone's actively on a mission there, but I bet we can do it anyway." Fox pulled out his flute again. "Let me see what I can figure out..."

---

Far away, in a town once devoted to industry and now, thanks to the merging of the Muggle and magical worlds some eighty or ninety years ago, a museum center and living historical exhibit,

John White stood on a street named for the main activity which had taken place in the old mill looming over him, listening to the sounds of life going on all around.

*His child is grown now, and although he'd never admit it, I think he's getting tired of teaching. He's had nearly twenty years of peace, even discounting this rather frantic last few months. And his wife has never had a real adventure of her own, and might be willing to give our type a try.*

*It's worth a shot.*

He stepped up to the door and knocked. The worst thing he could hear, after all, was "no."

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat** **The Known Names**

"Well, that was unexpected." Carrie tucked her husband into bed and stepped out of their room, shutting the door behind herself. "Just when I thought he was well settled on Chronicling that little tell he'd found, the one where Redwing and Lynx are, this other world came swooping out of nowhere and insisted on having its say. For more than three months of Outer Time, no less."

"It's one of the hazards of living with a Chronicler, or so I've heard." Fox had his hands in his pockets, his shoulders settled comfortably back. "At least it gave us plenty of time to solidify our plans for going after them, whenever their breakpoint comes up. And we've located the other two pairings, so once we have our gingers safe and sound, we can go straight on through."

"Uncle John still isn't back from his own mission, though." Meghan skipped down the hall to the stairs, turned on her toe, and came bouncing back. "So what are we supposed to do next?"

"Who isn't back?" inquired a voice from the stairs.

"Uncle John!" Meghan hurtled back the way she'd come to get a hug, skidding to a halt before she knocked John down the stairs with her exuberance, and Neenie emerged from her bedroom with her brilliant smile, Fox taking his place behind her in the greetings queue.

"Success?" Carrie asked, collecting her own hug after the children had all finished. "And what took so long, if you don't mind my asking?"

"The story wasn't quite as over as I'd thought it was, possibly because of me, so it seemed only right that I stay and help mop up. But things are well in hand there now, and I have some people I'd like to introduce you to." John gave his son, daughter, and niece each a meaningful look. "We will all remember, won't we, that we are Legendbreakers and as such must be courteous to other Legendbreakers. We will also remember that this is Outer Time, not the world we came from, and that people who look like other people may not necessarily have the same name or have done the same deeds. Is that quite clear?"

"This I have to see," Fox muttered. "Who've you recruited, Dad?"

"As it happens, Eve's twin brother and his wife. Their names are Russell and Cecelia Evans, and they will most likely be moving into a domain east of us, since that area is currently uninhabited. In other words, they will be our neighbors, and we will not make trouble with them." John raised

an eyebrow at Fox. "Will we."

"No, s—" Fox froze in the middle of the second word, causing Neenie and Meghan to giggle. Carrie, behind them, was shaking her head.

"You couldn't get anyone else?" she asked.

"The idea was to give Eve someone she cared about, no?" John returned. "And someone about whom she had no terrifying memories. Irritating and saddening ones, yes, but not terrifying. Given that, and thirty-odd years of growing up for him, plus I don't dare to guess how many more for her, he seemed the best choice possible. Cecy is an excellent bonus, since they're alike enough that they should get along but different enough that they won't irritate one another. I hope."

"So when do we get to meet them?" Meghan bounced on her toes. "Are they here? Downstairs?"

"Yes, they are. Why don't you and your mother go downstairs and say hello." John stepped aside, allowing Meghan to plunge down the stairs at full speed and Carrie to follow at a slightly more sedate pace, one of her sardonic smiles on her face. Fox still looked rather stunned, but Neenie was beginning to nod.

"The name is from one of the smaller spins of our verse," she said. "But that's not who the person is, or who he started out as, is it? He's just using the name for Breaking, and he was...a dungeon dweller for most of his life?"

"That's right, up until what would be ridge seventh year, when your counterpart, Fox, changed things by admitting he needed help. By making a wish, and forgetting to be careful what he wished for." John chuckled. "We should take a holiday in that world sometime. It's worth a visit. Some of the things they've done with...but I digress. The point is, that wish changed not only him, but a great many other people. One of whom is now traveling as Mr. Evans."

"But can you really call him Miss Eve's brother?" Neenie frowned. "I understand that's how it could have been, but I don't know if she'll like it..."

"Look who's talking." Fox poked his sister in the shoulder. "If I hadn't seen a friendly face for... however many years Miss Eve's been out Breaking, I wouldn't care if he called himself my brother, my sister, or a two-tailed monkey, so long as he was there."

"I think you might have a little trouble if *he* called himself your sister." Neenie flicked him on the upper curve of the ear and started down the stairs herself. "Since you're the only boy who can pull off dresses that I know."

Fox turned to look at his father. "Was that a compliment or an insult?"

"Probably a little of both." John tapped his fingertips together, trying to think of how to phrase his final caution. "Have you read the tell we were discussing? The one our newest friends come from?"



"I skimmed it, but not much beyond. He gets on my nerves, even when I know he's going to get better." Fox leaned against the wall. "Why?"

"Mrs. Evans...may ask you to do a thing or two for her. Unless it would really go against the grain, I'd appreciate if you would oblige her."

"All right." Fox's brown brows drew together. "What sort of things?"

"Why don't you come downstairs and see for yourself."

"Well, if you insist," Fox drawled, and pushed off the wall to descend the stairs in his usual leisurely fashion.

Behind his back, John crossed his fingers. This would either be a resounding success, or the worst failure since he'd accidentally knocked over one of the wigs Fox's counterpart kept around the house. Apparently, actors had bad reactions to anyone but themselves touching their false hair. Still, most of the spots had gone away within a week, though he thought one or two might still be in places he couldn't reach...

"Here's hoping you can help me look for them soon, love," he said quietly, touching the ring he wore on a chain around his neck, and followed his children downstairs.

---

After the byplay upstairs, Fox had no illusions about the identity of the man with dark hair pulled back into a neat tail, who was answering one of Meghan's eager questions with far more patience than Fox had ever seen him demonstrate in Inner Time. As well, even a cursory skim of the particular tell from which he knew this version of the man originated had prepared him for the identity of Mrs. Evans.

What he hadn't been ready for was the way in which his own heart gave a queer little thump when he saw her. In his own world, he had known her only from pictures, from stories, and from one memorable visit to the Mirror of Erised. He had always been secretly ashamed of that, as it felt like disloyalty to the Pack, to whom he owed everything he was. But was it so wrong, really, to wish that the people whose blood one shared also shared one's cherished beliefs and principles?

Now, for the first time in his life, one did, and Fox had absolutely no idea what he was going to do about that.

She looked up and saw him, and smiled. "You do look a great deal like Reynard Beauvoi," she said. "Your father had told me you did."

"I didn't always." Fox advanced a step or two into the kitchen, aware that all eyes had turned his way. "The other face...it wasn't my favorite, but I survived it."

"Will you let me see?" The request was quiet, gentle, but Fox could hear the remnants of tears underneath it. Legendbreaker Cecilia Evans might now be, but she was also a mother, and he knew

she hadn't made the decision to leave her children behind her lightly. Even if she could slip away from her duties to visit them sometimes, she would no longer be involved in their day-to-day lives, and he was sure it had hurt her terribly.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated on his twin-bond with Neenie, on pushing aside temporarily the alterations that her blood brought to him. His skin tingled all over, his hair dropped limply against his head, and when he opened his eyes, for one moment his vision was blurry as the change completed itself.

"Yes," Mrs. Evans said softly. "Yes, I see how it could have been." She came to his side, looking up into his face, studying him carefully. "My boy...he's like you, which you already knew, but he carries scars you don't have. Pains and regrets you never knew. You've had your own, that much I can see, but you also have a joy about you, an innocence, almost, which he lost a long time ago. If he ever had it to begin with."

"All children begin with it," Mr. Evans put in. His voice was the same, deeply resonant as always, but it lacked the bitter, biting edge with which Fox was used to hearing it. "Your son's blood parents took pains to remove it as quickly as possible. It would have interfered, badly, with their desires for him. With his father's, at least." He smiled, humor lighting his eyes and making him momentarily unrecognizable as the harsh, dour master of the dungeons. "And still, in the end, he broke free."

"More power to him," Fox said, releasing his control and feeling the color rush back to his face and hair. "I got out so young I didn't have much choice. Though I suppose I could always have turned Dark, if I really, really wanted to." He made a face. "Which I didn't. What's the point? Unless you're on top, you're always taking orders from everyone above you and watching out for everyone below you who wants you dead. And when you are on top, you can't relax either, because one slip and everyone below you—which is to say, everyone—will be swarming up to take advantage. It's just not worth it."

"Cogently argued." Mr. Evans inclined his head in Fox's direction. "I wish I had as much sense at your age. But then, many things would not have happened as they did. And I do like where I find myself now, and this newest adventure I have undertaken." He held out his hand to his wife. "We have undertaken, I should say."

"Shall we escort you over to Eve and Susie's domain, or would you prefer to go on your own?" Carrie asked. "Or is it more proper for John to take you, since he's your sponsor, your mentor?"

"I think it might be best for him to escort us, though I certainly see no harm if you would care to come along." Mrs. Evans took her husband's outstretched hand in her own. "That is, if you dare to leave your young people home alone."

"They haven't blown anything up yet." Carrie looked the cubs over. "But then, we've yet to rescue their usual instigator. Once he gets here, I doubt any of us will even dare to sleep, much less leave them alone."

"That's not fair," Meghan protested. "We can get into lots of trouble without Wolf! There was the time..."

"It wasn't a challenge, Pearl." John placed his hand on top of his niece's head, stemming her incipient outbreak of bouncing. "Find something nice and quiet to do while we're away, all right? We shouldn't be too long."

"Eating and sleeping might not be out of the question," Carrie suggested. "Since once your father is awake and ready to return to that Chronicle he started a few months ago, we should have enough power to perform an extraction without disrupting the timeline too much." She smiled. "As you'll be feeding yourselves tonight, you can have whatever you like. As long as it's relatively balanced, and you do your own dishes."

"And if you're in bed by the time we get back, we'll forgo the beatings for tonight," John added. "But if not..."

Neenie came to rigid attention and snapped off a smart salute, Fox and Meghan following her example. "Sir, yes, *sir* !" they chorused.

John sighed. "I am surrounded by smartmouths," he told the Evanses, leading the way towards the cottage's front door. "And the worst of it is, sometimes they're even as funny as they think they are..."

---

Ron Weasley had no idea what was going on.

He thought he ought to be used to the sensation by now, but somehow it never stopped being frustrating, any more than it stopped being frightening. Harry's preoccupation with Draco Malfoy, annoying as it was, he could handle, but now both Hermione and Ginny seemed to have something on their minds that they didn't want to talk about, and he'd never been good at guessing games.

To add to it all, he had a sneaking suspicion that something was still wrong with him. It might be an aftereffect of having been poisoned, though now that he thought about it, it seemed to have been going on longer than that. He recalled Ginny asking Harry, the year before, if he'd had stretches of time that he didn't remember, in an effort to find out if You-Know-Who might be possessing him. Harry's answer, at the time, had been no.

Ron wondered what he was supposed to do now that his own answer was yes.

*Why would You-Know-Who want to possess me? What good would it do him? Unless he wants to off Harry and has decided I'm the easiest target...I do fall under the Imperius Curse awfully easy, wouldn't that mean I'd be easy to possess? And I'm nearly always with Harry, we have the same classes since we both want to be Aurors, we're both on the Quidditch team and we sleep in the same dorm...we used to be nearly always with Hermione, but now she's disappearing for hours at a time, and she won't talk about where she's going or who she's with...*

The thoughts were not encouraging, but he didn't think he could bring them up to anyone else. They would laugh at him, claim he was having delusions of grandeur, believing himself more important than he was. Only Ginny had been looking strangely at him for the past couple of weeks, and occasionally, when he thought back to one or two of the periods he couldn't remember, he thought she might have been nearby just before or just after them.

*She can't be involved...or can she? You-Know-Who did possess her once already, through that damn diary, so maybe could he do it again? And hopscotch from her to me, use her as a launching pad to get to the person he really wants? But then why wouldn't she have worked it out, told somebody, asked for help?*

*Why haven't you?* whispered the little voice inside his head, the one which had him worried. *If you really think you're being possessed by Voldemort—*

"Don't say his name," Ron hissed under his breath, making Harry and Ginny both look at him oddly. He shook his head at them, returning Harry to his essay and Ginny to her book, and clamped his lips shut, thinking at the voice instead. *Who are you, and what do you want with me?*

*I can't tell you who I am. You wouldn't believe me.* The voice snorted in sardonic mental laughter. *And the only thing I want from you is to get away, but I don't know how—or maybe I do. Has Harry got the Map on him?*

*Why do you care?* Ron shot back.

*Because there's somebody missing from your little group, and if you find out where she is right now, you might be on your way to answering all your questions, and fixing a lot of problems at once. Why not give it a try?*

Ron shrugged. *Sure, why not.* "Do we know where Hermione is?" he asked.

"Not sure," said Ginny, looking up from her book again. "She said she might be meeting another friend for a study session, but not who or where..."

"Let's find out, then." Harry pulled the battered parchment square which was the Marauder's Map out of his bag. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he intoned, touching his wand to its center.

Ron leaned over to see as the familiar framework of Hogwarts spread across the parchment.

---

"And...done!" Hermione sealed her final spell with a flourish and stepped back, looking up at her work. "If my calculations are right, it should work now. Shall we test it?"

"N-no, not yet." Mal emerged from behind the Vanishing Cabinet and came to stand beside Hermione. "We should make sure it's safe before we risk ourselves. Why don't we..." He glanced around, then picked up a tawdry and tarnished tiara. "Here, let's see if that goes through all right."

Setting it on one of the shelves inside the Cabinet, he shut the doors. "Give it a minute to register there's something in there, maybe, and then we'll have a look."

"All right." Hermione smiled, leaning back on her heels. "Mal, I just wanted to say, it's been a real pleasure working with you. I feel like I understand purebloods so much better now that we've been friends."

"What, Weasley wasn't enough for you?" Mal chuckled. "You've known him a lot longer than you have me."

"Yes, but Ron's..." Hermione waved an impatient hand. "Ron's different. His family lives their own way, they do what they please, and most of the things you've told me sound like you come from the traditional purebloods. The ones who're mostly on Voldemort's side." Mal's shudder made her shake her head. "Though that you and Ron *do* have in common. It's just a name, how can it possibly hurt you?"

"You'd be surprised how much a name can hurt." Mal turned to look at her, his gray eyes unusually earnest. "Hermione...I have to tell you something. Before we look to see if the Cabinet works, before we do anything else. I should have told you a long time ago, but I was afraid. Afraid you wouldn't keep helping me, afraid you wouldn't keep being my friend."

"Afraid I wouldn't...are you secretly a Death Eater? Going to use the Cabinet to kidnap me and make Harry come to rescue me?" Hermione smiled, but no answering smile came to Mal's face.

"They'd want me to, if they knew you were here with me," he said quietly. "If they knew you trusted me the way you have. If they knew how much you've helped me." Now he tried to smile, but it was a wan and twisted expression. "Please...try not to hate me, once you know my name?"

His wand swirled in a tight circle around his head.

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The New Arrivals**

Ron knew when they were getting close to the location the Map had indicated for Hermione (after she hadn't appeared for the first several seconds they looked, and hadn't *that* brought his heart into his mouth). Even if he hadn't been familiar with the path from the year before, he could simply have followed the yelling.

"...trusted you, I liked you, and all the time you were lying to me? Using me? That's not what friends do!"

*Well, that doesn't sound good,* the voice in Ron's head commented. *But considering who the Map said she was with, it wouldn't.*

"I never said a word to you that wasn't true!" a boy's voice shouted back. "And of course I changed the way I look—wouldn't you, if it was the only way anyone would ever look at you without seeing someone else?"

"Maybe you didn't tell me lies, but you left an awful lot out of what you did say!" Hermione sounded close to tears, which had both Ron and his passenger worried. She didn't cry easily.

*Unlike some girls I know.*

"And that doesn't even begin to address how you used me to get your own job done, after you've nearly killed two of my friends trying to do it other ways—"

"Would you give me a chance to explain instead of just jumping all over me like this?" the boy cut in. "Or was all that talk about caring more about what people do and who they are than where they come from or who their families are just that, just talk? Are you willing to listen to me honestly, judge me by what I've done and what I haven't, or are you just going to look at my face and my past and decide that settles it all?"

Ron skidded to a halt one corner away from Hermione and the boy, holding up his hand to halt Harry and Ginny, whom he'd outdistanced in the final stretch. "She sounds all right as yet," he whispered at Harry's furious gesture. "And this might be important. We should listen before we go charging in and do something we can't take back."

*Nicely done,* the voice commented as Harry nodded slowly. Ginny was giving him an odd look, but

then shook her head and settled into a ready crouch, her wand gripped loosely in her hand.

"You. Lied. To. Me." Hermione's voice had dropped to its lowest, most dangerous register. "How do I know you're not still lying now?"

The clatter of a dropped wand made Harry's eyes widen, and Ron felt his own doing the same. "Do whatever you want," the boy said shortly. "You'd know the spells if anyone would, the ones that make it obvious when somebody lies, or even inflict punishments." A brief snicker. "Though I'd appreciate it if you'd make it something other than spots. I may not be too fond of this face, but that's not my idea of a way to change it."

"No, you just made yourself look like you were related to Tonks." Hermione's shoes clicked softly against the stone floor as, Ron imagined, she paced up and down the corridor. "Why? Because you know she's someone I would trust?"

"Partly, yes, but it's also not a lie. I *am* related to her, we're first cousins, even if we've never met. There's a spell—"

"Of course, *Invoco sanguinis*. I remember reading about it for Charms a few months ago, it looks into your bloodline and calls up the appearance of a relative of the first or second degree. Is that where—"

"I learned about it? Not entirely. I've known about it for years, every pureblood does, but I learned *how* to do it from that reading." Another short, harsh laugh. "Never thought it would come in handy this soon. But it did."

"Came in handy to lie to me, you mean." The dark, dangerous note was back in Hermione's voice. "Came in handy to get me to help you with something you knew I would never agree to on my own. What are you going to use that Cabinet for? Why did you need it repaired?"

"Well, that depends on you, doesn't it?" The boy's voice acquired a drawling, supercilious tone, and now Ron recognized it for the first time, though he had known the speaker's identity from the moment Hermione's dot appeared beside another on the Map in the seventh floor corridor outside the Room of Requirement. "On you, and on your friends, your side. On whether or not you really do mean everything you said."

"What are you talking about?"

"You said once you wished you knew what made people join the other side of this war." A long pause, broken by two or three ragged breaths. "Some of them...some of us don't have any choice. Not if they want, *we* want our families to stay alive. So I said I'd do this, said I'd fix the Cabinet, said I'd show people how to use it to get through the castle's security, and...and kill..."

Ginny's grip on her wand had tightened. Harry barely seemed to be breathing, his whole body tense with a focus Ron seldom saw in him off the Quidditch field.

"I don't want to, all right?" The words burst out of the speaker around the corner with a desperation Ron couldn't help but feel was genuine. "I never wanted to, not really, not since I got old enough to understand what it's like. But by then it was too late. This was all I knew, all I had, there was nowhere else for me to go. And then you walked in."

"Me?" Hermione sounded startled. "What do I have to do with—"

"I told the Room not to let anyone else in while I was there," the other overrode her, speaking more quickly now, as though he had to get everything out before she could interrupt again. "But you found it anyway. So somewhere in my mind, in my heart, I must have required you." He laughed, as brittle as broken glass. "You, the one person I've done more to hurt than anyone else in this school. You're supposed to be so smart—didn't you ever figure out why? Why I was always calling you names, putting you down, making sure everyone knew how little I thought of you? Didn't you ever guess—"

"You're crazy!" Horror and shock were equally blended in Hermione's tone, but underneath them, Ron thought he detected a hint of something else, and the voice in the back of his mind swore. "You can't possibly mean—"

"Why not?" the other challenged. "Because I'm a pureblood? Because I'm a Slytherin? Does that mean I can't have feelings, or that when I do have them, they'll always be the ones I want them to be?"

Ron clenched his fists, a surge of hot anger rising in his chest. *Doesn't she have enough to deal with—most of it because of you?* he thought angrily towards the speaker around the corner. *Now you're going to mess with her head, make her think you care about her, when all the time—*

*He does care about her, Ron's passenger broke in. But he's mixed up, the same way Snape was always mixed up about Harry's mum. He thinks there's only one kind of love, so when he feels anything for a person, it has to be that. He can't imagine loving her as a friend, or a sister, because he doesn't even know that's possible—*

"None of this makes any sense," Hermione said shakily. "And the worst part is, some part of me feels like it should. Like I'm missing just one piece, one word in my essay, one letter in my incantation, and as soon as I find that, everything will fall into place."

"Try this," the other suggested, and Hermione's little cry of surprise broke off in a way Ron knew well.

Perfectly at one, for this moment, with the passenger inside his own mind, he hurled himself around the corner and tore Draco Malfoy away from Hermione just in time to keep Hermione's knee from finding its target. Given that his momentum carried both of them across the passage, with Malfoy taking the brunt of the impact against the opposite wall, Ron didn't think Malfoy was particularly grateful, but he didn't much care.

"Bad snake," he said almost conversationally, adjusting his grip on a bug-eyed Malfoy so that he



was using only his left arm to pin the Slytherin against the stone wall, freeing his right hand to produce his wand. "Didn't your mummy ever teach you what happens when you kiss a girl who doesn't want you to?"

"You just—want her—for yourself," Malfoy wheezed, trying to shove Ron's arm away with his shoulders. "She doesn't belong—to you—"

"She doesn't belong to anybody," said Harry in his coldest voice, stepping up beside Ron, wand trained between Malfoy's eyes and held perfectly steady. "She's our friend, which means we look out for her. Stop her being used by scum like you. No matter what kind of pathetic lies you've told her—"

"Harry," Ginny interrupted. Both boys turned to look at her where she stood with her arms around Hermione, though Ron, warned by a murmur from the back of his mind, kept the majority of his attention on his squirming prisoner. "I don't think he was lying. Remember, he didn't know we were there."

"That doesn't mean he told the truth." Harry turned back to glare at Malfoy. "He was playing for her sympathy, trying to make her believe he's just a poor little rich boy, stuck on the wrong side of the war with no way out—"

"What if he is?"

Everyone turned to look at the speaker. Ron would have done the same, except that, as he belatedly realized, the voice was his own.

"What do we risk if we believe him, and take him to Dumbledore right now?" that even, familiar voice went on, issuing from Ron's lips though in no way connected with his mind—or rather, he realized with growing fear, not his *own* mind. "We're four to one, and he doesn't even have his wand. I think it rolled over there somewhere, if someone wants to go look for it. If he's lying to try to get on our good side, can't Dumbledore do that thing like Snape can, where he looks in your eyes and knows what you're thinking? And if he's not, then we've just hit the Death Eaters where it hurts, stopped one of their plans before it ever got started, and we didn't even have to work for it —"

*What are you doing?* Ron tried to wrest control of his voice back, but his passenger was too strong for him. *Are you mad? This is Malfoy we're talking about, he just admitted going through with a plot to get Death Eaters into Hogwarts—we can't trust him!*

*Did I say one word about trusting him?* The voice laughed coldly. *Nobody trusts him, not the way he is now. But this is the best chance I can see to end the war, or at least set Voldemort and the Death Eaters back a good way—*

*Stop saying that name!* Ron fought harder, and his control over his physical body slipped, relaxing both his grip on his wand and his pressure on Malfoy's chest. *How do I know you're not just trying to get him in the same room with Dumbledore, then have him pull something out and kill us all?*

*Fine thing that'd be for the war, getting our leader, the Chosen One, and his three best friends at the same time—*

Malfoy exploded into action, flinging Ron off himself and tackling Harry, his hand closing around Harry's wand and yanking. Ron had just time to admire the way in which Harry's left fist came driving inwards on a collision course with one of Malfoy's eyes before he hit the ground, shoulder first, expelling the breath from his lungs. Hazily he heard Ginny and Hermione both shout spells, heard Malfoy's yelp of pain and Harry's curse, but his attention was directed inwards, towards the other presence currently occupying his mind.

A presence which looked, to his mental vision, very much like himself, except for its blank, red, monstrous eyes.

*It's not what you think*, the monster began, but Ron was through listening. He gathered up his magic and struck out savagely, and the satisfaction of seeing his evil twin wince away from the blow joined with the relief of getting his wind back.

"Get out of my head," he muttered, pushing himself into a sitting position. The battle with Malfoy, he noticed peripherally, was finished, the Slytherin semi-conscious in a corner with Ginny guarding him, and Harry and Hermione were headed his way, looking worried. "Make you get out—you've got no right—"

*I never wanted to be here in the first place*, the monster growled, shielding himself with an ease Ron envied. *You're all a bunch of idiots, you never stop to think about things and you only ask for help when you can't avoid it—I've been trying to help you, but just because I happen to look a little scary and be inside your head, which by the way wasn't my idea, you're more interested in fighting me than worrying about your real problems—*

Behind Ginny, the world split open.

The monster swore again, true fear in his voice for the first time, and Ron couldn't blame him. The masked man at the fore of the impossible tear in reality was bad enough, but the things behind him, human-shaped but a featureless gray, their surfaces rippling as though they were liquid, were the stuff of nightmare. *His* nightmares, the ones which sometimes had a good but strange component to them, the ones which—

His mind skidded across the unfamiliar thoughts, trying to make sense of them, but his body was wiser. He was on his feet, his wand in his hand, falling into flanking position with Harry, Hermione on his other side, even as Ginny wheeled and gasped, as Malfoy cowered away with a little whimper, scrabbling himself upright somehow with his back to the wall and edging along it as though hoping he wouldn't be noticed.

"You," Ginny spat, giving ground but bringing her wand up to fighting position. "I thought I smelled something foul."

"I'm sorry, have we met?" The masked man's voice was light, almost pleasant, but something in it

sent shudders down Ron's spine. Harry was balanced on the balls of his feet, wand ready at his side, and Hermione's lips were silently forming spells as she prepared to cast.

"I remember what you did." Ginny's tone was flat, as though the memory caused her such pain she could barely stand to speak of it. "How you had your... your creatures break us down, grind away at us, until we were ready for 'rehabilitation'. You thought none of us would be aware of you, but I was. I saw you. Never your face, no, never that, but your shape, your movements. And your voice. Are you going to deny it? Say you weren't the one?"

"Whyever should I do that?" The man seemed entirely focused on Ginny, but somehow Ron had the impression that he saw everything that was going on, saw the three friends behind her ready to back her up in an instant, saw Malfoy frantically worming himself around the edge of a door which hadn't been there a moment before. "As you said, you saw me and heard me. Which means you know what I do to my enemies. I track them down, through as many universes as may be necessary, and render them unable to harm me further. Are you so sure you want to continue being my enemy, after all you've already been through? Will you survive going through it again, or will that fine spirit of yours finally break?"

"Hey!" The word ripped out of Ron without his conscious decision, but he sensed that his other self was equally shocked. "Nobody talks to my sister like that! Who do you think you are?"

The man's attention turned to him, and Ron felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. "I am your rival, Weasley," he said softly. "And I am your death."

The spell came hurtling at him so quickly that Ron had no time to dodge or block. It struck him full on, and his world went dark, shot through with pain. He fired back blindly, heard a yell mingled with the sound of his friends' spellcasting, felt hands that clutched in terrifyingly, impossibly familiar ways closing around his wrists—new voices were shouting now, spells mixed with ordinary curses of shock and anger, and then a hard blow on his chest, breaking the grasp of the *things'* hands on him—there were still hands, but they were holding him up, supporting him and helping him to stumble forward, through what must have been one of the doors to the secret passages, since when he half-fell into a sitting position, there was grass under his hands and legs —

He was lying on his side, a girl quietly weeping near him, small sounds in the background letting him know they weren't alone. "Hermione?" he mumbled, though he knew it was her. "You made it?"

"Mmm." Her hand closed around his. "Ron, I'm so sorry."

"For what? Getting fooled by Malfoy? You couldn't know he was that tricky—" He stopped, realizing there could be another interpretation of her words. "Where's Harry and Ginny?"

"They didn't make it, Ron." The pain in her voice held a strong element of self-blame, as though she thought it was every inch her fault that their friends were gone. "I wasn't fast enough, no one could have been for Harry, they had him before I could even blink. And Ginny..." She swallowed

hard. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Tell me," Ron demanded, pushing himself upright with his free hand. "And then cast *Lumos* or light one of your fires, I can't see a thing."

"Oh, Ron, I would, but—" She cut off abruptly. "They hit this whole area with some variant on Instant Darkness Powder," she said after a few moments, an odd ring to her words. "We're still working out the counterspell. It may take a little while."

"Fine, that's fine, at least someone's doing something. Now what about Ginny? What happened to her?"

"I made a choice," Hermione said quietly. "She was in the clear at first, she could have run away from those things, if she hadn't stopped long enough to cast a spell that would throw you out of harm's way. And I might have been able to free her...if I had ignored what she did for you and let them catch up with you instead. She wanted you safe, Ron, and I had to respect her choice. So I saved you, and they took her."

Ron closed his eyes, though it made no difference to the darkness around him. *This can't be happening. My little sister saving me, my best friend taken away by things I don't even recognize, the girl I care about being friendly with a no-good Slytherin piece of garbage—*

"What happened to Malfoy?" he mumbled. His other self, silent to this point, seemed to be getting ready to speak up, and he wanted as many points as possible cleared up before he had to deal with that complication as well.

"I don't know. I think he got away through the Vanishing Cabinet, somehow." Hermione gave a choky little laugh. "For all the good it will do him."

*All right, what do you want?* Ron thought irritably as his other self's signals became impossible to ignore. *Going to try to take me over again?*

*Believe it or not, that was never really what I wanted. And the red eyes don't mean I'm possessed, just that I can see in the dark like a kneazle. Which I was trying to tell you before you jumped all over me.* His other self sighed. *But it doesn't matter now. What does matter is that I think there might be a way out of this for all of us.*

*And what would I have to do?* Ron knew he sounded suspicious, and didn't care. He was.

*Nothing too much.* His other self appeared to be thinking hard. *Just...say aloud some of the things you were thinking. I don't know if it will work, but if I'm right, it might.*

*You don't know if what will work?* Ron demanded, but his other self had gone silent. Grumbling under his breath, he squeezed Hermione's hand again.

"M sorry this happened, Hermione," he said. "I wish it hadn't."

He felt her go very still. "Do you?" she asked softly. "Do you really?"

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Hardest Choice**

He roused in the half-darkness, confused, scared, until he identified the tall and blocky shapes around him as four-poster beds, heard the little sighs and creaks that meant it was a normal night in Gryffindor Tower. *A dream*, he realized, the understanding slowing his heart, calming his breathing. *It was just a dream.*

*But how much of it?*

At the bottom of his bed, a girl's silhouette stirred, bushy hair surrounding her head like a wild halo. "You'll be all right now," murmured the well-known voice. "I have to go."

"No, wait." He caught at the edge of her robe as she started to stand. "What was going on out there? With you and Malfoy, and then those *things*, and you said Harry and Ginny were gone—"

"You told me you wished it had never happened." Feminine fingers, smooth and cool, gently disentangled his from their handful of black fabric. "So now it hasn't. No one ever met with Malfoy in the Room of Requirement, and nothing strange ever happened outside it. Harry's right there—" She pointed to the next bed over, where he could now see his friend curled into his usual nighttime ball under the bedclothes. "—and you'll see Ginny in the morning. Forget it, Ron, forget about all of it. It never happened. It was just a dream."

"What about you?" Reluctantly, Ron let go of his hold. "Will I see you in the morning?"

His friend gave a strange, choky little laugh. "Don't worry," she said. "Everyone who should be there, will be. Now go back to sleep, Ron, please. I promise, it will be all right now."

"If you say so." Ron slid down under the covers and shut his eyes obediently. "Night, Hermione."

"Good night, Ron. Sleep well." There was a pause, and then a very faint sound, which could have been three whispered words or the sound of a kiss being blown from an outstretched fingertip.

Or, just possibly, the sound of nothing at all.

Ron slipped into sleep, and never registered that although his visitor was gone, the door of his dormitory had failed to open and close.

---

Safely in Outer Time, the Threshold closed behind her, Neenie took the three steps which brought her to her own domain, then sank down at the base of one of the trees, dropping her face into her hands. "I'm not crying," she whispered. "I'm *not*. That was the best thing I could have done for him, for that world's Ron, merging him into a ridge that way. He would never have understood what we do here, and this way he has a world he knows, and Redwing gets to stay with us. I'm *not* crying, I'm..."

Her throat and her eyes conspired to make a liar of her, and she drew her knees up to her chest, shaking.

*We should have been faster. We should have done more. If we'd only been there a few seconds sooner, we could have saved Lynx as well as Redwing, stopped the RC's from taking that world's Harry and Hermione for rehabilitation, fixed it as a tell of its own rather than letting it be merged. We might even have caught the man who was directing the RC's, the one who's caused us all these problems in the first place...*

She knew her recriminations were pointless. Her Uncle Pat had been exhausted by his unusual efforts towards Chronicling a world completely separate from their own, which bore tangential relations to not one but two ridges. Without his sudden awakening to the understanding that the little tell he'd stumbled across, the world where her beloved and his sister had been placed, was about to go up like a firework, they would have had no warning at all. In which case, they would have been back where they had started, combing through hundreds of thousands of worlds to try to find two particular, very special people. At least they had saved one of their own, instead of losing them both.

Unfortunately, as she also knew, knowing and accepting were two entirely different things.

Something cool touched her hand. Startled, she looked up.

The forest around her was changing. Even as she watched, the small dots of red and yellow and brown which had begun to appear among the trees grew rapidly larger, the leaves drying and losing their green before her eyes. A breeze whipped through the upper canopy, carrying a drift of autumn color with it and leaving behind bare branches. The sky above her was leaden gray, and bits of it seemed to be descending towards her. One of those bits was what had made an impression on her skin.

"Snow?" Neenie got slowly to her feet, blinking in puzzlement at the clouds. "Why would it—"

A woman's figure moved in the trees. Neenie had a hand on her dagger with its blue pommel stone before she thought.

"Peace," Miss Suzie said, stepping out where Neenie could see her more clearly. "Your family will be here in a moment, along with your newest arrival. I wanted to come a little ahead of them, to remind you that no matter how well you do, you will always have failures."

"I know that." Neenie released the dagger impatiently. "Do you have to rub it in?"

"Such was not my intention." Miss Suzie gestured towards the sky. "You crafted this domain. Though you have given your Packmates, your siblings and parents, control over it to some extent, you did the majority of the work and therefore it will always respond most readily to you. And while your heart sorrows, the domain will grieve with you. Until you recoup your loss, until you regain the person you feel responsible for not saving this time, it will be winter here."

"Always winter?" Neenie wrapped her arms around herself, shivering. "And never Christmas?"

Miss Suzie's smile was as wintry as the breeze now cutting through Neenie's thin robes. "The words are yours, not mine, but yes. Now, go and take comfort, and make your plans well. Your father's pains on behalf of my partner have absolved you from any further responsibility to us. From this day on, you are a free Legendbreaker, though we will always be available should you need help with a difficult problem, or wish to share your joy at some great success."

"Thank you." On an impulse, Neenie curtsied, as she would have to a queen. Miss Suzie accepted it with a stately inclination of her head, then turned and was gone, vanishing into the now swirling snow.

"Neenie?" called a voice a moment later, young, male, and with the power to make Neenie's breath catch short, make her heart thump wildly against the insides of her ribs. "You out here?"

"Over here." Neenie pressed the inside corners of her eyes, willing her tears away. This was a moment for happiness, not regrets. "Are you all right?"

"With Mrs.—I mean, your Aunt Carrie to fix me up? How could I be anything else?"

"You managed before," said Fox as the two young men appeared around a particularly large tree, Redwing half a step ahead with his longer legs. "Of course, you never took the 'who can bang himself up the most' prize. That would be my brother."

Redwing flicked the cloak he was carrying over his arm in Fox's direction, showering Fox with snow, then shook it out once more before coming to drape it around Neenie and look anxiously down into her face as he fastened the clasp at her throat. "What about you?" he asked quietly. "How are you doing?"

"You're here." Neenie put a hand over his, smiling into worried blue eyes, breathing in the scent of clean male with just a hint of spice and musky feathers. "That makes everything better for right now. I've missed you, you know."

"I'm glad to hear it." Redwing slid his arms around her, under the cloak, and she stepped into the embrace and settled her cheek against his collarbone. His hands moved along her back and sides, gently caressing, and she sighed with pleasure.

"You have until next spring to stop that," she murmured.

"You haven't been eating," Redwing said over her words, his finger tracing down her spine. "Why



haven't you been making her eat?" he demanded of Fox. "You know how she gets when she's worried about something she thinks she can solve with her books! She forgets to eat, half the time she won't sleep..."

"Yes, and you're the only one who can distract her," Fox retorted. "And until today, we didn't have you. I can do a lot of things for her, but not that, and if you start saying I should have anyway, I swear I'm going to mix up all your socks so you never have a matched pair again."

Redwing chuckled, the sound transmitting through Neenie's bones before it reached her outer ears. "Why should I care? I won't be able to tell, with my eyes back to the way they were in our world, before all this happened. Besides, nobody sees your socks when you're wearing robes anyway."

"But you won't always be wearing robes," Neenie cautioned, lifting her head to look up at Redwing. "We work in all kinds of places, there are spins and tells where people wear jeans and trousers more than they do robes, we might even have to wear business attire sometimes..."

"Then I'll let you pick out my clothes for me, and hex him if he gets anywhere near." Redwing kissed her on the forehead. "And we're just being silly in any case, so it won't matter. Shall we go back to the cottage? It's getting chilly out here, and Mr.—your dad was saying something about plans..."

---

"Losing Lynx may not be as much of a disaster as we thought at first," John said when everyone was seated around the kitchen table. "It's not good, certainly, but because we did get Redwing—" He nodded to the young man of that nickname, who tossed him a salute in return. "—they have a limited number of worlds where they can rehabilitate her."

"Why—oh, stupid me!" Meghan shook her head in chagrin. "It's the same reason we were all put in pairs and threes in the first place, isn't it? The resonance?"

"It is precisely the resonance." John smiled at her. "And because my mission succeeded, and we are now free to use all of our power, we may be able to force their hand even further if we move quickly. Are you up for it?"

"Who are you asking?" Carrie said before an eager-eyed Meghan could reply. "Because I'm going to have to say no if Redwing wants to go. Sorry," she added in Redwing's direction, "but I just finished a complicated bit of healing on you and your eyes need time to readjust to working in infrared instead of normal light."

"I wasn't going to ask anyway." Redwing grimaced. "It would be worse than the nightmare where you realize you haven't studied for a practical exam. As long as you're not going after..." He sketched a jagged shape down the center of his forehead.

"No, I think we should save the most complicated for last." John tapped his fingers together. "As much as I would like to go after that world now, for personal reasons. Still, if we leave that one as their only option for placing Lynx, we get an extra strong dose of resonance between her and our

young hero, which might make our job easier. And it so happens that we have the perfect people to handle the other pair we're discussing." He pointed first to Fox, then to Meghan. "Assuming you'd like them back, of course."

"Let me see." Fox leaned back in his chair. "Do I want to rescue, literally from a fate worse than death, a beautiful girl who's already in love with me and will take to Legendbreaking like she was born for it? I do believe that would be a yes."

Meghan simply let her beaming smile speak for her.

"Excellent." John looked down the table at Pat. "And if you're recovered enough to try a little Chronicling, I thought we might be able to pull off an FSM maneuver."

"A forced split and merge?" Neenie looked dubious. "I don't know, Dad. That takes a lot of power."

"It does, but it's also quick, and it leaves no traces. If I understand it correctly, that is."

"If we take advantage of a natural breakpoint...or even if we have to manufacture one, in an indeterminate stretch..." Neenie trailed off, muttering to herself, then looked up. "I think we can do it," she said. "It's risky, but as long as we get in and out cleanly, we'll rebuild our power fast, because we'll have everyone except for Lynx, Wolf, and..." She flinched from saying the last name. "Everyone except those three. And as long as we pick our moment to start congruency with their world carefully, we could even go so far as to wait until the main action ends if we have to."

"Which I think we'd better." Pat's reluctance on the point was clear, understandably so since his Pack-sister and his godson were two of the people under discussion, but his face was determined. "Especially with Wolf involved. I mean, just look at the titles of the ridge books. The Chronicler didn't want you to lose sight of who it was about, now did she?" He shook his head. "Which means they'll be watching, and even a hint of interference will bring the RC's down like the wrath of your god of choice. But once the final battle is over, and we get into those nineteen *years* of indeterminate time..."

"A few people walk out of the castle and disappear early one morning, without anyone seeing them go, and we nudge the world into the next one over, where those people are still sleeping in their beds." Fox snickered. "Or, in one case, where she never existed. But she won't mind that, as long as she exists with us. It could work."

"It *will* work," John said, letting no trace of his inner uncertainty appear on his face or in his voice. "But it will have to wait until we finish the mission which is our current priority. Now, apart from Fox and Meghan, who should go into the field for that one?"

---

Neville Longbottom fingered the DA Galleon in the pocket of his robes and wondered, not for the first time, where Luna Lovegood might be leading him. The train ride back to London for the Christmas holidays in this, his sixth year at Hogwarts and Luna's fifth, had been uneventful until

she had asked him, through the medium of the very coin he was now rubbing with his thumb, to wait for two minutes after she got up to go to the lavatory, then come into the corridor and join her.

"What is so secret that you couldn't say it in front of Harry?" he asked now. "Or Ron, or Hermione, or Ginny?"

"It's not something I have to say." Luna opened the door of an empty compartment and beckoned him in. "It's something you have to see." She led him to the window, which the darkening evening had turned into a ghostly mirror, superimposing their translucent images on the trees and meadows past which the Hogwarts Express was rushing. "Come and look."

Stepping up beside Luna, Neville looked as she had requested. For a moment, he saw only their two forms, his own familiar one, stocky and round-faced as always, and Luna's slender, wide-eyed prettiness. Then, as though a mist were clearing away, a third shape appeared, between and behind them.

"What—" Neville whirled, but no one had entered the compartment with them.

"She isn't here," said Luna, her tone reproving. "She's only there. Look at her and tell me what you see."

Setting aside his feeling of being disconnected from reality (an exercise to which he had become accustomed during the year and a half he had known Luna) and returning his eyes to the reflections, Neville squinted at the ghostly girl, who was becoming better defined with every moment. "She's pretty. Sort of delicate, like she might break, except I don't think she would. She looks tough too. Her skin is a brown sugar kind of color, and her hair is all braided, like Angelina used to wear, only shorter." He leaned forward a bit, inspecting the reflection's face. "She has silver eyes. Sad eyes, like she misses somebody she loves. I..." He frowned. "I think I know her, only I can't think of her name. And..."

His heart gave a convulsive shudder, cutting off his words. The girl in the mirroring window had just laid her hand on reflection-Neville's shoulder—and Neville could feel the pressure of those small, strong fingers through his robes at this very moment.

"It's you she misses," Luna said conversationally. "It's you she wants. Do you want her? Will you go with her? You don't have to worry about your gran, or anyone else here," she went on without giving Neville time to answer, which was just as well, as he had absolutely no idea what he was going to say. "They'll never know we're gone."

"We?" Neville was extremely proud that his voice hadn't squeaked. "Does she want you too?"

"Not the same way. Just as a friend. I have someone else who's been missing me." Luna leaned back, looking dangerously off-balance from where Neville could see her in real life. In the reflection world, he could clearly see the young man against whom she was resting, whose features and coloring reminded him of Hermione Granger but whose teasing smile made him think

more of Harry or Ron. "I've made my mind up already, so it all depends on you. The only thing you have to do is say yes, you'll go with her, or no, you want to stay here. But whatever you decide, you need to do it quickly. There isn't much time."

Neville had read about being torn by a decision, but had never understood it so clearly as at this moment. It was as if he was not one person but two: one of him wanted nothing so much as to bolt out of this compartment and back to the safety of his friends, his life, the world he understood, while the other knew himself ready to conquer worlds and slay dragons if only the girl whose hand was on his shoulder would stand by his side. But it was a choice he had to make, he couldn't have it both ways, it had to be one or the other, safety or adventure, the known or the unknown—

"Yes," he heard someone whisper, just as someone else shouted, "No!"

The world tore down the middle with a sickening jerk like the train running off its rails, and half of him staggered back and collapsed onto one of the seats in the compartment as the other half reached up and clasped a hand, tiny and warm and real and alive—

With a gasp, Neville opened his eyes. Luna was leaning over him, looking concerned. "The train went around a curve, and you fell," she said. "Are you all right? Did you hit your head?"

"The girl." Neville sat up, breathing hard. "There was a girl—and another boy—"

"There's no one here but us." Luna gestured around the empty compartment. "I was hoping to show you one of the new spells Daddy's planning to print in this month's edition of *The Quibbler*, that you can use on a window to see your true love, but it didn't work right when I tried it. I'm sorry to have called you away for something so silly."

"Don't mention it." Neville got up to peer out the compartment window. "I was sure there was a girl..."

Looking back the way the train had come, he failed to see Luna's small and secret smile, or her silently blown kiss in the vague upward direction of Outer Time.

---

"I'm a little sorry for him," Captain murmured into his Pearl's ear. "He never gets to have a you."

"He'll have somebody nice, though." Pearl ran her fingers through his hair. "And I suppose Luna could go looking in that direction. If she really, really wanted to."

"I hope she doesn't," Fox put in, cradling Starwing against him and resting his cheek on top of her head. "He's not worth it at that point."

"You would know." Captain grinned and dodged the halfhearted smack his friend aimed at him, then looked down—though not as far as he had been used to look—at his beloved. "You grew," he said, trying not to let his eyes stray to the area in which the largest gains had been made. "I like it."

"I thought you would." Pearl wiggled a little, and snickered at the flush which rose in Captain's cheeks. "Is it hard to be good?"

"Yes." Captain gently removed her arms from their place around his neck and took one step back from her, though he still held her hand. "It's harder than ever to be good." He glanced in the direction of a large, black, winged horse which was watching them all with an expression of weary equine patience. "Though it does help to have your mum right there."

"We won't have to be good much longer," Starwing said without opening her eyes. "Once we're trained in being what we are now, and we go on our final gathering mission, we can all make our promises at once, and get started on our lives."

"All right, I'll bite." Captain started in the direction of the horse, Pearl skipping beside him, Fox and Starwing on his other flank. "What are we now? And what exactly happened between the last time I saw you, and now?"

"The answer to the second question is a very long story." Fox slid his arm around Starwing's waist for ease of walking. "But it will help to flesh out the answer to the first question, which is: Legendbreakers..."

---

On another arm of the great sprawling universe of story, a man waited. He had seen his own beginnings only a little while before, and soon he would see to the final ending of his enemies. He could appreciate such an artistic duality, in the moments when cold rage did not turn his eyes to gray ice and harden his pointed face into a sculpture of marble.

*It was they who changed me, they who ruined me. If they had never come into my world, I would never have conceived of such a disgusting emotion. Love for her, indeed! As if such a thing were possible!*

*For that, and for everything else, they will pay. And soon.*

He had spent long hours trying, and failing, to breach the security on their domain, until he realized he had no need to attack them in their stronghold. Instead he could force them to come to him, to enter a world where he would control the rules. With their own needs and desires he would trap them, and with their own foolish beliefs he would destroy them.

*I have what you want. More, I have who you want. So come to me, little Legendbreakers, Pack and Pride in your vaunted strength. Come, and learn the secrets of how you began.*

*Before I seal you to the Inner Time of your ridge, to end you once and for all.*

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Last Beginning**

The cottage, most unusually, was quiet.

*Possibly because all the people who like to be noisy have realized I'm in an unusually foul mood today and taken themselves elsewhere...*

John didn't normally like his bad temper inconveniencing his family, but today was an exception. The moon cycle of their domain might skip the one night which affected him the worst, but removing two or more days from the normal progression would have taken exponentially more power, so he had to suffer through the usual building up of tension, along with the letdown afterwards.

*And it's almost worse not to transform—not that I miss the pain, especially since I'd be going through it untamed, but it leaves me feeling... empty. At loose ends. Like a piece of myself is missing, and even if it's a nasty piece that I don't particularly like, it's part of me and I've spent my life learning to cope with it. So now that it's gone...*

Of course, the nastiness and disliking aside, he could say the same about a certain person.

"For this reason," he quoted softly, "a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

*One flesh, one heart, one soul. Not complete unity, not perfect agreement—wouldn't that be boring after a while!—but wholeness. The feeling of having found my other half, that this is how it was always meant to be.*

*But when someone tears the halves apart...*

He closed his eyes, feeling the ring he had formed from flames grow warm against his chest. "Soon," he murmured. "Soon. When the time is right."

*When everyone is ready. When all the lessons are learned. When we think we won't fail miserably.*

*All I can say is, it had better be soon, for my sanity if nothing else!*

His sense of humor thus reasserting itself, he chuckled, opened his eyes, and got to his feet from where he had been sitting in front of the fireplace, the roaring flames both comfort and necessity

in the domain's current wintry state. If the only limiting factor was the readiness of the rest of their Legendbreaking team, it would serve his turn better to be working on training exercises with the most newly arrived members, rather than sitting around and feeling sorry for himself.

*Or, if I still don't trust myself around other people, I could always do some theory work.* Nodding to himself, John crossed the room to the series of bookshelves and selected one of the volumes, an enormously thick hardcover with an exploding bank vault on the front. *Let's see here, chapter thirty-four, I think Pearl said?*

He flipped pages until he found the spot his niece had been referencing, then grinned. *Yes, this should do nicely as a contact point for a certain feline. And if we're lucky, my lady will feel the ripples in the fabric of the world and meet us there...*

---

"All right, go through it with me just one more time." Captain brushed his hand back and forth against one of the stone merlons forming the crenellation in which he sat. "I think I'm getting it, but I'm not quite there yet."

"Start at the beginning." Meghan perched sideways in the next crenellation over, one foot up and the other swinging free. "When you remember being the other you."

"The other me." Captain smiled ruefully. "Not exactly the world's most thrilling person, is he? But there's something there. The seeds of a new him are starting to sprout." He looked up, eyes dark with worry. "I hope that wasn't just because I was along for the ride."

"I don't think so." Meghan shook her head. "He started to change in the last part of the ridge as well. You were just seeing the beginning of that. But you might have speeded it up a little." She beamed at him. "Now go on."

"Starwing—or her counterpart, the person she is in the ridge—she pulled me aside on the train. Said she had something to show me, and I looked out the window and saw..." Captain reached out to capture one of Meghan's hands. "I saw you. He saw you too, my host did, my counterpart, and that's what started the splitting of the world, isn't it?"

Meghan nodded. "You knew me," she said. "He didn't. And you wanted to go to me, and he wanted to stay where he was. So when Starwing asked the question, that forced the two of you apart."

"And forced there to be two worlds, because one person can't say both things at once in the same world." Captain slid a broad finger of his own between two of Meghan's daintier ones. "But the worlds never got any more different than that, because in the moment after they split apart, you reached in and pulled me through your Threshold to Outer Time, and Fox grabbed up Starwing the same way..."

"And then we merged the two worlds back together again, because only the people who were meant to be in that world in the first place were still there." Meghan squeezed Captain's finger with hers. "A forced split and merge—and a neat one, Neenie says, no loose ends or untidiness

about it." She preened for a moment, then sobered. "I just hope we can do that well the next time." A small gulp. "I hope *I* can do that well."

"It is going to have to be you, isn't it?" Captain leaned over the merlon to cup his other hand around her face. "Everyone else's counterpart is either there that night or is already dead in the ridge at that point. I suppose your mum could go..."

"Mum wouldn't fit the lines I found, though." Meghan leaned into her love's caress. "It says 'a girl', and that means younger than... than the one we're after. So yes, I think it does have to be me." She smiled a little. "You'd almost think the Chronicler *wanted* us to do this, with a hint like that written right into the ridge!"

"Who knows?" Captain looked up into the clear blueness of the sky above their neighbors' domain. "Maybe she does."

---

Harry swung the Cloak back over himself and walked on. Someone else was moving not far away, stooping over another prone figure on the ground. He was feet away from her when he realized it was Ginny.

He stopped in his tracks. She was crouching over a girl who was whispering for her mother.

"It's all right," Ginny was saying. "It's okay. We're going to get you inside."

"But I want to go *home*," whispered the girl. "I don't want to fight anymore!"

"I know," said Ginny, and her voice broke. "It's going to be all right."

Ripples of cold undulated over Harry's skin. He wanted to shout out to the night, he wanted Ginny to know that he was there, he wanted her to know where he was going. He wanted to be stopped, to be dragged back, to be sent back home...

But he *was* home. Hogwarts was the first and best home he had known. He and Voldemort and Snape, the abandoned boys, had all found home here...

Ginny was kneeling beside the injured girl now, holding her hand. With a huge effort Harry forced himself on. He thought he saw Ginny look around as he passed, and wondered whether she had sensed someone walking nearby, but he did not speak, and he did not look back.

---

"Need some help here?" A witch a little younger than Ginny's mother, with brown, smoke-stained curls and a worried face, dropped to one knee on the other side of the injured girl. "Where does it hurt, love?"

"But..." the girl began with wide eyes, but stopped short as the witch shook her head. "It's my knee. I think I wrenched it, and then I fell and jarred everything." She drew her robes aside to



reveal the afflicted part, and the witch touched the swelling gently, her hands creamy pale against the girl's darker skin. "If you could just help me—" She broke off in a gasp of pain as two fingers pressed down at a particular spot.

"Sorry, but I had to check that." The witch sighed. "The good news is, you're not too badly hurt, and any decent Healer should be able to put it right in a flash, but the bad news is, most of the Healers will be busy with bigger problems tonight. You may have to wait quite a while."

"I can wait." The girl smiled shyly. "I had good teachers."

Ginny sat back on her heels, her mind churning. Something about this night, the people in front of her, the feeling she'd had a few moments before that she wasn't alone, felt wrong and right at the same time. She wanted the rightness of it, but she feared the wrongness, feared it with a strength she didn't fully understand. It was as if this girl, with her bright gray eyes and the lines of pain grooved into her face, and this woman, with the untamable hair which put Ginny in mind of Hermione now that she had a better look at it, meant laughter and joy on the one hand, and terror and pain, or worse still, the blankness of unmaking, on the other...

"Help me get her inside?" the witch asked, breaking into Ginny's reverie. "We can talk once we're there."

"All right." Ginny slipped an arm under the girl's shoulders, and the witch did the same from the other side. Together, they lifted her and supported her towards the castle, finding a small corner of the Great Hall which was still unoccupied and claiming it for their own. In the better light of the floating candles, the girl proved to be about Ginny's own age, a few years older than she had assumed.

*But assumed isn't the right word. More like expected. Only, how could I have expected anything from someone I've never met? I don't even know her name...*

"I'm Ginny Weasley," she said when they were settled. "If you didn't know."

"I think I could have worked it out now that I can see you properly," the witch said as the girl drew her wand and began to wave it tentatively around her injured knee. "You favor your brothers a good bit." She held out a hand. "I wish condolences weren't such a meaningless thing on a night like this, but you have mine anyway."

"Thank you." Ginny accepted the hand, letting one shuddering wave of grief for Fred roll over her. "Why do people have to fight?" she burst out, keeping her voice low with tremendous effort, her sorrow and pain fueling an intense anger. "Why do people have to fight about the stupidest things in the world? Why do people have to bleed, and hurt, and *die* ? What *good* does any of it do?"

"I could give you all kinds of well-reasoned, scholarly answers, but that's not what you want. You want an answer that will make it make sense in your heart, and I don't have one." The witch pressed Ginny's hand briefly. "I can only tell you that your brother was a grown man, he knew what he was doing, and *he* thought this cause was worth risking his life. And if we win—"

"When," the girl corrected without looking up from her self-healing.

"I beg your pardon." The witch inclined her upper body in the girl's direction. "When we win, a lot of people will be free to live long and happy lives, who wouldn't have been if we'd lost. But you know that already, and it doesn't do anything to help you tonight, because not all the winning in the world will bring your brother back to you."

Ginny laughed under her breath, staving off her tears by the action. "You don't just look like Hermione," she said. "You think like her too. Do you know her? Hermione Granger?"

"Do you think I know her?" the witch countered. "Look carefully, Ginny. Look at both of us. Tell me what you see. Don't pause, don't think. Just speak out."

"You're wrong," Ginny said immediately, pointing at the girl. "You're the wrong age. You're too old, older than me, almost, and that's not right. You should be..." She trailed off, threads of memory beginning to weave themselves together inside her mind. "You're the little sister. You always hated being younger, younger even than me and Luna, and you were always asking your mum and dad, and...and your *other* mum and dad?" She blinked at the older witch, who was smiling and nodding in encouragement. "You were always asking them if you couldn't use an Aging Potion, and they were always saying no. Because it would only change your body, it wouldn't change your mind, and you really weren't the same age as...as..."

"As who?" The girl slid her wand away and curled her legs under her, both of them moving equally well now. "Whose little sister am I, Ginny?"

"You sensed him outside," the witch put in. "You knew he was there, even though he didn't speak to you. You know what he's going to do, and you hate him and love him equally for it, because it's a very heroic thing to do, but you don't see how it will make any real difference."

"How do you know all this?" Ginny felt her breath coming short, and couldn't have said for the life of her if she were more afraid of the girl and the woman sitting in front of her or the firestorm building inside her mind. "We've never met—"

"Haven't we?" The witch held out her left hand, palm up, slightly cupped, and twirled her wand three times within the space of air her fingers defined. A picture formed within it, as though it were a crystal ball, a picture of a compartment on the Hogwarts Express, filled with laughing students and one older witch and wizard, the witch who sat in front of her now and...

"Yes," Ginny murmured, peering into the depths of the picture. "Yes. Professor Lupin. You, and he—" She broke off, recalling what she had seen already tonight. "But he and Tonks—and they're—"

The witch bowed her head. "Some things cannot be changed," she said softly. "All honor to them, for their valiant fight. But tell me this, Ginny. Are you beginning to remember a time, a world, a life that your mind tells you is impossible?"

"How do I answer that without sounding mad?" Ginny let her fingers hover above the floating

picture. "I think I am. But is it real, or am I just imagining it because it looks so much nicer than what I have?"

"Are we real?" the girl asked, laying her hand on Ginny's arm. "Are we real, and really here, and asking you to remember us?"

"If you're not, I'm having one incredible dream." Ginny looked from girl to woman. "Just tell me this. Is Harry going to die out there?"

"Swear that you will tell no one the answer," the witch said sharply. "You could change things for the worst, start this whole cycle over again, if you do. Swear, now."

"On my life, and my hope of seeing him again." Ginny pressed a hand momentarily to her heart. "And going with him to...to wherever my brother went. After the fight outside the Room of Requirement." She looked hard at the girl. "You remember."

The girl bounced in place, grinning. "Yes, I do," she said. "And so do you. Danger, you hear? You hear that?"

"Hush, Pearl." Danger vanished her crystal-ball picture with a flick of her fingers and laid that hand firmly atop a braided head. "Don't get too excited. We're a long way from being finished yet." She turned her attention back to Ginny. "As for your question—he will *appear* to. In some respects, he will. And you will have to give the impression that you fully believe he has. But in the end, no. Harry Potter will not die tonight." She smiled. "By being willing to die, by going to what he thinks is his death for the sake of others, he will sever Voldemort's link to him, he will destroy the hold that evil has over him. Because evil cannot understand love, and 'greater love hath no man than this'."

"And then it will be over." Ginny shut her eyes, weak with a relief she hadn't known she could feel. "Then it will finally be over."

"Then this part of it will be over," Danger corrected. "The next part will just be beginning. And a lot of that, Ginny, is up to you. You're the one Harry will trust, the one he'll listen to, the one he'll want to see after it's over and he's had time to rest and think a little. So you're the one who's going to have to make our case for us. Always assuming we're what you want."

Ginny sat still and quiet, letting the memories which were being released by Danger's and Pearl's words seep into place in her mind. The fight outside the Room of Requirement, especially, was coming clear to her, and the choice she had made there, to sacrifice herself so that her friends could get her brother away to safety.

*It was the same choice Fred made tonight. The same one Harry's going out there to make. And it's hard to sit here and think about it in cold blood, but when the decision comes, when the moment happens, there isn't even really a choice. Not if you love the people enough.*

*I loved them enough then. I don't think anything's changed.*

*Though it might be harder in the long run to live with them than to die for them!*

"I can't think of much I've wanted more," she said, opening her eyes. "But I'm afraid I don't quite understand. We can't go back to the world we came from, can we? Not with everything we've seen and done."

"We don't have to." Pearl cupped her hands as Danger had earlier, and between them grew a vision of a snow-covered cottage. "We have a different place to belong now, and different jobs to do, stopping what happened to us from happening to other people who just want to live their own lives and make their own decisions..."

One slightly jumbled explanation of Legendbreaking later, Ginny had an idea. She wasn't sure if it was the best one available, but it was hers, and she wasn't about to second-guess herself.

*Besides, if Harry's like me, the self that came from the world with Danger and Meghan and everyone else—the Pack and Pride world, I guess—is enough like the self that lives in this world that they'll be sort of...blended. She probed gently at the inside of her own mind. There should be at least three of me in here, but I only feel like one person. A few different memories here and there, but nothing that really changed who I am. I know I did feel different, back in the first world I was in, before I knew Redwing was there with me, but the lines blurred between then and getting taken by the RC's again, and now...*

*Now I'm just me, Ginny Weasley. I love my family and doing Charms and playing Quidditch, I hate pureblood bigots and rude people and Brussels sprouts, and I want to spend the rest of my life with Harry Potter, fighting against evil.*

*No matter where that means I have to go.*

"I think I might be able to get Harry's Pack memories to wake up, the way you woke me," she said when Pearl was done talking. "Not by telling him things, but by asking him a question. One I don't think anyone ever asked him before. Especially not in this world."

"That sounds like a very good idea." Danger looked around as the noise at the front of the Great Hall began to increase. "And I think you should be up there, not back here with anonymous members of the crowd." She winked. "Take care of yourself, and we'll see you tomorrow."

"See you then." Ginny started to get up, then stopped. "Danger, how did you know all of this? You haven't been out of this world with Harry since they left you here, you said so yourself..."

Danger's smile was sad. "One of the double-edged swords of not existing in the ridge," she said. "They had no one to rehabilitate me to, so they had to leave all my memories as they were. And a certain link of mine reawakened, at least in its receiving capability, almost as soon as its other half was freed. There have been times it was far more of a burden than a pleasure, knowing what they were doing and not being able to be with them. But as you said yourself, tomorrow it will all be over." She put her arm around Pearl and kissed the top of her Pack-daughter's head. "One way or the other."

Ginny displayed crossed fingers, smiled at her love's little sister and his foster mother, and turned to go to her own family. She would miss them intensely if this worked out, but it was the way of life for children to grow up and leave their parents, for sisters to be parted from their brothers.

*And if I become a Legendbreaker, I can stop families from having no choice about being torn apart. I can make sure fewer parents have to cry because their children died before they did, and fewer sisters have to pick up their wands or their swords or their guns and seek justice for the death of their brothers.*

*All that, and I still get the boy I want, and his big crazy family.*

*Plus one brother of my own, but hey, nothing's perfect.*

The thought counterbalanced the inevitable tears which came to her eyes as she fought her way to her mother's side. "I love you, Mummy," she whispered when she was there. "I love you so much."

Treasuring the last hugs she would ever receive from her family, Ginny Weasley mourned with them, and prepared herself mentally for the fight of her life.

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Unasked Question**

"I've had enough trouble for a lifetime."

The words, in his own voice, hummed inside Harry Potter's head as he slowly awakened, opening his eyes to stare up at the blurry but familiar view of burgundy-red canopy and curtains.

*My canopy and curtains. My bed. The same one I collapsed into the night I was Sorted, the night it was finally real that I had a place where I belonged. We came back to Hogwarts to finish it—*

*He rolled onto his side, reaching for his glasses. And we did finish it, all of us. It's over. Voldemort is gone. I don't have to run, I don't have to hide, I don't have to deal with having a destiny ever again...*

The dorm came into focus around him, looking bafflingly, almost terrifyingly normal after everything that had happened. All five beds were occupied, though a gleam of silver and a flash of red from Neville's direction told Harry his friend wasn't yet over the astonishment of having pulled the Sword of Gryffindor out of the Sorting Hat the night before.

*Or was it two nights ago? Harry sat up and peered at the window, trying to establish the time from the direction of the light. I think it must've been, because the last thing I remember is Kreacher bringing me those sandwiches about the middle of the morning, and now it's dawn again. The first day—or the second day, really, I slept through most of the first one—of the rest of my life.*

Vaguely he wondered why he wasn't more excited. He'd been dreaming of this day since he was old enough to understand about the scar on his forehead, the whispers of "The Boy Who Lived" as he passed. Shouldn't he be feeling something akin to the wild surge of joy which had possessed him as the Hogwarts Express pulled out of platform nine and three-quarters for the first time with him on board?

*I'm not eleven anymore, he decided after a few moments waiting uncertainly for something other than tired acceptance (and a few pangs of hunger) to make itself known. I can't expect to feel the same way I did then.*

*And besides, nobody had to die for me to go to Hogwarts...*

Rather than think too much further about that, Harry swung his feet out of bed and opened his

wardrobe. Kreacher had clearly been through here as well, since what greeted him was not a row of empty hooks or a rush of moths but a neat line of clean, pressed robes hanging up against the back wall and a selection of T-shirts and trousers on the shelves below. The drawers still further down, when he bent to look, contained socks, underwear, and a piece of folded parchment with his name written across the back in a clear, feminine handwriting.

Harry sat down on the floor before he fell, staring at the note. Slowly, as though they belonged to somebody else, his hands reached out and unfolded it.

*Want to go for a walk with me? I'll bring breakfast. Meet me in the common room.*

There was no signature, but none was needed. The light, sweet scent of flowers that hung about the parchment had been haunting Harry's dreams for almost a year. A real, unforced smile came to his face for the first time since...

*Since I don't remember when. Which means it's been too long.*

Picking out what he needed from the open drawer, he got quickly to his feet.

It was impolite to keep a lady waiting.

---

Harry rounded the last curve of the spiral staircase and looked down into the round, stone-walled common room. He'd seen it literally thousands of times from this same vantage point, with its tapestry-hung walls, its shabby overstuffed armchairs, its squashy and sagging couches—

*Its beautiful red-haired witches sitting by the fireplace.*

"Good morning," Ginny said from her spot on the hearthrug, her voice quiet but carrying clearly to Harry's ears. "Did you sleep well?"

"Very well, thank you." Harry descended the final few stairs and came to sit across from Ginny. "Is one of those for me?"

"Yes, whichever one you'd like better." Ginny poked at the two fat rolls of flatbread which lay on a plate on the hearth. "Kreacher put them together for me—this one is ham and cheese, I think, and that should make this one bacon and eggs. And here." She shook a covered flask, and liquid sloshed within. "Pumpkin juice with Mum's special mix of spices in it. For a special day."

"A special day," Harry repeated, shaking his head. "Ginny, I—" A great many contradictory things all tried to get out of his mouth at once. He looked at her helplessly, tongue-tied, hoping she would understand.

"You're here, and you're alive." Ginny reached across the space between them and took his hand. "So are an awful lot of other people, and that's because of you. Wouldn't you say that makes today special?"

"It... doesn't feel like enough," Harry managed after a few moments. "People still died. People got hurt. And it isn't over yet. There will be Death Eaters who get off, who weren't here or who ran away before we won, and some people will probably get into trouble for doing things they had no choice about doing." He had a momentary vision of the Malfoy family, sitting in a tense cluster in one corner of the celebratory Great Hall the day before, looking about with fearful eyes as though waiting for the blow to fall on one or another of them. "It's never really going to be over, is it?"

"Not if you expect perfection, it's not." Ginny picked up the bacon-and-eggs flatbread roll with her free hand and held it out to him. "Come and walk with me?"

Harry looked from her to the bread and back to her, then accepted it and got to his feet. Ginny did the same, tucking the flask of pumpkin juice into one of her robe's capacious pockets and picking up the ham-and-cheese roll on the way. In silence they climbed out of the portrait hole and descended the endless flights of steps which kept Gryffindors and Ravenclaws alike in excellent shape through their years at Hogwarts. The staircases grew gradually wider and grander until they reached the sweeping marble edifice which led down into the entrance hall, which had been cleared, Harry was glad to note, of all the debris of battle.

Ginny took a bite from her roll as Harry pushed open the huge, carved oak doors. "Mmm," she said indistinctly, catching a bit of ham as it fell from the bitten edge. "Oh, this is good. How's yours?"

"I don't know yet." Harry sniffed at the flatbread, then bit off the top end of the roll. The bacon crunched satisfactorily between his teeth, and Kreacher had scrambled the eggs with little bits of onion and sweet pepper in them. "Very good," he said around his mouthful.

Ginny laughed, stepping out onto the stone steps which led down to the long sweep of Hogwarts' lawn. "You sound like Ron. Which would make me Hermione, wouldn't it?"

"Merlin's robes, I hope not." Harry followed Ginny's lead down the outdoor stairs. "I love Hermione, but she's not the person I want today."

"You've had enough of her for a little while?" Ginny's tone made the question light, non-threatening, almost teasing, but at the same time hinted that she'd like an answer.

"I've had enough of... everything." Harry switched the roll into his left hand and dipped into Ginny's pocket with his right, liberating the flask of pumpkin juice. "Open this for me?"

Using her free hand, Ginny undid the cap on the flask, and Harry took a long drink, enjoying the cool, sweet spiciness. "Thanks," he said when his mouth was clear. "Want some?"

"Yes, please." Ginny accepted the flask and drank deeply, then held it out for Harry to cap before sliding it back into her pocket. "Enough of everything?"

"I don't mean it in a bad way." Harry took another, smaller bite of his breakfast and thought while he chewed. "Or maybe I do, but you'd have to define 'bad' first. Is it bad to... to not know what to



do next? To be uncertain about... well, everything?"

"No, Harry." Ginny smiled gently at him, tucking her hair behind one ear. "That's called being normal."

"No *wonder* I don't recognize it." Harry loaded his words with sarcasm, and Ginny laughed aloud. "But it's a real question, and it's something I have to deal with now. What does the hero do once the villain's dead?"

"Live happily ever after?" Ginny suggested.

"Nice work if you can get it." Harry bit into the roll moodily. "What does it *mean*, though?"

"What do you want it to mean?"

Harry was about to toss off some light, foolish answer, but a note of tension in Ginny's question warned him to look around at her. She had stopped walking and was facing him, her brown eyes level and unwavering.

"That's a real question too," she said quietly. "And it's not one I think anyone's ever asked you. So I'm going to start. What do you want, Harry? Not what do you think you *ought* to have, or what *can* you have. Not what should 'The Boy Who Lived' or 'The Chosen One' get for fulfilling his great and glorious destiny." Even inside Harry's own mind, those two titles had never been imbued with such a withering load of irony. "What do *you*, Harry James Potter, really and truly *want*?"

"I..." Harry swallowed in a movement that had nothing to do with breakfast. "I don't *know*."

"I think you do, somewhere in there." Ginny laid her delicate fingers gently against Harry's temple. "Only you've had to bury it so very deep to finish what you *had* to do that it's going to be hard to find." Her hand dropped to his shoulder. "Will you let me help you?"

A long, long moment passed before Harry felt himself slowly nodding.

"Thank you." Ginny squeezed his shoulder once, as though she were wishing him good luck on the Quidditch pitch, then turned to look in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. "Let's walk that way," she suggested. "I feel like breaking the rules today."

"Please," Harry said in a voice which sounded almost like his own. "When *don't* you feel like breaking the rules?"

"When I agree with them." Ginny tossed her hair over her shoulder and grinned at him. "Or when I made them up in the first place."

"Are you going to make some up for me, then?" Harry took another bite of roll, pulling one of the pieces of bacon free in the process.

"Yes, I think I will." Ginny tapped the fingers of her free hand with her own roll in order. "Rule

number one, you have to tell the truth. You can say that you don't want to talk about something, but no lying, all right?"

"All right," mumbled Harry through a mouthful of bacon.

"Rule number two. No thinking about what can and can't happen." Ginny peeled off a piece of flatbread and tossed it into the underbrush at the edge of the Forest. "This is about what you *want*, not what's possible or realistic. We'll get to all that later."

"Right." Harry glanced at the place where Ginny's flatbread had landed and was just in time to see an orange-and-black paw batting away a pointed muzzle of brown. He froze, half-hearing voices, one male, one female, both as familiar as his own, dearly missed and eagerly longed for—

*Imagining things.* He gave his head a shake. *I'm imagining things, trying to figure out where Ginny's going with all of this.*

"And rule number three." Ginny reached a clearing a few feet into the Forest and perched herself on a handy rock, peeling back the wrapping of her roll a bit farther. "No thinking about what you should or shouldn't have either, what you deserve or ought to have. Like I said—"

"This is about what I *want*," Harry finished, sitting down on a fallen log. "I get that."

"Well, then, start us rolling." Ginny pointed her flatbread at him like a wand. "What do you want, Harry? What is it you've always wanted the most, out of all the world, Muggle or magical?"

"Can I have a minute to think about it?"

"Certainly." Ginny spread her hands expansively. "Take all the time you need."

Harry sat back on the log and pulled another strip of bacon out of the middle of his roll, sucking eggs off it as he considered. *What do I want... what do I want...*

A flash of white feathers caught his eye as a snowy owl settled into a tree at the edge of the clearing, a branch or two down from what looked like a hawk, though it had its head under its wing so Harry couldn't be sure. "Must be post time at the castle," he murmured, feeling a moment's stab of grief for Hedwig. She'd been the first real birthday present he'd ever received, not only an owl but a friend, given to him by another—

And then it came to him, all at once, stunningly perfect in its simplicity.

"I know why I can't answer your question," he said, looking back at Ginny. "You're asking it wrong."

"How can I ask it right, then?" Ginny tore the last of her flatbread into small pieces and scattered them beside her rock. "What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing too big. You just need to change the first word." Harry felt a smile, his second real one

of the day, working its way onto his face. "Or maybe I need to answer the question you did ask, and then you need to ask the new one that comes out of the answer."

"I'm listening." Ginny was beginning to smile as well.

"I want..." Harry stopped. "Maybe I should start with what I *don't* want. I know that better."

Ginny wagged two fingers in a signal for him to continue.

"I don't want yesterday to keep happening over and over for the rest of my life." Harry put his hands over his ears, grimacing. "I don't want to keep being 'The Chosen One', or, Merlin help us all, 'The Boy Who Lived', for as long as *I* live. Professor Dumbledore was always saying that it was our choices that mattered, not our abilities, but fighting Voldemort isn't anything I chose to do. I mean, I did, but only because not choosing it would have meant I forfeited and he won. So now I have the rest of my life to make choices in—but is everyone always just going to see me as the boy who killed You-Know-Who, or will they take the time to look at my life and really see *me* in it?"

"I will," Ginny said softly.

"I know you will." Harry nodded. "Which is why the answer to your question is, I want *people*. The people who look at me and only see *me*, not a hero or a scar or a destiny. The people who want to be around me not to pick up some reflected glory or brag to their friends later, but because they're *my* friends and they like spending time with me. The people who would think to ask me this kind of a question." He smiled at her. "Which I guess means I have to start with you."

"Remember the rules." Ginny pressed the flask of pumpkin juice against her cheeks, but her ears were busily turning a rosy pink. "You don't *have* to do anything. It's all about—"

"What I want, yes, I remember," Harry interrupted. "But what I want isn't *what* I want at all. It's *who*. And who I want, Ginny, is you." It came out more easily than he thought it would. "You, Ron and Hermione, Neville and Luna. My friends, my real friends, the ones who matter."

He paused, recalling the flash of memory he'd had in the common room. "After that, if your rules were true," he said slowly, "if there weren't any limits on magic, if it did absolutely everything the way Muggles think it does... I think there are some people I'd like to give second chances. To see what would happen to them if they got the opportunity to make something of themselves."

"Like who?" Ginny uncapped the pumpkin juice and drank, then shook the flask in Harry's direction.

"Yes, please." Harry caught the recapped flask handily, opened it, and drained it. "Like Malfoy, for one. Dumbledore was right about him, he isn't a killer, he's just weak—he even tried to help us, the night we got caught by the Snatchers, it's not his fault it didn't work. He was born on the wrong side of the war, and never had a chance to get out of it." He put the cap back on the flask and set it down beside his log. "He might've been an interesting person to know if he had."

"So he might." Ginny tapped her fingertips together, a smile playing around the corners of her mouth. "Anyone else?"

"Snape," Harry said promptly. "He made a load of mistakes, but he never learned the right lessons from them. I'd like to see what would've happened to him if he had."

"How do you mean, 'learned the right lessons'?" Ginny propped one foot up on the rock beside her.

"Well, compare him with Ron." Harry held out his hands like the balance pans of a Potions scale. "Ron's done some things that hurt me, hurt you, hurt Hermione. I'm sure you can think of a few." He let one of his hands drop, as though a weight had been put in that pan. "But afterwards, when he'd had time to cool off, he came back. He said he was sorry, and—this is the important part—he backed it up with what he did." He brought his hands back to the level. "Like dragging me out of a half-frozen pond and saving my life."

"Yes, that sounds fairly important," Ginny said, laughing. "I like you much better alive."

"Thanks for that." Harry grinned at her. "But like I was saying, after Snape hurt my mum, he tried *telling* her he was sorry, but everything he was still *doing* told her he wasn't. So she wouldn't listen to him, she cut him off, and he took that as final. He didn't think to stop doing the things that were hurting her, and that's how this whole mess got started in the first place." He shrugged. "Maybe he deserved what he got, but I'd like to see who he could've been if he'd made the other choice. If what he said and what he did had lined up a little better."

"That might have changed a lot of things, you realize." Ginny turned to watch as a yearling doe, delicate and graceful on long legs, stepped hesitantly out of the Forest to nose at the fragments of bread she'd scattered. "It might even have meant your parents never died. Would you want that too?"

"Now that, I honestly don't know." Harry squinted at a patch of air beside one of the doe's hooves, but couldn't decide if the blurring he saw was really there or just a smudge on his glasses. "How can I? I never knew them. I know it sounds awful, but..."

"Remember, no should or shouldn't," Ginny interjected. "It's in the rules."

"Right, right, the rules." Harry sighed. "Playing by the rules, then, what I'd really want more than anything..." He swallowed against a suddenly tight throat. "Sirius," he said quietly. "I'd want Sirius back again. But not exactly like he was—not that I wasn't happy to have him any way at all, but if I can have whatever I want, I'd want him the way he ought to have been. The way he would have been, if not for Azkaban. I'd want him to have all the chances he missed because of that, to do all the things he never had time for. Maybe even fall in love, get married, have a kid of his own." He found a smile from somewhere. "Then I'd have a godmother to go with my godfather, and a little godsister—though is that even a word?"

"It is now." Ginny plucked a spray of leaves from a nearby tree and held them out to the doe, who took them daintily from her hand. "And I'm sure she would have been a dreadful pest, too."

The doe paused in her chewing to look down her long nose at Ginny.

"It seems so wrong, to want my godfather more than my own parents." Harry turned to lean his back against a nearby tree, staring off into the Forest, letting his imagination shape a bear-like head, a long shaggy back, four broad canine paws out of the shadows. "And don't start again with the rules. If I'm allowed to have whatever I want, I should be allowed to say whatever I think!"

"You are allowed. I'm just allowed to smack you if you start getting silly." Ginny dusted her hands off. "And it only seems wrong if you're thinking about it like a bard's tale. In the real world, well, you said it yourself—it isn't that you don't care about your parents, but you never *knew* your parents, and you did know Sirius." She stopped for a moment, then went on softly. "You loved him, Harry. You loved him very dearly, and it hurt you terribly when he died. Didn't it?"

"More than I knew how to say." Harry thought for one moment that he saw a thestral standing guard over the shadowy Grim, wings arched protectively, but the sun chose that instant to emerge from behind the clouds and beam directly into his eyes. He pulled his glasses off and pressed his hands against his face, grateful beyond words for the obvious answer to why a pair of tears were now making their way down his cheeks.

"It helped a little when Professor Lupin was alive," he said when he had blinked away most of the sunspots. "He was like a link back to them, to Sirius, to my parents. I felt like, when he was around, everything wasn't gone yet. If that makes any sense." He put his glasses back on, settling them into place. "Not to mention how much we all learned from him. He was the best Defense teacher we ever had, werewolf or not."

"Is that your way of working around to saying you'd want him too?" Ginny inquired.

"I hadn't thought of it that way yet, but yes, it is, and I would." Harry picked up the empty pumpkin juice flask and idly tossed it from hand to hand. "I'd want him to find his own happiness earlier than he did, though. Not that Tonks was bad for him, but he spent a lot of years alone." The flask dropped into the leaves at his feet. "I know what it's like to be alone."

"I know you do." Ginny sat up straighter as the doe lay down beside her rock. "But you aren't anymore, Harry. And if I have my way, you never will be again. Not like that." Her words seemed to reverberate through the clearing, as though she had sworn an Unbreakable Vow.

"Thanks." Harry pulled his feet up under him. "That means a lot, coming from you."

## He Nearly Killed the Cat The Power to Choose

"You're welcome." Ginny arched her back, stretching. "So now that you have all the people around you that you want, what is it that you're going to *do*? I know you, Harry, and you wouldn't be happy just sitting in the sunlight. Not for long."

Harry chuckled at the thought. "Definitely not. I'd go mad within a week. And then I'd run around howling like a wolf and drive everyone else mad." He howled once or twice under his breath to demonstrate, making Ginny giggle. "No, you're right. I'd need something to do. Something that mattered, something important."

"Auror work?" Ginny offered. "I know that's what you told Professor McGonagall when you went for your career advice session."

"It is, but..." Harry ran his lip through his teeth, trying to get his thoughts to solidify into words. "Stopping Dark wizards before they hurt people is the *kind* of thing I want to do, but if I could have exactly what I want—which I can, I know, it's in the rules," he added before Ginny could, "I'd want to do it more...quietly, I guess. Secretly. I've had my fill of being the hero on a pedestal that everyone is supposed to look up to and admire."

"I always wondered about putting people on pedestals." Ginny shaped one with her hands. "How are you supposed to get any work done way up there?"

"You're not," Harry said sourly. "Just preen and primp and take your bows, like Lockhart used to do. Malfoy would be better at that part of it than I would." He snickered. "Which is probably what he'd end up doing, if he did get that second chance. He'd be the *visible* hero, the one all the girls coo over. Sign the autographs, shake the hands, pose for pictures, and meanwhile, the rest of us can get the *real* work done—"

He broke off as a scuffle erupted in the underbrush beside him, and a tricolored cat shot out of the thicket with her tail bushed out in alarm, a brown fox with enormous ears a step and a half behind, teeth bared. The cat bounded up to Ginny and leapt for her arms, and Ginny caught her deftly and stroked her head. "You know better than that," she said sternly to the fox, who had pulled up short of the rock and was now sitting beside it, whining. "Biting's only allowed if it wasn't true."

Harry stared at the two animals, then at the doe, who had raised her head to survey these newcomers with her mild gray—*gray?*— eyes. The blurring along her side was still there,

shimmering now, as he watched, into the form of something like a monkey or ape, except that its fur was the silver-white color of moonlight reflected on water...

*Or my Invisibility Cloak. Demiguise, that's what it's called, Hagrid showed us one once...*

The snowy owl spread her wings and glided down to the ground within the clearing, landing neatly beside the fox and reaching over to preen one of its ears with her beak. The hawk ruffled up its feathers, then followed, soaring down towards Ginny, who unconcernedly extended her arm to provide it with a perch. "Good morning, featherhead," she said, stroking the top of its beak with a finger. "I'm glad to see you made it out all right."

"Made it out—Ginny, what is this?" Harry was on his feet, automatically feeling for his wand, his shoulders rising into the proper position for a quick draw. "What's going on?"

"What you asked for." Ginny guided the cat onto her shoulders, then stood up, depositing the hawk on a convenient branch beside her. "What you just told me you wanted. You can have it, Harry, you can have all of it—"

"At what price?" Harry shot back. "What is it you want me to do, or not do? Who *are* you, really?"

"I can't blame you for being suspicious, Harry, but it's not like that." Ginny looked him square in the eye, her brown irises untouched with so much as a hint of red. "I *am* Ginny Weasley, and I'm the same person I was yesterday and the day before, when I fought with you against Voldemort. I've just been given a gift, and the ability to offer that same gift to you. And the only price is..." She shrugged. "To do what you'd like to do in any case. To live, and be yourself, and do and have everything you've just told me you want most. To be happy, Harry. Really and truly happy. Is it so hard to believe that could happen to you?"

"In a word? Yes." Harry backed up a pace or two, getting his shoulders against a tree, keeping the animals in sight as though they were a party of Death Eaters. "Rules or no rules, some of the things I was talking about can't happen. Magic can't bring back the dead, and it can't turn back time—"

"I *know* that, Harry, but you don't understand—"

"All right, that will do," said a new voice. Harry and Ginny whipped around in unison to face the speaker.

She stood at the edge of the clearing, hands on her robed hips, looking them both up and down. Her face held a tolerant amusement Harry associated with Hermione, whom this witch strongly resembled, though she looked the age of a Hogwarts teacher rather than a student. The fox at Ginny's feet yipped joyfully and bounded towards her, the tricolored cat slithering down from Ginny's shoulders to follow, purring so loudly Harry could hear it from his place across the clearing. The witch knelt to caress both animals, giving them her entire attention for a moment, then looked back up at Harry and Ginny. "Are you both quite finished?" she inquired.

"I suppose I'd better be." Ginny sat back down on her rock limply. "I'm sorry, Danger, I must not have done it right, but I didn't think it would be this hard, this complicated..."

"Consider how strange the truth really sounds sometimes," the witch—*Danger?* Harry wondered, and found himself speculating on how one achieved such a nickname—said with a chuckle. "Shall I have a go, and you spend a little time with everyone?"

"If you would." Ginny sighed. "I don't know why I thought this would be easy, nothing with Harry involved ever is..."

Harry was about to protest, but the justice of this observation stopped him before he could speak. He decided instead to watch and think.

*Something very strange is going on here.* That was obvious, or should have been, he now realized, from the moment they had entered the Forest. It abounded in animals, but they generally stayed away from humans rather than swarming around them as the odd assortment of creatures was now doing with Ginny, escorting her out of the clearing.

*It doesn't seem to be involved with Voldemort.* His mental emphasis on the third word of the sentence was heavy, but as Sirius had once told him, the world wasn't divided into good people and Death Eaters. To be fair, he'd have to consider the possibility that this particular type of strangeness might be, if not entirely benign, at least not actively evil.

*But it does seem to be involved with ...well, me.* He had to stifle a laugh as Ginny's words recurred to him. *And when was the last time my life was simple?*

"Well, then," said the witch named Danger, bringing Harry back to the present. She was sitting on the same rock where Ginny had been a few moments before, watching him with a patient smile which blended Harry's earlier thoughts of Hermione with memories of Mrs. Weasley in one of her calmer moods. "What is it you'd like most to know, Harry? You can ask me anything you like. Any question at all."

*Any question...any question...* A number of them wrestled within his mind, stretching and shoving to be the first one out of his mouth. The winner, when it finally emerged, turned out to be, "What's really going on here?"

"Really going on?" Danger raised an eyebrow. "You don't pick the easy ones, do you? But then you never did." She shifted on her rock, clasping her hands across her knee. "Will you forgive me if I start with 'Once upon a time'?"

"As long as you do start."

*Touché.* She laughed softly through the word. "All right, then. Once upon a time, in a land very much like this one, there lived a young man very much like you. He had your name and your face, and he began in the same place that you did. But shortly after a certain event..." She brushed a finger across her forehead. "Things started to change for him."



"But that wasn't anything to do with him," Harry objected. "He was just a baby then."

"True, but that wouldn't matter to his enemies. And by that I don't mean the one you know most about, the one you've just finished battling with." Danger curled her lip. "I could wish it were so easy. Not to disrespect what you've done, but these enemies are more numerous, more widespread, and far, far more devious and underhanded. Their goal is..." She frowned. "How shall I say it? They believe that only one set of choices can or ever should be valid. Those ideas you were discussing with your friend a few minutes ago? They would be horrified that you so much as thought those things. And if, by some chance, they should ever find a world where those things were real..."

"A world?" said Harry, confused. "How can there be more than one?"

"Don't you live in two yourself?" Danger laid her hands atop each other. "One Muggle, the other magical? It isn't quite the same, but it's a place to start understanding. Doesn't the life you used to have, before your eleventh birthday, sometimes feel distant and unreal? Almost as though it happened to someone else, as though you only saw it in a film or read about it in a book?" She looked him directly in the eye. "Or as if it were a dream."

Slowly, Harry nodded.

"And you can imagine what your life might have been if your birthday hadn't happened the way that it did. Think about it, talk about it, dream about it even. Or about the life you might have had if that other particular event had happened another way." Once again, she tapped her forehead. "Or, to come back to cases, if certain things had happened a few months later than that. If one or two people had existed, and had spoken to other people about things they saw and knew. The world would be very different, wouldn't it?"

"Of course it would, but what does that have to do with there being more than one world?" Harry began. "Unless..." He stopped, blinking, as the connection crashed over him. "There *is* more than one, isn't there? There must be hundreds. Thousands, even. And they're all different. Because something happened differently in every one."

"Very good!" Danger applauded softly. "We'll make a scholar of you yet."

"So everything I said, everything that I wanted..." Harry spoke as the thoughts came to him, listening to his own words with wonder. "It's real somewhere? Or it could be?"

"It was." Bowing her head, Danger sighed. "It was, once. And somewhere it still is. But not for me, and not for you, I'm afraid. Not ever again."

"Because of your enemies." That much, Harry understood perfectly. "They came in and destroyed things, because they didn't like the way it was going. Because they...didn't like that people were happy?" It was a guess, but he thought a fair one, given everything else under discussion.

"Not exactly, but close." Danger picked up a stick and began to scratch in the dirt, creating an

abstract design of squares and circles surrounding her feet. "What they didn't like was that it was different. There's one particular way they believe that things should go in this world, with someone like you as the hero, and they don't care if changes make things better or worse or exactly the same except that one person's clothing is red or yellow instead of green. If it's different than the way things are written, they want it destroyed. Put back to the way it 'ought to be'."

"So is that what happened to me?" Harry could feel his heart beginning to pound, his chest tightening as it had two nights before when he had faced what he thought would be his death. "Was I 'put back'? Was none of this real, just a dream or a story or something?" An even more disquieting thought occurred. "Or am I *going* to be? Were things supposed to be worse than this? More people dying, or taking longer to work everything out, or—"

"No, no, nothing like that!" Danger held up her hands, shaking her head with a smile. "No, the way you've just come is the 'right' one. The known one, the one that's expected and 'proper'." Her quotes, though invisible, were venomous. "But as for what happened to you, that's a bit harder. Your question about things being real is a very good one, and I want to give it the right answer. You see, you *were* 'put back' to this world...but that doesn't mean it's not real."

Harry scowled. "Thanks, that makes everything clear as mud."

"And just how well would you do explaining the inner workings of a spell to a thorough-going Muggle?" Danger retorted. "Give me a chance, here!" She pursed her lips, thinking. "Tell me this. Can you remember having a different life than this one? Even just a little?"

About to say no, Harry stopped. *I came up with all those ideas for Ginny awfully fast. And I feel like I already know how much better my life would be if they were true ...* "Maybe a little. Bits and pieces."

"And the people in that life. Do you think you cared about them?"

"Unless I'm remembering it all wrong, they were mostly the same as the people I care about now. So yes."

"And there you have it." Danger spread her hands. "You cared about people there, but you also care about people here. You love them, and they love you. Which means both worlds are real."

"Love matters that much?" Harry glanced back in the direction he'd seen the shadow that reminded him of Sirius. "Why?"

"Because love is the most potent form of belief." Danger laid a fist gently against her heart. "And in every world where magic is operant, the most important element is belief."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, though an idea was already poking its hand up in the back of his mind, based on Danger's qualifier. *Every world where magic is operant ...so if it was the sort of place the Muggles think this world is, one with no magic at all, maybe the rules are different ...*

"Think about a Muggleborn coming to Hogwarts for the first time. When he shouts 'Up!' to his broom for the first time, what happens?" Danger extended her hand, palm down, like her hypothetical student. "Or most of the time, what doesn't happen?"

"The broom doesn't 'up,'" recalled Harry from his first flying lesson, thinking of Hermione and Neville. "Because he doesn't really believe that it will. So...belief is fundamental to magic?"

"Precisely." Danger smiled. "And what's easier to believe in than a story? Especially a really good story, with heroes you want to cheer for and villains you love to hate? Only we know that no one's ever completely good or evil, so we want to see as many sides of everybody in the story as they're willing to show us. And if there's a nice love interest somewhere in there, so much the better, because anyone who hasn't been crossed in love herself wants to see the boy and the girl get each other and live happily ever after."

"But..." Harry paused after the word, frowning. There seemed to be a point missing. "What *is* happily ever after?" he asked after a moment. "Or—is that what Ginny was trying to get me to find out, asking all those questions?"

"Gold star for you." Danger nodded firmly. "Everyone has his own, or her own, happily ever after. And you've come to a point, just now, where yours could be one of two things. So here it is, in plainest language. If you truly meant what you said yesterday, if you're tired of trouble and strife and fighting and everything that goes with it, then you can close your eyes and wish us all away, and away we'll go, no questions asked. You'll wake up in your own bed, and you might remember that you had an odd dream about walking and talking with Ginny, but it will fade as you prepare for the day, the way dreams do, until you don't remember it at all. You'll go on with your life, and you'll have your friends and eventually your family, and you'll be ordinary and contented as long as you live. Not a bad reward for a hero."

Harry considered this. *It's what I want*, he tried to remind himself. *What I've always wanted. Only...*

"Or?" he said when his thoughts refused to travel past the mental ellipsis.

"Or you can take what we're offering." Danger blew into her cupped palms, then turned her hands outward with a spreading motion and a slight laugh. "Have a look."

A panorama of impossible worlds spread before Harry's astonished eyes. Here, a castle sitting firmly on star-studded space; there, a pair of towers connected at the top by a slender bridge; in another place, a cottage in a wood, tantalizingly, impossibly familiar, with three or four figures moving about it in comfortable, domestic patterns...

"This is what we call Outer Time," said Danger, breaking into his reverie. "It's our home base, our planning space. We rest there and recuperate, between missions."

"Missions?" Harry asked warily, looking at her from the corner of his eye. "If you're looking for another hero—"

"We are, yes, but not a destined or prophesied one this time." Danger flicked her fingers, making the scene vanish. "As you've rightly said, Harry, you never had a choice before, so here it is. Your chance to choose. You can stay in this world, this piece of Inner Time, and live out your life happily. Or you can come to Outer Time, and make a difference in untold numbers of lives. You see..." She sighed. "It may be cheating to tell you this, but it's a fact, and you ought to know it before you decide." Her lip caught between her lower teeth as she pondered her choice of words. "You're not the only one," she said at last. "You never have been."

"The only one of what?" Harry's hand rose, without his conscious volition, to touch his scar. "Living Hor—"

"No, no, not that," Danger disclaimed hastily. "Or...well, no and yes. You're the only one *here*. In this world, this place, this time. But there's the rub...because as you worked out for yourself a little while ago, this world isn't all there is. Not even close. There are hundreds, thousands, millions of worlds out there. And somewhere in almost all of them is a child like you once were. A child caught up in something much bigger than he is, forced into a fate she doesn't want. You see, the destined, reluctant hero is one of the easiest figures to identify with, the easiest to care about. The easiest to believe in. Do you understand?"

"Because it's believed in...it happens?" Harry hazarded. "It happens over and over, because people want it to be that way?"

"Precisely." Danger sat back, her hands clasped around her knee once again. "Which is where we come in. We can't change the fact that there are heroes, but we can change what makes a hero. What's around them, what's expected of them, what and who they're believed to be and do and require. Alter the ideas. Twist the myths." She smirked briefly. "Break the legends."

Harry debated asking why this was funny, but decided the question could wait. "What do you twist and break them into?" he asked instead. "What kind of changes do you make?"

"You hit on the most important part of our particular mission yourself." Danger repeated her earlier action with hands and breath, this time creating the image of what appeared to be a formal portrait. "We feel it's most important to give heroes families. People they can trust, people they can depend on. Not to the point of helplessness, but with the understanding that most things in life don't have to be done alone."

Leaning forward, Harry peered at the portrait. Its ornate frame reminded him, for a second, of the Mirror of Erised he had encountered in his first year at Hogwarts, which showed the heart's desire of the person looking into it. But, as Professor Dumbledore had warned him, the mirror could show you *only* your desires—it wouldn't tell you if they were good or bad, or even if they were possible...

*But this is possible.* The certainty rose to the surface of his mind as he thought about it, as though it were something he had learned in that same first year that he were only now recalling. *Maybe it shouldn't be by some people's rules, but it is. And as strange as it sounds, it might even make me happy.*

*If I decide I want it, that is.*

Shaking this off, he concentrated on the portrait itself. Like that long-ago mirror, it showed him an image of himself surrounded by a number of other people, but whereas in the long-ago he'd had to guess at most of the other people's identities, in the now, most of their faces were familiar to him.

*Not always what I'd expect, though.* He stifled a laugh under a cough as his eyes took in every detail of the pale-blond boy pictured opposite him, from the ruby-red Quidditch robes embellished with a golden C and the polished wooden flute cradled between slender fingers to the confident set of the narrow shoulders and the faint smile visible in the cool gray eyes. *But I thought he'd be interesting to know if he had a fair shot at life. Looks like I was right.*

Looking down, he blinked a few times. "I know her," he said almost to himself, going to one knee to better examine the impish grin of a girl a few years younger than himself, her brown-sugar skin and black braids set off admirably by her Healer-apprentice robes of mint green. "I've seen her before. But..." He glanced up at Danger. "I shouldn't have. Should I?"

"Should and shouldn't are such loaded words. You did, didn't you? Talking to Ginny as you walked into the Forest, telling her that she wanted to go home?" Danger smiled tenderly at the girl's image. "And even if you didn't recognize her then, you do now. Her name is—"

"Meghan," Harry interrupted. "Meghan Lily, for my mum. But everybody calls her Pearl. She's my sister, or as good as. Just like..." He got to his feet again, grinning at the brown-haired girl who stood between his own figure and that of the boy who was, and was not, Draco Malfoy. She wore perfectly pressed Gryffindor day robes, and her prefect badge gleamed over the top edge of her leather-bound edition of *The Horse and his Boy*. "Just like Hermione. Who is your sister, but you've brought her up since she was a baby. Brought all of us up, really, with your friend from school, and her husband, and yours..."

His voice trailed off as the full impact of his words, and of the adults sitting and standing among their children within the portrait, began to strike home.

*This is like the Mirror of Erised all over again—finally seeing my parents, my family, and wanting, so much, to go to them, to be with them.* His eyes rested hungrily on the figure of his godfather, lounging comfortably in an armchair, dressed in robes of Auror red. A few threads of gray wove through his black hair, and his face was mature in a way the Sirius of this world had never achieved, but hints of the old Marauder spirit still lurked in the silvery eyes. *To be one of them. To have the life my parents wanted for me, even if they couldn't give it to me themselves.*

*How can that be wrong? Especially when you pair it up with being able to give other kids a chance at the same thing?*

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Enemy Revealed**

"What happens to the people in this world?" Harry asked, looking up at Danger. "Won't they notice if I disappear?"

"That's why Ginny came to get you so early in the morning." Danger winked. "If worlds can be separated, they can also be merged, can't they? Only when they're alike enough that no one will notice it, though, or at least that's how we do things." She scowled briefly. "Not like some others I could name. But in any case, all we have to do is find the world that's just like this one, except that Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley are still fast asleep in Gryffindor Tower..."

"And just..." Harry interlaced his fingers. "Like that?"

"A bit more complicated than that, but not by much." Danger nodded. "And anyone who was awake to see you two leaving the castle will think it was a dream, or a trick of the eye, because when they go to look, there Harry and Ginny will be, exactly as they should." Her tender smile returned. "And in the meantime, you'll be with us. Exactly as *you* should."

"And we get to make a difference in a lot of people's lives, but quietly. Without people making a big fuss over us, sometimes without them noticing us at all." As he spoke, Harry regarded the two adult witches in the portrait. One of them was clearly Danger, while the other, regal in the green robes of a full Healer and handlinked with Sirius, could be no one but Meghan's mother—*Aletha*, his mind supplied, *Letha to us, and to most people really. And we call Sirius Padfoot because that's what we could say when we were babies, and—*

"Wait," he said in confusion, his mind finally catching up with the implications of the sandy-haired man who stood beside Danger in the portrait, his face less lined than Harry had been used to seeing it and his expression knowing, even faintly possessive. "But he—but you—but Tonks—"

"Was nine years old when he and I were married," Danger supplied smoothly. "You said yourself it didn't seem fair to make him wait so very long to be happy."

"Well, yes, but..." Harry stopped, shaking his head. *Even if I did decide to stay behind, nothing would ever be the same now, would it? I'd always have this somewhere in the back of my mind, and I'd always wonder...*

"Are dreams always like this?" he asked after a few moments of thought. "You think you want

them, and you chase after them for a long time, and when you finally catch up with them, they're something entirely different from what you thought—or they're exactly what you thought, but *you've* changed so much that you don't want them anymore?"

"Not always. But that's how you tell the truest dreams, the ones you give your whole life to, from the ones that aren't so true." Danger blew on her picture, shimmering it to pieces. "Because the truest dreams are the ones that stay true even in the having, and give you new dreams to chase as part of them. Does this mean you've decided, or just that you want to talk about philosophy?"

Harry was taking a breath to speak his decision aloud, to make it irrevocable, when a burst of laughter and chatter startled him into a jump. Danger muttered something under her breath, then sighed and got to her feet with a smile, facing the oncoming crowd. "All right," she said, hands on her hips, "who's first?"

Backing away a few steps, Harry watched the group mill around, feeling the balance in his mind begin to slide back from the verge of decision. What Danger had offered was attractive, certainly, but if fighting a war taught one nothing else, it hammered home the lesson that everything came at a cost. Battles won and objectives captured had to be weighed against blood spilled, wounds taken, friends (and enemies) lying still and cold and shrunken into themselves, never to rise again. Even wizard's chess, with its stylized stony violence, was scant preparation for the reality.

*If I say yes to this, if I take them all at their word and go with them, what am I losing?* He fingered the mokeskin pouch which still hung around his neck, thinking of the shard of mirror, the treasured letter, the now-emptied Snitch, the so-recently-repaired wand now resident in his pocket, all of them emblematic of some painful price, whether paid by him or by another. *Who's paying what for this to be real?*

One trade-off was easy even for him to see. If he went with these people, left what Danger had called Inner Time, he would leave behind his own friends, the people he'd fought and bled beside. They might, as he'd been so blithely assured, never know the difference—

*But what about me?*

His eyes roved over the crowd, picking out faces and features he knew, comparing them to the people he knew still slept in the castle behind him. Ron and Hermione were the easiest to find, as both of them looked a great deal like the pair who had walked with him to Gryffindor Tower the day before, but even they were not identical to their counterparts. Tiny hints of bearing and expression, little quirks missing or magnified, hinted at the differences he couldn't see.

This Ron, Harry decided after several moments of watching, moved and held himself with an air of confidence, almost of maturity, which his own world's Ron might develop more fully in a few years but had only in its earliest stages today. Any questions the young man in front of him had about his particular identity and his world's need for him as an individual had long since been put to rest.

*He always wanted to be more than just "the youngest Weasley" or "Harry Potter's friend", and now*

*he is. A smile tugged at one corner of his mouth, mingled happiness and pride in this new manifestation of Ron. I don't know what he's found to be or do, but whatever it is, it suits him.*

Hermione, for her part, seemed to have found an inner peace and tranquility, an ability to take life as it came, which was a refreshing change from the constant twitchy anxiety about being the best and achieving the most which Harry was used to seeing in her. He thought the changes on both parts might have something to do with the settled ease with which a broad hand, marked with Keeper's calluses, twined around a smaller, more delicate one.

*Guess some things really don't change.*

Nor, Harry could admit inside his own mind, would it be difficult to get used to his friends without the endless fretting about being "good enough" that Voldemort's locket had attempted to exploit in Ron, or Hermione's impossibly high standards and her determination that he and Ron also live up to them. It wasn't that he'd ever wished they would change to make his life easier, not exactly...

*A real friend accepts people the way they are. But that doesn't mean you have to be blind to the annoying things they do, or deny that they're annoying. The smile went after the other corner of his mouth this time. Unless anyone else calls them on it. Then you defend them as far as you possibly can, and tell the other person it's none of their damn business when you're stuck for an answer.*

In any case, his friends hadn't changed because Harry had asked them to—they'd changed to suit themselves, or to suit one another if Harry was any judge, which in the long term would add up to about the same thing.

*And really? All they've done is grow up. Put aside being childish, because there isn't time for it anymore. Other than that, they're the same as they ever were. Both sides of his mouth worked in unison now, echoing the lightening of his heart as he came to his conclusion. I can live with that.*

Ginny slipped out of the group, bumping her brother's elbow affectionately with her shoulder in passing, and came to him, looking searchingly at his face. "You look like you've made up your mind," she said, her voice hovering between statement and question.

"Almost." Harry frowned as he watched the swirl of faces and forms, not finding two that he had expected from the portrait Danger had shown him. "Aren't there some people missing? Shouldn't..." It was harder than he had thought it would be, to speak the wish aloud. "Shouldn't Sirius be here? And Lupin?"

"One of them is." Ginny pointed, and Harry snorted a laugh in spite of himself as he caught sight of the bear-like dog leaning on Danger's legs, looking up at her soulfully while she rubbed his ears with a tender smile. "And the other one would be, but it's too dangerous for him to cross into this world right now. His bond with Danger is... strained, I guess you'd say, and they're not sure how it would react if he stepped back into Inner Time, especially a world where his counterpart just died. I'm sure he's watching—he can probably see and hear everything we're doing—but no one wants



to take unnecessary chances. Not this close..."

*This close to having everyone together again, Harry finished mentally when Ginny trailed off. This close to having what they want.*

*Having what I want.*

*Because I do want it.*

The wish might have been hard to voice, but it was startlingly easy to think. It helped that he'd been able to admit the abstract desire to Ginny before being confronted with the concrete reality, he thought, but whatever the reasoning, he was finally prepared to commit himself.

*I walked into death with my eyes wide open, and it was the hardest thing I've ever done. This... this is walking into life, instead. The smile returned, more twisted than before. Stands to reason it's even harder. But I've made up my mind and I'm not about to go back on it, not when it really is everything I've ever wanted...*

"Which way do we go?" he asked quietly, reaching for Ginny's hand. "To get to this Outer Time, I mean."

Ginny caught her breath sharply once, and her fingers contracted around Harry's, but her voice, when she spoke, trembled only with joy. "They'll show us. As soon as we let them know we've decided. Which...?" She gave the word an upward, questioning twist.

"Yeah, I meant it," Harry confirmed, looking down at her with a grin which, for the first time in longer than he wanted to remember, felt not in the least bit forced. "Want to tell them together?"

"Yes, please." Ginny shut her eyes for a moment, as though holding back tears, then opened them, grinning up at him with a wicked twist that made Harry just as happy her mother wouldn't be around in Outer Time. "They've been waiting for us, you know. To say the words and do the deeds." She tapped the base of his left ring finger suggestively. "We can be any age we need to, once we're sealed to the domain, and promises matter there just like they do here. Probably more."

"Promises matter?" Harry said, glancing up as Danger emerged from the crowd, slipping to one edge of the clearing. A shimmer in the air nearby took on the shape of a slender man as she approached it. His sand-brown hair was shot with gray, one hand was raised as though he leaned against a window, and he stared down at Danger with such love and longing Harry could almost feel it. "Like that one?"

"Exactly like that one." Ginny blinked hard as Danger lifted her own hand, pressing it against an insubstantial patch of air on the other side of the nonexistent pane of glass which separated her from her mate. "I don't know how she did it. Being alone for so long, never having any idea where he was, or if they would ever see each other again..."

"She trusted him to find her." Harry drew Ginny closer to him and slid his arm around her

shoulders, squeezing her against his side. "And he trusted her, to be strong and to never stop believing she'd be found. If she'd been the one out there in Outer Time, she would have found him too, wouldn't she?"

Ginny nodded. "And they both had to be strong another way, too," she said, swallowing before she went on. "She had to be the last one they came for, because... well, Harry, because of you. Whoever did this to us, they put the two of you in this world together to balance out something. I'm not quite sure what it is, but you and Danger share some kind of strength that would have given them trouble if they separated you. And because you're so central to the story this world tells, it would resist strongly if our friends tried to come for you before it was over. So they had to wait to come for you, and that meant waiting for Danger too." She sighed deeply. "I could wish all I saw was how romantic it is, because it *is* romantic. But I keep thinking about how painful it must have been, and how hard."

"Isn't that part of romance too?" Harry caught a bit of Ginny's hair between his fingers and slid them down its length. "Breaking down any obstacle, living through any pain, to be with each other again? Being ready to do anything for the other person, even the hardest and most important things there are?" He felt her going still against his side as his words sank in. "Like making the big promises, the ones that matter," he finished, glancing down at her. "Making them, and then keeping them. Forever." He allowed himself a grin. "Isn't that what you meant?"

"Yes, but I guess I'm just old-fashioned some ways." Ginny leaned back against his arm, her expression deceptively demure. "I want you to ask me, not the other way around."

"But it's perfectly all right for you to ask me to ask you?" Harry frowned. "How does that work?"

"It's a girl thing, you wouldn't understand." Ginny waved an airy hand. "Are you going to get to it sometime today or what?"

"For that, I might not get to it at all," Harry mock-threatened, and felt Ginny's shoulders quiver in the laugh which meant he had fooled her not one bit. "All right, all right, fine. Do you want me to do the pose and everything, then?"

"That's up to you, though I can't say I'd mind." Ginny had dropped her teasing tone now, though her eyes were still sparkling. "I don't think any girl would, really."

"Maybe someday I'll test that out. Kidding," Harry added quickly as Ginny stiffened against him. "I was kidding. Let me see here..." Disengaging from Ginny but reclaiming her hand in the process, he dropped to one knee, looking up at her, hearing the soft gasps and squeals from their spectators and feeling the power building in the clearing as his intentions became clear. "Ginny Weasley," he said, squeezing her hand slightly, "will you—"

"Down!"

After nearly a year of war, some instincts were ingrained too deeply to lose overnight. Harry yanked on Ginny's hand instead of finishing his sentence, catching her on his free arm as she

stumbled forward, then lowering her swiftly to the ground and shielding her body with his own. The sound, behind them, of eight or ten other people also diving for cover or to shelter others was all but obliterated by a rising shriek of wind, accompanied by a rumble of thunder and the sudden darkening of the day.

*This cannot be good...*

"Well, well, well," drawled a cool voice. Harry gritted his teeth, fighting the feeling that he ought to be able to name its owner. "Look what the cat dragged in." The voice snickered once in appreciation of its own humor. "Such a clever little kitty it is, finding everything I'd been so careful to hide. Or was I careful after all?" The sarcasm in the voice, already heavy, redoubled itself. "I suppose it never occurred to you that I might have *wanted* you to find them—because once *you* found *them*, *I* could find *you*, and crush your unnatural, pathetic, sappy little *Pack* in its entirety, once and for all?"

A snarling hiss ripped the air in answer. Harry, looking up, was unsurprised to see Hermione's face twisted in fury, her fingers crooked as though she longed to sprout claws and tear at her enemy.

*Tear his mask off, maybe.* The man who stood between two trees at the edge of the clearing, his face covered with black cloth so that only the vaguest outlines of features were perceptible, was perhaps an inch or two taller than Harry himself, though what should have been the slender elegance of his frame was slightly marred by a hint of a developing paunch. He wore finely-cut robes and leather gloves of the same shade of black as his mask, effectively cutting off all points of recognition other than his figure and voice.

*But I can't help feeling like those should be enough...*

"Wait a minute here," said a deep voice whose owner could not possibly be as calm as he sounded, and Sirius Black, human once more, pushed himself to his feet, brushing bits of twig off his own robes. "You want me to believe that you sat back and watched us find each other just so you could come in here and swat us all at once?" He snorted and shook his head, rather like his dog form on discovering something foul enough that he didn't care to investigate it further. "Talk about making it harder on yourself than it had to be!"

"This is true," added Aletha, rising to stand beside her husband, then lifting her daughter up beside her. "If it was our Neenie you wanted, you've had plenty of chances to take her. She's been active in several different Inner Times, all of which you'd already touched yourself. So you ought to have been able to find her and bring all this power of yours to bear." She bent again, this time giving Neville a hand up. "Which, yes, I do feel, and it's very neat, the way you've sealed us off from Outer Time. Though I have to wonder how long you think it will last against all of us."

"As long as it needs to." Their enemy's sneer was audible in his voice. "As for why I did what I did, that's no concern of yours. Why don't you spend a little time thinking about how much I'm going to enjoy watching all of you be rehabilitated into your proper selves? Permanently, this time, with no clever little *Legendbreaker* to come riding to the rescue?"

Harry sucked in a quiet breath as the venom in the voice finally identified it for him. Turning his body so that his right side was shielded by Ginny's still-recumbent form, he slowly drew his wand. *It's possible he's shielded, but most shields only block hostile spells, and this one's about as unthreatening as it's possible for a spell to be. Not to mention, so basic he may not have thought to block it out...*

"You know, I've been thinking about you some," said a cool, clear tenor, and a boy who resembled Hermione rose to his feet. He was very nearly the same height as the man he faced across the few feet of forest clearing, and his voice held similar notes of disdain and disapproval, but his diction was clearer, more crisp and precise, and he had the physique of an acrobat or a dancer, long and lean without an ounce of excess fat.

*Or a Quidditch star. One who's still playing, who's making sure to keep himself in form.*

Rising to one knee, keeping an eye on the matched pair, Harry ran over his movements in his mind. He had known this spell literally since his first year, but he was only going to get one shot at it.

"Thinking about me?" their enemy repeated slowly. "Should I be flattered?"

"Probably not." The younger man folded his arms, leaning back on his heel. "Since what I was thinking was that we'd been hit by someone whose basic personality trait seems to be incompetence. I mean, really. How hard would it be to make sure that everyone you want to get—especially since you seem to have a particular vendetta against my lovely twin, here—" He helped Hermione up, squeezing her hand before he released it. "—is actually *home* when you make your first strike?"

A low growl emerged from behind the mask. The young man raised one brown eyebrow and continued. "Truth hurts, doesn't it? Face it, man, you missed your primary target entirely, floundered around causing loads of damage to people who were barely involved in what I think you're trying to do, and wrapped up—assuming I'm identifying you correctly here, which I'm fairly sure I am—by causing yourself more problems than you solved. Including, in your case, actually sparking off your own personal experiences with Outer Time." He smirked, the expression naggingly familiar. "I may not be as familiar with this ridge as some, but to me, that sounds a lot like—"

*Wingardium Leviosa*, Harry enunciated clearly in his mind, executing a textbook swish and flick in the direction of their enemy's mask. The man yelped and tried to clutch at the fabric as it obediently levitated, following the line of Harry's wand, but it was already too late.

"Draco Malfoy," Ginny growled, her lips curling back from her teeth. "I should have known..."

## He Nearly Killed the Cat The Final Elements

"Of course!" Sirius snapped his fingers. "Now it all makes sense! Who else would there be than our little Fox—or his alternate, sorry about that," he added quickly to an offended noise from the boy standing behind him, "that Kreacher would recognize as his master, but 'not in the direct line'?"

"And he didn't know your voice because in the time period where Pearl and I had been placed, you were still only an infant," Aletha took over from her husband. "Supposedly." Her voice, if it had been turned loose on the Hogwarts lake, would have seriously inconvenienced the giant squid. "So what grudge exactly do you think you have against us, to come barging into our lives and disrupt them this way?"

"What grudge?" Draco Malfoy, somewhat older than Harry was used to seeing him and beginning (to Harry's secret delight) to lose his hair, drew himself up indignantly. "As if you didn't know. It's your fault, all of you, for turning me into this—you have only yourselves to blame—*he* knows what I'm talking about even if you don't—" A pale finger, shaking in outrage, jabbed at the boy who was still standing coolly beside Hermione. "Ask *him* what you did to me, and then tell me why you think I might try to destroy you before you can do the same thing to thousands of others like me!"

"Hold on, I think I've got this," said Ron, raising his hand. "You're the one from the world Lynx and I got stuffed into, aren't you? The one who faked up his face to look like Tonks, made nice to Hermione to get her to help you fix that stupid Cabinet, acted like you were friends, and then got all offended when she was angry that you'd lied to her?"

Malfoy spat to one side. "Friends," he hissed, glaring at Hermione, who returned the look with equal hauteur. "As if any such thing were possible. It never *would* have been, except for *you* ." His eyes raked the crowd in the clearing, as though trying to destroy them with the force of his will alone. "But I escaped you in the end. I got away. And I started planning my revenge that very same day."

"You climbed into the Vanishing Cabinet," Ginny said, her eyes half-shut as though she recalled a dream. "If the world had still been running on its normal lines, that would only have taken you to Diagon Alley, but the rules were different since it had already been invaded by the RC's."

"By *your* RC's, I might add," Hermione put in, folding her arms across her chest. "So it's no use

blaming us for what happened. As Fox said just a moment ago, you did it to yourself."

"But who was responsible for changing me in the first place? For muddling my mind, befouling my thoughts enough that I thought I might want to speak with you as an equal? Even to *require* you, as a helper or as... anything else?" Malfoy began to stalk around the edge of the clearing, directing unfriendly looks at various members of the crowd. "That *distinction* belongs to you, all of you and your truth-twisting ways."

"And do you like so much better the way you ought to have ended up?" said Danger, speaking for the first time since the revelation of their enemy's identity. Her voice was soft, but penetrating, and everyone turned to face her, even Malfoy. "Would you really prefer to be that lost, that frightened and unsure of yourself, that much cut off from any true happiness or betterment in your future, at the ripe old age of almost eighteen?"

"I don't see why that's any of your business." Malfoy looked down his nose at her. "Since I'm not that mewling brat any longer, and I don't intend to be ever again. But the rest of you." A vicious, not quite sane grin split his face. "Why don't I give you an idea of what I'm going to do to you, now that I've got you all at my mercy, cut off from Outer Time, all twelve of you in the same place at last..." He trailed off, glancing uneasily across the group.

"Isn't that special?" Luna remarked into the silence. "He's learned how to count."

"Where's the werewolf?" Malfoy craned his neck, peering around people and behind them, as though he thought Remus Lupin might be hiding beneath someone's robes. "What have you done with him?"

Danger laughed once, softly. "My husband remained in Outer Time, to hold the way open for us to return," she said. "I'm sure he'll be terribly sorry to have missed you."

"Remained in—" Malfoy cut himself off forcibly, sucked air through his teeth, and was nodding almost before he had breathed out again. "Yes, I see it now. Leaving one behind for backup, just like you always do. Clever. But not clever enough, or why isn't he already here, breaking you free of my evil ways?" His grin returned, wider and madder than before. "Because he can't, can he? My shields work both ways, stopping you from getting out of this world and stopping him from getting in! He can sit out there and watch what I do to you, watch how I break you down bit by bit, and when I get to *you*..."

The word was softly, almost lovingly, breathed towards Danger, who bowed her head as though wilting under it. "Yes, when he sees what I have in store for you, his dear little *mate*, perhaps he'll feel obliged to try to come and rescue you after all. Or perhaps he'll show a lick of common sense and let you go... or he would, if he could break free of your so-special *soul-bond* before it drags him down to destruction behind you!"

"So enlighten us," drawled Hermione's twin—*Fox*, Harry reminded himself, *they call him Fox*—drawing all eyes back to himself. "What is it that you have planned for us, now that we've fallen into your perfectly executed trap?"

"I'm so glad you asked." Malfoy leaned against a nearby tree, smirking broadly. "Let's start at the bottom and work up, shall we? The *long* bottom, that is." He snickered at his own joke. Neville rolled his eyes and turned his shoulder to Malfoy as though uninterested, incidentally hiding the slit in his robes through which his right hand slipped. Malfoy, oblivious, babbled on. "I've found a lovely little world for you..."

"Harry," a man's voice said quietly from the air to Harry's left. "Rub your nose if you can hear me."

Resisting the urge to whip around and stare, Harry scratched the end of his nose, keeping his head turned towards Ginny to keep Malfoy from spotting where his true attention was focused. Her face, he noticed in passing, had hardened into a mask of fury, which would have fooled anyone who wasn't close enough to spot the shimmer gathering in the corners of her eyes.

*This must really be scaring her. She doesn't cry easily.*

"Good," the voice said with some satisfaction. "Don't turn your head, he might see that, but cut your eyes this way."

*What am I, four?* But even as he thought it, Harry realized the careful instructions made sense. Malfoy was employing psychological warfare even as Voldemort had tried to do two nights before, using people's fears against them, making them believe they couldn't possibly win and collecting the advantage that gave him in terms of morale. This new player, whoever he might be —*and I think I already know*—was countering that with his own calm, collected spirit, but he couldn't be sure how well or badly Harry was taking things.

*And while I'm sitting here thinking, I'm not doing what he told me.*

Casually, he flicked a glance to the left. Danger still sat with her head bowed, her fingers twined around each other, but her earlier air of defeat, of being cowed by horrible threats to herself and her mate, was gone. The pose, although it had not materially altered, gave Harry's newly sensitized eyes the impression of watchfulness, of the stillness of concentration.

Behind her and to one side stood the image of a brown-haired man, likewise still and watchful. His lips curved in a brief smile as he met Harry's gaze, and Harry found himself smiling in return, recalling his walk through the Forest two nights ago with a similar likeness walking beside him.

*Everything's coming around in a circle, isn't it? First I played against death, and now I'm playing for life...*

"Listen carefully, I don't have long," said Remus Lupin, shooting a look of his own at Malfoy, who was now expounding upon the fate he had planned for Luna. "While I'm not terribly surprised by his ability to blame others for his own mistakes, he's right about one thing. He has me cut off from providing any real help to you. His power is rooted here where I am, in Outer Time, and he has this world locked off. Which also means the rest of us can't call on Outer Time. But by that same token, he's made a grave mistake." A moment's fierce smile reminded Harry of the rank this man

held within the family he now knew was called the Pack. "He's ignoring those of you who are still sealed to Inner Time. And you, no less than your friends, have the power to defeat him."

"How?" Harry asked without moving his lips, keeping his head turned in Malfoy's general direction. The older version of his Hogwarts nemesis was now expounding upon the proper treatment of Weasleys, and the shimmer was collecting more prominently in Ginny's eyes as she clenched her fists.

"There are six elements for sealing a person to a particular world, and giving them the ability to play by its rules." Lupin ticked them off on his fingers. "Bread and salt, water and wine, blood and tears. No doubt our friend there has his own pocket domain somewhere in Outer Time, where he's eaten and drunk and shed his blood, and managed somehow to squeeze out a tear. Probably through reflecting on his own tiny misfortunes. But what matters is, if you can get him to do the same thing here—to eat, drink, or shed at least three of the six—he'll be halfway sealed to this world instead, and we have a shot at breaking his bonds with Outer Time. At which point, he loses all power except the common-and-garden magic he was born with."

"A shot?" Harry hoped he had managed to convey his displeasure not with the chance, but with the fact that it sounded like *only* a chance, in the words. From the grim look on Lupin's face, he'd succeeded.

"I don't want to lie to you, it's not going to be easy," the older wizard said, his hand going out as though to stroke Danger's hair but pulling back short of its mark. "But it's the best possibility I see. Of course, if you can catch him on more than three of the elements, things get progressively easier with each one. And if you could manage all six..." The smile returned, and with it a moment's twinkle in the blue eyes which reminded Harry sharply of Dumbledore. "Well, that would get us the Snitch. He'd be instantly sealed to this world, and since his personality really hasn't changed in any significant way from his original, he'd start to assimilate into that same original straight off."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer bloke," Harry muttered, his mind already starting to work. *Bread, salt, water, wine...* "Can she," he twitched his head towards Danger, "do that thing?" A few wiggles of his fingers elucidated his point, or so he hoped. *I remember there is a hand-signal code, but not how to do it myself, not yet...* "Talk to them without him knowing about it?"

"What do you need to say?" Lupin inquired, as the smallest of smiles touched the side of Danger's mouth closest to Harry. "Though I warn you, as soon as she moves, I have to blank out and you'll need to be inoffensive over here. She's the one keeping attention off us for the moment."

"Got it." Harry reshuffled his plan of attack to take this into account. "Can she... can you," he amended, turning his attention to Danger, "ask them to fight? Have a big, obvious, angry falling-out, the sort that would make him think he's already winning? Shouting, calling names, pushing and shoving, anything they think will keep his attention on them and make him laugh. Make him laugh *hard*, like rolling on the ground."

"Make him..." Lupin's eyes lit with pleasure, and Danger's smile flickered again. "Of course. Well



thought. Anything else?"

"Just..." Swallowing once, Harry tried a small smile of his own. "Ask them to trust me?"

Lupin smiled warmly. "They already do. I'll see you soon, Harry. Best of luck."

"Thanks," Harry muttered as the image of the older wizard disappeared. "I'm going to need it."

As Malfoy continued his tirade, now addressing Luna in a voice of lofty disdain which didn't quite mask the frustrated lust underneath, Harry leaned down to Ginny and touched her cheek, turning her face towards him. "Do you trust me?" he asked softly. "Enough to do something you won't like?"

"Of course." Ginny straightened her back and lifted her head, narrowing her eyes against her tears. "What is it?"

"Stop doing that." Harry let his own shoulders sag, glancing at Malfoy, who still seemed oblivious to their little group, though Danger's quiet movements towards the invisible boundary between them and the Legendbreakers would become apparent soon. "Stop fighting it. Let him think he's won, he's broken you down. Don't make it big or flashy, but cry. And while you're crying..." He pointed his wand at one of the fragments of flatbread Ginny had scattered earlier, Summoning it into his hand. "Blot the tears on this."

Ginny frowned. "Harry, what are you doing?"

"What I was told." Harry pressed the thumb-sized bit of bread into her hand. "Can you handle it?"

"Yes, but—" Ginny cut herself off, shaking her head. "No, there's no time now, is there? You'd explain if there was. But as soon as there is..."

"You'll be the first to know," Harry promised. "Oh, and one other thing. Don't panic if they—" He nodded towards the Legendbreakers, some of whom were still putting up their show of indifference to Malfoy's rambling screed, others whose eyes were closely following the intricate motions of Danger's fingers. "—seem to lose it. It's all part of the plan."

"You scare me almost as much as Fred and George when you say that." Ginny smiled, even as one fat tear slid from her left eye and began to make its way down her cheek. She dabbed at it with the bread, the absorbent crumb soaking up the liquid almost instantly. "But I do trust you. And love you." A second tear followed the first. "So that question you didn't get a chance to finish asking?" She shot a fulminating glare in Malfoy's direction. "The answer's yes. Just in case you were wondering."

"Maybe a little." Harry wished he dared steal a kiss, but that would definitely have pulled Malfoy's attention, and their best chance for the moment was to stay as quiet and inoffensive as possible.

*Until we get everything we need, that is.*

*So let me think.* He turned his back on Malfoy, ignoring the sniping words in much the same way he had always been able to stop listening to Professor Binns when the day's lesson on History of Magic became impossibly boring. *Bread we have, plus water and salt—because that's what tears are, when you come right down to it—and tears from him I'm working on, or they are.* He glanced to one side, seeing a few of the Legendbreakers beginning to draw apart, murmuring darkly to each other. *So that leaves wine, and blood. Wine I think I can handle, as long as I can get the charms right. Blood...*

A soft cough drew his attention to Danger, who had returned to her earlier position seated on the fallen leaves, head bowed, hands folded. "Leave blood to me," her voice said, quiet but clear, sounding as though she were standing beside him rather than sitting down several feet away. "I have an idea, but it will need the rest of the elements in place to make it work."

"You're sure?" Harry asked, frowning a little. "I mean, not that I doubt you, but..."

"But everything rides on this." Danger tilted her head just enough that her eyes could meet his. No hint of softness or mercy could be discerned within the chill, unflinching brown. "Believe me, I know. And I have been waiting for this moment for what feels like a very, very long time. He will not escape me, Harry. I promise you that."

"If you say so." Swallowing his doubts, Harry stepped back a pace just as the first shouts erupted from the group beside him.

"All my fault?" The words were shrieked at Hermione's very best volume. "How *dare* you!"

Sirius and Aletha, greatly daring in Harry's opinion, dashed into the middle of the fray, trying to pry Hermione's hands off Meghan, not helped by Meghan's lunges and swipes towards Hermione as the smaller girl returned as good as she got. "I dare because it's *true!*" she shouted as her mother finally got her disentangled and hoisted her bodily several feet back. "If you hadn't been so stupid as not to know who you were making friends with—"

"Oh, so now I'm responsible for things my counterpart did? Things she didn't even *know* she was doing? Why not blame *him* for *his* counterpart being an idiot, then?" Hermione's finger stabbed towards Ron. "Since he was the one who made sure the world fell apart too soon for us to rescue them both?"

"Hey, I did the best I could to stop him!" Ron protested. "If we're going to play the blame game, why not start with the obvious candidate?" He turned on Fox. "Like the one standing right here who's got mostly the same blood as *that?*" A vicious glare indicated Malfoy, who had stopped his harangue to sit down on the rock Ginny and Danger had used earlier, looking intensely interested in the burgeoning argument. "Why didn't *he* do something to stop all of this, huh?"

"Because I couldn't," Fox said wearily. "As you'd know if you had even a shred of intelligence in that ginger head of yours! What she sees in you, I've no idea, never did—"

"Little late to be raising objections now, isn't it?" Ron shot back. "Unless you're going to start

taking your ideas from him too, instead of just your bloodline, and try and rehabilitate me into my original so you can find someone you like better for your precious twin—"

Grinning to himself, Harry turned away, blocking out the argument as he had Malfoy's rampage earlier. His friends had their enemy's attention well and truly captured, and even if they hadn't, he was sure Danger was performing the tiny, quiet, "look somewhere else" spell he now recalled was one of Neville's abilities—

*And he's not part of the fight, either.* The sturdy, brown-haired boy was standing to one side, an expression of concentration on his face. *He must be working together with Danger, to make sure Malfoy only looks where we want him to, not where we don't...*

But even the combined efforts of two Legendbreakers wouldn't last forever, Harry reminded himself. He'd better get moving.

*Wine. I had elf-made wine with Hagrid and Professor Slughorn that one night last year, the night I took the Felix Felicis and got that memory for Professor Dumbledore. Bet you anything Hagrid kept one or two of those bottles for himself... now if I can just remember how to do this...*

"*Alohomora,*" he breathed, envisioning the back door of Hagrid's hut, the one which faced the Forest, springing open. A moment to let that spell take effect, then...

"*Accio wine bottle!*"

The sound of excited voices in the background, combined with a Summoning spell which *had* to work, invoked for a split second the memory of Harry's fourth year, at the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. This time, though, his foe was far worse than a nesting dragon.

*And isn't that something I never thought I'd be able to say?*

The argument, he noticed out of the corner of his eye, was quickly devolving into a shoving match, which would become more physical even than that in a moment or two. *They can't keep it up much longer without having to fight, and it would tip Malfoy off in a second that they're acting if they pulled their punches or didn't let them connect—we have to finish this quickly—*

Movement from the way he had been facing brought his head snapping back around. Neck-first, an open wine bottle soared through the air like a broomstick for a house-elf, landing neatly in the hand Harry stretched out to catch it.

*Now let there just be some left—*

He shook the bottle slightly and breathed a sigh of relief. "Ginny," he hissed, turning to hurry back to her side. "Give me the bread."

"Here it is." Ginny laid a moist lump in his palm. "Harry, are you sure about this?"

"As much as I was about anything else in this past year." Harry poured the remainder of the wine

over the bread, watching with satisfaction as the bits not already sodden with Ginny's tears turned a warm ruby red.

"Oh, so not at all. Good to know."

"Har-har," said Harry dryly, and levitated his small burden, looking across at Malfoy. Like his earlier spell, there would only be one chance for this.

*Come on, he willed the other wizard, come on, laugh. Laugh. You've got to think this is funny—these people you've spent all this time hating, the ones you could never destroy by pulling them apart, and here they're doing it for you by being together—*

Ron launched himself at Fox, and the two of them went down in a heap, yelling and rolling on the ground. The girls shrieked as one, Aletha dropped her face into her hands, Sirius groaned and ran his fingers through his hair, and outside the circle, Malfoy began to snicker.

*That's right, laugh. Laugh at the way they're falling apart, the way everything they wanted is exploding in their faces. Harry edged a few paces nearer to Malfoy, willing it with all his might, feeling Ginny's strength joining his like a warm wind scented faintly with flowers. Laugh at how they're proving that everything they stand for is wrong, and you were right all the time. Laugh. Laugh. Laugh...*

And Malfoy did.

At first the sound was low and hesitant, as though he were no longer sure how it was done, but slowly his chuckles gathered momentum, growing as they went. About forty-five seconds into the fight, when Ron drove his own knuckles into the ground in an attempt to smash in Fox's teeth, he guffawed outright for the first time, and from then on his battle was lost.

*Good. Good. Now keep it up. Harry drew back his wand arm slowly, the dripping piece of bread floating at its tip. Just keep it up, keep it growing, until...*

"Oh, stop it!" Hermione wailed, bursting into tears of her own as Fox got his hands around Ron's throat and Ron clawed at Fox's eyes. "Stop it, stop it, both of you, please! "

Malfoy doubled over with laughter at this, his arms folded across his stomach as though he feared his sides might literally split. His eyes gleamed bright when he lifted his head again, and Harry's spirits surged as a single shining drop slipped from the inside corner of the left one. *Yes, yes, yes, come on—*

The tear fell from Malfoy's pointed chin and was lost in the litter of the Forest floor.

*That's one. Now for the rest.*

Sirius and Aletha were finally getting the combatants under control, and Malfoy, pouting a bit at the curtailment of his fun, was dabbing fussily at his eyes with a kerchief. Harry waited, chewing on his lip as he studied his opponent. *Not yet... not yet...*

His hand was in motion before his mind could catch up with it. The tiny bit of bread, carrying its freight of water, wine, and salt, flew straight and true across the clearing and disappeared into Malfoy's mouth.

*Direct hit!* Harry kept his cheer firmly internal. *Now as long as he doesn't choke on it—*

Malfoy coughed once, blinking hard, but then cleared his throat and swallowed, shaking his head and straightening his robes. "Really, such bad manners you all have," he said chidingly, wagging his finger at the Pack. "It's rude to fight when someone's invited you to share a special occasion, didn't you know that?"

"So true," said Lupin, his image materializing beside Harry again. "Love? Ready to make it even more special than before?"

"Absolutely." Danger got to her feet in one swift, flowing movement and half-turned to brush her hand past Lupin's chest. Her fingers came away clutched around a tiny, glittering object, and she slid it onto her left hand, twisted it once, and strode towards Malfoy with purpose. He spotted her a split-second before her right hand shot out and clasped his robes, yanking him off-balance and cutting short any spell he might have been about to try to stop her approach.

"You selfish, spoiled, pathetic little *waste* ," she said with biting precision, and brought her left hand around in a ringing slap, releasing his robes as she made contact.

"Ow!" Malfoy stumbled back several paces, his hand pressed to his cheek. "What are you doing —" His eyes widened as he lowered his hand, looking with horror at his fingers and the smears of red now spreading across them. "Stop—*no!* "

Danger dropped to her knees and slapped her hands flat on the ground, the diamond on the ring she had taken from Lupin and turned inward on her finger catching the light for one instant before it, and the blood it had drawn from Malfoy's face, were pressed into the earth.

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat The Just Deserts**

He came awake in the darkness with a gasp, unsure of where or even who he was. Then memory crashed over him, and he clenched his teeth against a sickly moan, his mouth paper-dry with mingled terror and helpless fury.

His enemies had won. They'd beaten him again, in the moment of what ought to have been his triumph—he'd been so flushed with victory, so gleeful to see them brought low at last, that he'd looked precisely where they'd intended him to look, at the fight two of them had staged as a diversion, and hadn't listened to the little whispers of caution within his own mind that something wasn't right—

*And Potter forced a resealing on me. I'd have realized it if I'd been paying attention, I'd have felt the bonds breaking, but no, I had to watch Weasley and the blood-traitor version of me beating each other up, and Granger crying over it, and then she got me across the face with her damned ring, and—*

And then there had been nothing, or nothing until just this moment. His eyes were starting to adjust to the near-total blackness within the room, he realized, he could begin to make out shapes, a table with two chairs close to his bedside, rectangles on the walls which must be either framed pictures or windows, a larger one to the side which was likely a door—

*Wait, table and chairs? Pictures? Windows? I ought to be in the Slytherin boys' dorm, that's where I would have been if nothing had ever happened in my world, if I'd never had Granger's help fixing that blasted Cabinet, if I'd gone ahead and finished out the ridge the way I ought to've...*

Unbidden, his mind supplied an image of him gloating over the woman named Danger, telling her that he never again intended to be the mewling brat who was the Draco Malfoy of his original world's ending. He gulped, or tried to. His throat was too tight to make much of it.

*They took me at my word. They didn't just let me assimilate into my ridge character, they pulled me out with them and sealed me to some other bit of Inner Time, some spin or tell out there somewhere. Merlin's pants, there are millions of those, they could take their pick, and probably a few hundred thousand of their Chroniclers had "Draco Malfoy getting taken down a few pegs" on their top-ten list of things they wanted most to see...*

*Or what if they didn't even bother staying within our series? What if they looked through all of*

*Inner Time, every world there ever was, for a place they thought would be...suitable?* His stomach went into free-fall, thinking of a few of the fates he had so gleefully designed for the people he had thought would never be able to retaliate in kind. *And depending on how vengeful they're feeling, they could keep an eye on me, let me suffer through the worst time in whatever world I'm in, then pull me out and shove me into another one, to go through it all again. And again. And again. As often as they want, through any hell anyone's ever written down, forever...*

One speck of his mind tried to point out that he was forgetting something about the people at whose mercy he now lay, something important, but the rest of him wasn't listening. The full horror of the eternity ahead of him crashed over him, the first wave of a rising tide of heart-stopping fear within his soul, and he whimpered like a child in the grip of a nightmare, curling into a ball with his hands over his face, his last vestiges of sanity begging silently for someone to come and make it not be real—

"Luke!"

He stiffened. The voice was a woman's, cultured, shaken, and impossibly familiar.

*No. No. This can't be happening— she can't really be here—*

"Oh, love, I thought you'd sleep for hours yet!" A light sprang on beside his bed, dim yet painfully piercing to his dark-adapted eyes. He flinched away from it automatically, shielding his face with an arm, and was still off-balance and trying to adjust when the mattress dipped beside him, as though someone had sat down. Before he could manage to look up, a pair of arms closed tightly around him, plucking him free of the bedclothes and bundling him into a lap, where something warm and deliciously soft was wrapped around him, bearing a faint fragrance as well-known, and as impossible, as the voice had been—

"Mother?"

"Yes, my little one, yes, here I am," she murmured, the chest against which he lay vibrating with the sound. "I'm so sorry you had to wake up alone, but it's all right now." Her soft, smooth hand touched his forehead, his cheek, the side of his neck. "Everything is going to be all right."

Her fingers stroked gently through his hair, combing it back into place, stealing more of his fear with every touch. He tried desperately to remind himself that this was not, *could not be*, real, but it felt so good, so true, so *right*...

"The fever is almost gone, love," his mother went on, her tone becoming warmer, more brisk, as though she addressed someone else. He opened one eye, peering cautiously to his right, and sure enough, there was the figure of a man, standing in the doorway he'd seen earlier, brightly backlit so that only his outline was visible.

*Father?* The idea woke an instinctive spike of fear in his belly, but it eased almost as soon as it had come. *No, it can't be. He's not tall enough, and his hair's too short.* Confusion tightened in his chest to replace the fear. *But then who...*

"Will you get him another potion, while I stay with him?" his mother requested before he could complete the thought.

"Of course," said the man in the doorway, his deep and resonant tones striking a chord of familiarity, the profile displayed for a split-second as he turned and the gleam of light across sleek black hair bringing the half-realized recognition to its fulfillment.

*But what's he doing here? Wherever here might be? And why's my mother calling him—*

"Luke," her voice broke into his thoughts. He started to look around for the person she was addressing, and she laughed low in her chest. "I mean you, silly boy. Look at me."

*Me? But my name's not—*

"Up here." Her fingers snapped in the air beside her face, and without thought he turned his head, tracking on the sound. "That's better." She smiled at him for a moment as he got himself adjusted against her arms, but then her beautiful features composed themselves into an expression of quiet gravity. "I want you to listen to me very carefully, my love, and don't try to talk until I am finished. Do you understand?" Her smile flashed for a brief, shining instant. "Nod your head if you do."

*I was wondering how she expected me to answer if I'm not allowed to talk. Dutifully, he nodded. Maybe now I'll find out what all this is about...*

"You have been very ill, my darling, for...well, for longer than I care to think about." Her arms tightened for a moment, possessively, as though she were afraid he might somehow be snatched from her even now. "We almost lost you several times, and I know..." She had to stop and swallow before she could go on. "I know that you must have had some truly terrible dreams." Blue eyes, stern and warm all at once, focused on him with piercing intensity. "But now those dreams are over, do you understand me? However real they may have been to you while they were happening, they are not real now." She drew him closer to her again, kissing the top of his head. "We are here, together, and you are safe, and that is all that matters."

*Safe.* The word spread a glow of warmth all through him, dissolving the knots of tension and worry under his ribs, stealing the strength from his limbs and leaving them pleasantly limp as the truth began to sink in. *It was a dream, a bad dream, that's all it ever was. I never got the Dark Mark on my arm and tried to kill Professor Dumbledore, or hurt people and stole them away from their families—I never wanted to do those things, or thought they were funny and good while I was doing them—it was a dream, every last bit of it, I was never Draco Malfoy at all—*

*Don't let them do this to you!* a voice shrieked from somewhere deep inside his mind. *They're lying to you, it's all a trap! You are Draco Malfoy, don't let them fool you this way, fight back! Don't fall for it! There's a trick somewhere, there's got to be a trick, this is just the sort of thing those Pack-bastards would think is funny—*

Luke yawned, nestling his face more comfortably into the curve of his mother's collarbone. Go



away, he told the voice sleepily. *I don't want you. You aren't a very happy person, or a very nice one, either, so I don't think I want to be you anymore.* Another yawn, this one so wide as to almost crack his jaw. *Besides, I'm not allowed to use words like that "b" one you said. It's not a polite word to say.* He closed his eyes as his mother began to hum to him, rocking him back and forth in her arms. *Now go away. I want to sleep.*

*No!* the voice howled, but Luke wasn't listening. His mother's song was much more interesting, as was a masculine chuckle from somewhere nearby.

He cracked one eye open to see the dark-haired man from the corridor smiling at him, setting down a vial of potion on the small nightstand by the bed. "I see this won't be needed," said the deep voice, and one strong hand drew a wand from within black robes and Summoned the rocking chair Luke had somehow known was in a back corner of the room. "We'll ask your Aunt Eve tomorrow, when she comes for Christmas breakfast, what potions you should take to help you grow strong through the winter, so that you can be outside running and playing as soon as the snow melts in the spring."

*Oh, of course it's Christmas,* the voice said bitterly. *I should have known. Do you have any idea how blatantly they're manipulating you with this? I'm astounded there isn't sap dripping off the walls! Now try to get a grip here—they're bound to pull the rug out from under you any second now, whenever they get tired of winding you up—*

Luke glanced down at the soft green carpeting beneath his parents' feet. *Now you're just being silly,* he informed the voice. *That isn't the kind of rug you can pull. And why shouldn't it be Christmas? I like Christmas. Only—*

A sudden fear assailed him, and was able to do so in peace, the voice seeming to have been temporarily struck speechless. "Mummy," he said, tilting his head back to look up at her. "Did being ill make me sleep a lot?"

"You could say that," his mother agreed, nodding her head.

"But..." Luke shivered a little at the terrifying thought which had come to him. "What if I get ill again? What if..." He had to whisper it. It was too frightening to be said aloud. "What if I sleep through Christmas morning?"

"Then we will wait to have Christmas until you're well, my darling." His mother's tone was warm, amused without laughing *at* him, and Luke smiled in answer, feeling his fear slide away again. "Your presents will hardly run away!"

"Ah, now, Cecy," his father put in, chuckling again. "One of them might."

"True enough, but not *away* away. Only around the house." His mother sighed. "And up the tree, every chance it gets. And all over my good furniture, and my lace curtains..."

"All of which are easily repaired with magic," said his father firmly. "And you had your chance to

object when you saw what I was bringing inside with me the other day."

"So I did." Another sigh, but this one held a laugh inside it. "Oh, Russ. You know perfectly well I was never going to turn away such an abject little morsel of woebegonity—if that is even a word..."

Luke closed his eyes again, letting himself drift. He thought he might know what the present was that his parents were discussing in adult words, and the idea filled him with delight as warm and wriggling as that present itself was likely to be. He had always wanted a pet, something soft and cuddlesome that could curl up on his bed, but his father had said such things were for girls or Muggles—

*But that was only in the dreams, he reminded himself, not in real life. I don't have to worry about the dreams anymore, not ever again. Mummy said so.*

*Will you listen to me for a second?* The voice was back, and sounding increasingly desperate, Luke noticed. *You're getting it backwards! This is the dream, the fake, the setup, something, but whatever it is, it isn't real—it can't be real—*

"Why not?" Luke asked, opening his eyes. He stood in the middle of a gray, featureless plain, looking at a boy several years older than himself, a boy who looked very like the man Luke hazily recalled as his father from the bad dreams, or the face he'd seen for himself when he looked in the dream mirrors. *Draco*, he remembered with a jolt, *that was the name I had then. Draco Malfoy...*

"Because it's *good* ." Draco paced back and forth restlessly, twisting his hands together in front of him. "And it makes no sense for it to be good, not after what I did to those Pack..." He glanced at Luke and scowled once. "People," he finished. "They've got a score to settle with me, more than one for most of them, so this can't be what it looks like. They're leading me on, setting me up, stringing me along until just the right moment, and then—wham!" He slapped one hand into the other. "Oh, but I'm wise to their little game. I'm not going to let them fool me, no, sir, not me. I'm not falling for it, not for one minute..."

Luke sat down on the ground, trying to work this out inside his head as Draco continued to rant. He remembered the Pack from some of the dreams, and rather hoped that like his mother and father, they were real as well as dream-people. They always seemed happy, even when things weren't easy for them, and wanted other people to be happy too—

And there it was, the answer he'd been looking for, sitting right there in plain sight. Luke smiled, got to his feet, and walked over to Draco, who was still addressing his diatribe to thin air. "Scuse me," he said, tugging at the older boy's robes.

"What?" Draco snapped, looking down.

"If the Pack's good," Luke said carefully, "maybe they want everybody to have good things too. Even people who don't like them very much."

Draco opened his mouth, and closed it again. Opened it, and closed it. "But," he said finally. "But, but *why?* "

"I don't know." Luke shrugged. "Maybe because that's what good people do."

This seemed to stymie Draco completely. "But I don't understand," he complained, sitting down with an almost offended air. "They could have done anything to me. Anything at all. And they're going to turn me into a little kid and give me a kitten for Christmas?"

Luke cocked his head to one side. "Don't you like kittens?"

"I like kittens fine. It's the principle of the thing." Draco spun his hands in the air as he tried to explain. "You don't pay somebody back for ripping your life apart by turning around and giving them the life they always secretly wanted! That's just not how the game is played!"

"I think the Pack uses different rules than everybody else." Luke sat down to be more on a level with the other boy. "*Did* you always want a life like mine? With my mummy and daddy, and a kitten for Christmas, and no having to grow up and do bad things just because the snake-man said so?"

"What, a life with the only two people I ever really trusted, and no stupid grandiose expectations I should always have known I couldn't fulfill?" Draco sighed. "Kid, I'd have killed for it." He snorted what would have been a laugh if there hadn't been so much hurt behind it. "Or maybe I wouldn't have. Couldn't have, judging by the ridge. Instead I just piddled along, trying to play both sides against the middle and failing miserably, and wound up...well, would have wound up starting the whole mess over. Marry the 'right' girl, have the 'right' kid, raise him up the 'right' way, 'round the bend and here we go again." He leaned back on his hands. "Not that this is so much better. Stuck inside my own head forever, watching what I always wanted..." A small smile slipped unwillingly onto his face. "At least *you* get to live it."

"But we're the same," Luke objected. "You're just partway caught inside the dreams still, and I'm not. Can't you find the way out of them?"

"Find the way out?" Draco looked nonplussed, as though Luke were speaking a foreign language. "Out of what?"

Luke groaned under his breath. *He doesn't understand, and I don't have the right words to tell it to him...*

*But what if I could show him? He brightened as the idea came to him. What if I use the ideas inside his own head to show him what I mean? Because if we really are the same, he does understand, he just doesn't know it yet...*

He jumped up and clapped his hands. "Do it!" he shouted. "Do it right now!"

"Do what?" Draco clambered to his feet, looking alarmed. "Luke, what're you—"

The gray plain vanished. They stood in the middle of the Room of Hidden Things at Hogwarts, beside the black-and-gold Vanishing Cabinet, with Hermione Granger frozen in shock in front of them. Luke dived behind the nearest pile of broken objects and peered eagerly around the side. *I hope this works, I hope this works, I hope this works...*

"I trusted you!" Hermione shouted. "I liked you, and all the time you were lying to me? Using me? That's not what friends do!"

"I never said a word to you that wasn't true," Draco began hotly, "and of course I changed the way I look! Wouldn't you, if it was the only way anyone would ever look at you without seeing... someone else..." He trailed off, stepping back a pace, as Hermione blinked at him in confusion.

*Yes, yes, go, go,* Luke cheered on his other self silently, pumping his small fists in encouragement. *This is your chance, this is your time, you can do it...*

"I've been here before," Draco said softly. "I remember this. And it doesn't fix anything. Just like the ridge, all it ever does is start the whole messed-up loop all over again. I don't want to do that, especially not now that I know I lose in the end..."

"What are you talking about?" asked Hermione, hands on her hips, but Luke thought he saw a smile trying to hide on her face. "What loop?"

"I have to break it." Draco nodded, still speaking in the same quiet tone, as if to himself. "That's the answer. I have to do something else, something different. I have to..." He grimaced instead of finishing the sentence, then looked up and met Hermione's eyes. "I'm sorry," he said, swallowing as though the words left a bad taste in his mouth but not flinching away from her hard blue stare. "I shouldn't have lied to you."

Hermione blinked, then let her hands drop to her sides, mollified. "You're right, you shouldn't have," she said. "But I think I see why you did. You wanted a chance to start over, to do things right this time, without all the baggage from the past. To prove your destiny isn't fixed just because of who or where you were born." The smile wasn't hiding anymore, and Luke pressed his hands over his mouth to stifle a giggle. "Yes?"

"Yes," Draco acknowledged. "But I muffed it up, and then I went on and blamed you for it, and decided I had to have my revenge, and in the end everything circled right back around and—" He waved one hand, indicating their cluttered surroundings. "Here we are. So whatever you want to do, whatever shot you want to take, go ahead. I deserve it."

The smile turned wry, and Hermione shook her head. "You still don't understand," she said wonderingly. "But all right, if that's what you really want, I'll do it. Just to clarify, you're giving me full permission to do as I wish with you, and you'll go along with it?" *This time,* Luke thought he heard her self-censor. "You won't fight it or try to get out of it?"

Draco winced, but nodded. "Not like fighting would do me any good at this point," he said. "Yes, that's what I meant. Just..." He stepped forward to stand directly in front of her. "Get it over with

fast, all right?"

"Fast it is." Hermione lifted her hand and reached for Draco's forehead, pausing for an instant before she touched him. "Sweet dreams," she said softly, and pressed one finger to his skin.

Luke poked his head out of hiding as Draco folded up and dropped to what would have been the floor if a couch hadn't sprouted beneath him as he went down. "That's nice," he remarked, pattering over to Hermione. "Did you do it, or did the Room?"

"I think the Room must have. Even if it is a dream Room, it has the same characteristics the real one has." Hermione went to one knee, looking at him gravely. "He's hurt pretty badly in some places, you know. It won't be easy sharing your head with him. Are you sure you want him back?"

"I need to learn how to make hurts get better if I want to be a Legendbreaker like you and Mum and Dad when I grow up." Luke turned to look at his older, other self, lying motionless on the couch. "And besides, he's part of me. It's his head as much as it is mine." Another point occurred to him. "And *besides* besides, he's the one who really needs a mum and a dad and a Christmas with a kitten, because he should have had them a long time ago and he never did. I just didn't get there yet. So we'll go together."

Hermione laughed a little bit, under her breath. "I like you, Lucas Daniel Evans," she said, holding out her hand. "It's going to be fun having you grow up next door."

"I like you too." Luke squeezed her hand tightly, then let it go. "Are you going to send us home now?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to do." Hermione picked him up and held him on her hip, sketching runes in the air with her free hand. "Close your eyes and count to ten, and whatever you do, don't think of a red and green hippogriff..."

Luke giggled and buried his face in her side, trying to concentrate on his numbers instead of the silly image she'd supplied. *One, two, three, four, would it have spots or stripes? Maybe zig-zags. Six, seven, eight, no, wait, I missed five— five, six, seven, and how would it get green anyway? Crashing into the tops of trees, or rolling on the grass? Eight, nine, nine and three-quarters, ten...*

Arms were warm and strong around him, a voice murmured a lullaby above, a hand lay protectively on his hair. Everything was just as it should be on this Christmas night.

*What happened?* a sleepy voice asked from the back of his mind. *I thought she was going to...*

*Ah-ah,* Luke said hastily. *You said you wouldn't fight what she wanted to do.*

*And what she wanted was to put me back here? Terrific.* A long, deep sigh. *I'm never going to understand this, am I?*

*Maybe when we aren't different anymore, you will.* Luke cuddled closer to his mum, letting sleep sneak up on him. Christmas morning, after all, could only come when Christmas Eve night was

over. *Until then, just do what the song says.*

His mum's voice rose soft and pure for the final two lines of the carol.

*Sleep in heavenly peace,  
Sleep in heavenly peace...*

---

Elsewhere in Outer Time, a dark-haired, bespectacled young man gathered firewood into his arms, humming "Good King Wenceslas" under his breath. As he turned to start back to his family's comfortable cottage, he stopped in his tracks.

He wasn't alone. A woman with long red hair, her breath steaming in the cold, stood a few feet from him, gazing at him as though she could never see enough. Green eyes met green and held, one set already shining with unshed tears, the other beginning to glisten suspiciously behind their curved lenses.

"You must be Henry," the woman said quietly after a few moments. "Henry Black." She smiled once, tremulously. "Your sister tells me you're very brave."

"Does she?" Henry set the wood back down on the pile and crossed to the woman. "Well, that makes you Miss Eve, then. Miss Eve...Clay, wasn't it?"

"It was." Eve smiled again, more truly. "And is. I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Likewise." Henry held out his hand, and they shook. "I've heard a lot about you. What are you and Miss Suzie doing tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Eve blinked. "We had planned to go to my brother's house in the morning, and then spend a quiet afternoon at home..."

"Would you care to come over here instead?" Henry gestured towards the cottage. "The more, the merrier."

"We wouldn't want to intrude." Eve's glance was wistful, but her tone was firm. "Christmas is for family."

Henry stepped a pace closer and looked once more into the eyes so like his own. "That's why I'm offering," he said softly. "We'd really like to have you." He took a deep breath. "*I'd* like to have you."

Eve looked away, but Henry had already seen the stunned joy in her face. "In that case," she said a bit unsteadily, "I believe it would be rude of me not to accept." She turned back to him, her smile more natural than he had yet seen it. "Which I do, and thank you as well. I will...look forward to it. Very much."

"Great." Henry grinned at her. "See you tomorrow, then."

Striding back to the woodpile, he scooped up his armload again and headed for the house, whistling to himself and letting the words which matched the tune run through his head. They seemed appropriate to the place, the mood, the moment.

*God rest ye merry, gentlemen,  
Let nothing you dismay,  
Remember Christ our Savior  
Was born on Christmas Day,  
To save us all from Satan's power  
When we had gone astray...*

As he reached the door and rapped for admittance with one end of his load, he heard Miss Eve joining in the chorus, very softly.

*Oh, tidings of comfort and joy,  
Comfort and joy,  
Oh, tidings of comfort and joy.*

## **He Nearly Killed the Cat** **The Story Continues**

"Roll-call!"

Legendbreakers converged from all directions, flooding into the main room of the cottage, currently dominated by its enormous Christmas tree. The tall, dark-haired wizard standing by the tree with a scroll in his hands watched them come, nodding as each new singleton or couple found a place to sit.

"All right, people," he said when everyone was settled. "We are officially masked, so just this once we're going to be able to use former names. This is the last time, though, got it? As soon as I get done reading everybody's new names off here," he tapped the scroll with one finger, "that's what we're known as from this point on. Everyone clear on that?"

"Yes, sir," "Crystal," "Got it," "Roger that," floated back from various corners of the room.

"Well, then." The man grinned. "May as well start with the best. Patrick Black, formerly Sirius Black." He raised his free hand. "Present and accounted for."

"Present, certainly," said the dark-complexioned woman standing beside him. "Accounting for you is a great deal more complicated than that."

"Very funny. Carrie Black, formerly Aletha Black, present but minus her sense of humor." Sirius dodged the slap aimed for the back of his head and continued. "And their children. Henry Black, formerly Harry Potter..."

Harry saluted from the couch, using the arm which wasn't currently wrapped around Ginny.

"And Meghan Black, our very own Pearl, who needs no alteration."

"Because I'm perfect," said Meghan sweetly, batting her eyelashes. "Just the way I am."

"We'll debate that point later," said Sirius dryly, as Draco rolled his eyes and Ron pretended to gag. "Moving on from there, we have Meghan's... good friend, formerly Neville Longbottom, now..." He looked down at the scroll and raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"May I see?" asked Neville, holding out a hand. Sirius tossed the scroll over, and Neville skimmed down it and nodded. "That's right."



"With all the names in the world, you decided to pick..." Sirius grimaced. "Well, your funeral. Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce Mr. Newton Fenwick."

The Pride turned as one to look at Neville. Neville returned the looks blandly.

"Should we even ask?" Draco said after a long moment.

"It's close in meaning to my original, and it explains why I'd rather go by my nickname." Neville grinned suddenly. "Besides, it means no one will ever doubt that my parents gave it to me, because why would I pick that name for myself?"

"You have a point." Draco shrugged. "Not much of one, but it's your life. I'm guessing 'Captain' is still the order of the day around here, though."

"If you'd be so kind."

"Depends on how I'm feeling."

"Moving along," said Sirius in a tone which suggested he was attempting not to laugh. "Henry's girlfriend—"

"Fiancée," Ginny corrected.

"Very true, I beg your pardon. Henry's fiancée Jenny West, formerly Ginny Weasley, and her brother Rich, formerly Ron."

"And still Lynx and Redwing, for everyday use," Hermione put in. "Possibly even for some places in Inner Time, if we do what Jason and Reyna were suggesting."

"It did sound like fun," Ron agreed. Then his grin turned wicked. "Especially some of the outfits Reyna was showing us pictures of."

Hermione scowled. "I am *not* dressing as a pirate wench. Not *that* kind, anyway. *Real* female pirates wore the same things as the male ones did..."

"Behave over there," called Danger from her place on the hearth, next to Remus. "Go on, Sirius, get to the twins."

"My lady's voice has spoken." Sirius bowed in Danger's direction. "Engaged to be married to Mr. Richard West and currently having a pleasant little discussion with him, we have Miss Jean White, formerly Hermione Granger-Lupin, always Neenie; sitting back to enjoy said pleasant little discussion is the lady's twin brother, Reynard White, formerly Draco Black, still our Fox; and beside him the lady of his own heart, Phoebe Moon, formerly Luna Lovegood, the once and future Starwing."

"My name will be good for the sort of thing you mean too, Hermione," said Luna, shaping a round object in front of her with her hands. "For the opposite reason from Neville's—his seems a little

silly so everyone will think it's real, and mine seems a little silly so everyone will think I picked it out, that I'm trying to use a fancy name and fancy dress to hide that I can't do what I'll say I can do." She smiled. "Except I really can do it after all."

"And last but not least," said Sirius with an air of relief. "Mr. John White and his lady wife Gertrude—" He frowned. "You're keeping that? After all the complaining you've done?"

"I get to keep the nickname too." Danger grinned. "Even if dropping the last name means it might be a little hard to explain, because nothing says I have to. I'll let everybody guess how I got it, and the only thing I'll ever tell them is that they're wrong."

"Fair enough. John and Gertrude White, formerly Remus and Danger Lupin." Sirius let the scroll roll back up. "And I do believe that's everyone."

"Everyone in this domain," Harry corrected. "Some of the neighbors need a mention as well."

"Do they?" Sirius frowned. "Why would they—"

Harry pointed towards the ceiling.

"Oh, right." Setting the scroll aside, Sirius shook his head. "Seemed pretty obvious to *me*," he muttered.

"Yes, but we see them face to face." Remus kissed Danger on the cheek and got to his feet, stretching. "It makes a difference. Just from a description on a page, it might be difficult to tell that Miss Eve Clay was once Lily Potter, or that Miss Suzie Rioghan began as Susan Pevensie, Queen Susan of Narnia."

"I have my suspicions about Lin as well," said Aletha with a faint smile. "But that's another story."

Sirius grinned. "Literally so. And then we have our newest neighbors—" He stopped, frowning. "How'd you get hold of them, anyway, Moony? Our Chronicler finished *Be Careful* a while back, but she—she?" he asked Hermione, who nodded. "She hasn't even started *What You Wish For* as far as I'm aware, and you were right in the middle of that."

"Special permission." Remus crossed the room to look out the front window. "I'll be interested to see how she handles my arrival when she does start Chronicling that one. It was... unceremonious." A small choking sound brought his head around. "And the peanut gallery may keep its comments to itself," he informed Danger, who had both hands over her mouth.

Ron snickered. "So what's this make for him, then?" he asked. "Three different worlds he's lived in? He started out in our ridge as Snape, then jumped to the *Be Careful* otherworld at the end of the tell, and now he's here, calling himself Russell Evans—yeah, that's three."

"And let's not forget, he borrowed that name from yet another version of himself," Ginny added. "From *The Point of No Return* ." She frowned. "But then why—"

"The real Russell Evans wouldn't have had enough in common with the Lily who became Miss Eve," said Luna with assurance. "His world became too different, too early, when Lily and Petunia's parents adopted him."

"I suppose that makes sense." Ginny nodded. "And Mrs. Evans is Cecilia Black from *Be Careful*. Later Cecilia Snape." She made a face. "That still sounds so strange to me."

"Not nearly as strange as their kid, the one they have now." Draco leaned back on the couch and propped his feet up on the low table in front of it. "Lucas Daniel Evans, age four. Formerly known as, and harboring something of a split personality of, Draco Malfoy. The particular Draco Malfoy who disguised himself as a Hufflepuff kid who looked like Tonks, got his world's Hermione to help him fix the Vanishing Cabinet in his sixth year, and then pitched a fit because she was angry that he'd lied to her."

"And he ran away through the Vanishing Cabinet when the Reality Cops invaded his world," Hermione took over from her twin. "Which took him not to Borgin and Burkes but to Outer Time, because we and the RC's were already softening the boundaries of the world and because he was so frightened that all he wanted was to get away from everything, to go somewhere that the RC's couldn't find him. But once he got to Outer Time, and started to understand how it worked, he realized that he hadn't exactly been acting on his own when he asked my counterpart to help him."

"Be fair." Harry held up a hand. "It wouldn't have happened if the possibility wasn't there in the ridge that Malfoy actually does admire Hermione and want to be her friend, but can't admit it even to himself. But in any case, it got exacerbated because you two," he pointed to Ron and Ginny, "had been placed in that world, and you knew what *these* two," the finger now indicated Draco and Hermione, "ought to be. The resonance of that knowledge along the Pride-bond started affecting the world, turning it into a bit of a spin, and the most susceptible person to those changes, because of all the other pressure he was under, was Malfoy."

"So he started thinking about Hermione while he was working on the Cabinet in the Room of Hidden Things," Meghan piped up. "And because it is still the Room of Requirement, and because the Pack-magic was working on her too, it eventually brought her to him. He disguised himself as Mal, and they actually did make friends. But their friendship started with a lie, and he never apologized for that." She grinned. "Not then or there, anyway."

"And he decided that clearly everything was our fault," said Neville, tweaking one of Meghan's braids. "Since it was the Pride-magic, and the Pack-bond, that got him 'requiring' Hermione to the point where the Room responded. So he found a spin of our particular tell that our Chronicler wasn't watching very carefully, and he recruited RC's—or did he make them?" He frowned. "I don't think I know how that works."

"It can be either." Luna brought her hands together gently in the air. "Some RC's are characters who gave up their individuality for a chance to 'fix the worlds'. The dark side of Legendbreakers. Others are magical, or scientific, constructs who only do what they're ordered to do. Rather like Inferi, only they were never alive to begin with."

"And he came barging in and grabbed us all, and started 'rehabilitating' us." Ron scowled. "Which is what started the whole thing off in the first place, and what happened to him with his world's Hermione was his own damn fault in any case!"

"No one has ever accused Draco Malfoy of being a particularly penetrating thinker," said Ginny. "Draco *Black*, on the other hand..."

"Nice recovery," said Draco appreciatively. "I may have to rethink leaving that bee in your bed."

Harry leaned around his fiancée to look at his brother. "Bee?" he inquired in the friendliest possible tone.

"I never said I'd *done* it, I said I was *thinking* about it!" Draco glowered at him. "Lay off the death glare, will you?"

"Visitors," Remus announced from the front window. "Best behavior, please."

"Or at least not worst," Danger added, joining her husband. "They are, after all, family. Of a sort."

"Not the sort I ever wanted," said Sirius under his breath. "More like the sort I ran away from..."

Aletha tweaked her husband's ear, getting a yelp from him. "We'll have to unmask the domain when they get here, won't we?" she asked. "Go to new names for everybody, speak in code if we're discussing Inner Times, and so on and so forth?"

"Well, that depends on a number of factors." Hermione sat up, dislodging Ron in the process. "Whether or not we're being Chronicled—which, yes, we are, I can feel it—but this Chronicle is only ever being published in one of the safe areas, so we could only get in trouble if we started talking about worlds whose Chroniclers don't allow anyone else to Chronicle spins or tells of the ridges they've seen. Which, I posted the list over there last week, everyone should have read it by now." She pointed to the scroll, with its dozen or so lines of neat handwriting, which adorned the wall beneath the wide selection of Pack photographs. "But, on the other hand, it's probably best if we start getting used to our new names as soon as we can, since they're going to be ours for a long time." She smiled. "Since one of the ways Outer Time is different from Inner Time is that in Outer Time, once you find the age you like best to be, you don't have to keep going."

"All in favor of swapping over to new names right away, then?" said Remus, looking back from his place by the door.

Slowly, by ones and twos, hands went up. Sirius, with a small sigh, was the last. "I'll miss being able to make those puns," he said. "Even if you did have me limited to one a year."

"Oh, don't worry." Danger winked at her brother. "I have it on good authority that our Chronicler will find some way to sneak it into any story we influence. Yours and mine both."

"Yes!" Patrick Black punched his fist towards the sky. "Victory is mine!"

Carrie sighed. "What *am* I going to do with this man?" she asked her children.

"Love him and hug him and love him some more?" Meghan suggested. "And feed him lots of tasty food and listen to his stories?"

"Deflate his head every once in a while," was Henry's contribution. "To keep him from floating away over the trees and scaring all the birds."

Neenie giggled. "I remember that!"

Fox pursed his lips and whistled a bird call, and it was to the sound of answering laughter that John and Danger White opened the door of their family's home to greet their guests, Eve Clay, Suzie Rioghan, and the Evans family, Russell, Cecilia, and dark-haired Luke, who was holding something carefully under his bright green winter jacket.

"She's my best Christmas present ever," he informed the room as his mother unzipped the coat for him. "Her name is Bastet."

A half-grown black kitten lifted her head from Luke's arms and narrowed her green eyes at the new room filled with strange people. Neenie frowned in concentration for a moment and shrank into her alternate form. *Hello*, she said cat-wise, thrusting her whiskers forward towards the newcomer. *Welcome to*— She broke off with a little gasp.

*Thank you*. Bastet purred for a moment, then began to wash a paw.

A paw which, like the rest of her, glowed to Neenie's Legendbreaker-trained eyes with the unmistakable gleam of a Chronicler.

*No, he doesn't know*, the cat who was not a cat said silently, continuing her washing. *None of them do, except you. Though your sister may suspect. We've always been close, she and I.*

*Why are you here?* Neenie leapt up to the back of the couch and curled her tail around her paws, hoping this would disguise how hard they were shaking. *Is there something wrong? Something we should know?*

*No, nothing wrong*. Bastet squirmed in Luke's arms, and he bent to set her on the floor, where she trotted over to look up at Neenie. *Several things right, in fact. And a request I have for you. But the true reason I've come...*

*Yes?* Neenie asked when Bastet was silent for a few moments.

*I wanted to apologize*. Bastet's tail lay flat against the floor, her whiskers and ears hanging limply. *It may not have been my doing that you and your family were put through so much pain, I only Chronicled it, but if I hadn't ever started that Chronicle all those years ago, perhaps it wouldn't have happened—it's nearly killed me a dozen times to write down the things I see, I'm so sorry that you've had to live through them—*

Neenie jumped down from the couch, resuming her human form midway there, so that it was as a brown-haired, blue-eyed young woman that she bent down to offer her hand to Bastet. "We have each other," she said as the cat sniffed her fingers. "And now we always will. Don't ever apologize for that."

*Well.* Bastet began to purr once more. *If you say so.* One green eye closed in an unmistakable wink. *Does that mean you consider your pattern good enough to be spun out to a ridge?*

"Absolutely," Neenie said with a trace of indignation, then blinked as the implications of this dawned on her. "You—you mean—"

*Check your bookshelves when you get a chance.* Bastet's purr intensified. *After the holidays, obviously. But yes, I have a number of different ridges I'd like you, and the Pack and Pride, to guide for me. Familiarize yourself with the world and its rules, find your closest counterparts in whatever stretch of Inner Time looks promising, then bring them together as best you see fit and let the fireworks begin. Do you think you can do that?*

"I think we would be honored," Neenie breathed. "Can you tell me anything else?"

*Bits and pieces, yes. The two I have in mind for you at the moment are located on the same world, but on different continents, at different stages of development. One is medieval-magical, the other a bit more contemporary. And of course I'm sure there'll be others.* Bastet wrinkled her eyes in a cat-smile. *There are always others.*

"And they'll be ours to watch over and protect," Neenie murmured to herself. "As long as we all shall live." She glanced up to see Luke enthralled by a game of invisible catch which Redwing and Lynx had begun, and into which Starwing, Captain, Fox, and Wolf had insinuated themselves. "What about him?" she asked, looking back at the Chronicler-cat. "What will his story be?"

*You'll have to tell me.* Bastet rose to her feet and stretched. *I look forward to finding out. Good luck, Neenie. Or should I say... She wagged one back paw. Break a leg?*

And a moment later, Luke Evans's cat bounded away into the depths of the Den, only a cat once more.

"Hunt's luck, Bastet," Neenie whispered. "Thank you for everything."

Getting to her feet, she went to join her family in their Christmas celebration.

---

Far away, a different young woman sat at a computer.

"You're welcome," she murmured aloud as she typed. "For what it's worth."

**The End**