

## A Secret Never Told Reflections

*All the mirrors in here are draped... I wonder why?*

She was babbling, and Hermione Granger-Lupin knew it. She ought to be thinking about where she had been taken, how she was going to escape, but that would come too close to the fear she was still fighting.

She'd been taken captive by the Death Eaters, and such things never ended well.

*At least I know they won't be able to torture me for any of my secrets. Not as long as I have a minute's warning that they're going to try.* Her hand rested against her breastbone for a moment, pressing into the small medallions which hung there. *But I might not get that minute, so why am I not using my blue jewel now?*

Possibly, she admitted to herself, because she was worried that stripping the information harmful to her own side of the war out of her memories, as the one remaining blue jewel on her Pack-pendants would do if she asked it to, might either harm her permanently or not work completely if she tried it in as terrified a state as she was currently in.

*Letha managed it in front of Voldemort himself, but Letha's old enough to be my mum.* Hermione sank to the floor on the far side of the double bed from the door and pulled her pendants out of her robes, finding the carving of the winged horse by feel, then moving along to the bearlike dog, the wolf, and the lion which shared the pendant with it. *She practically is, in any case, since she's been helping to raise me since before I was two...*

She leaned back against the wall, cupping her pendants in her hands. *That's a good idea. Stories, like a den-night. It will settle me down, make me feel safe, comfortable.* A slow breath, in through her nose, out through her mouth. *Though something about this room is doing that already.*

It made less than no sense, Hermione knew, for a Death Eater's private quarters to be bringing her a sense of security. Especially when she'd been thrust in here by one of the masked figures with a coarse laugh, and a comment that it was the "proper place for you, finally!" That could have only a few meanings, and none of them ought to have been comforting to her.

*But it is and it does, and I shouldn't look a gift hippogriff in the beak.*

Her own turn of phrase brought a small smile to her lips. The girl she might have been, the bookish but brave Muggleborn who liked nothing better than memorizing her textbooks, would have been unlikely to think such things, even after six or seven years of immersion in the wizarding world. Hermione as she was, though, had grown up in the full understanding of herself as a witch, residing in a household filled with witches and wizards, both juvenile and adult.

*My Pack. Moony and Danger, Padfoot and Letha, Wolf, Pearl, and...*

She stopped before completing the list. The person whose nickname would once have come there was dead.

"But that doesn't mean I stopped loving him," she whispered, raising her hand to her left cheek, where a small, vertical scar marked her skin. "Never stopped loving him."

*Fox. His face rose before her mental eyes, laughing as he had so loved to do, his white-blond and porcelain looks thrown into stark contrast against their black-haired brother and their dark-skinned sister. My twin. Play twin to start, blood twin later, after his crazy father decided I'd stolen his magic and he should have it back.*

Which brought her to the thought she'd been trying to avoid thinking, for there was only one Death Eater in whose quarters she could be considered to have any sort of "proper place", even accounting for their twisted ideas.

*Lucius Malfoy. Who needs a new heir, as his original one got rather badly corrupted by almost thirteen years living with the Pack. And he can't exactly go out and beget one, not after that little present Danger gave him at the end of my third year...*

The twists and turns of her life sometimes made her head hurt to think about, and she'd lived them. It ought to have been impossible for her older sister, married to a werewolf but not one herself, to infect a man with lycanthropy, thus making him unable to sire children. But then, it ought to have been equally impossible for the boy born Draco Malfoy, product of two of the purest and most traditional magical lines in the wizarding world, to end up as Draco Black, the wisecracking, music-loving captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

*They say the universe has a strange sense of humor. Hermione cast a brief glance upwards. Having met some of the people who run this section of it, I can concur.*

Still, taken step by step, her life made perfect sense. It was only when one tried to leap directly from her Pack's beginnings before her second birthday to this moment, which would surely be an ending for someone, that the difficulties arose. For one thing, the thought of Draco had nearly made her throat close in grief. Even four months later, the pain of his loss still lingered.

*But the way Malfoy looked at it, if he couldn't have Draco, nobody could. So when he finally got his chance to try to convince his son he ought to join up with the Death Eaters, and failed miserably—as anybody'd think he'd have known he would, he's only been running his head into this same brick wall since we were eleven, but I suppose it's one of those pureblood things never to*

*admit when you're beaten—*

The sound of the door unlocking itself sent her thoughts flying for cover. A hasty shove got her to her feet just in time.

*At least Draco was able to strike one blow for our side before Malfoy killed him. He managed, and don't I just wish I knew how, to drag Malfoy's magic out of him. Make him a Squib. Moony said it probably wouldn't be permanent, but oh, how I wish it were—*

The door swung open to reveal the person, or rather people, she'd expected to see.

*Or perhaps I don't. Because what he decided to do about it made it a thousand times worse. Hermione bared her teeth briefly at the creature which had once been one of her dearest friends. He must have seen into Draco's mind a little, just enough to see that vision about who was supposed to meet with him at Draco's grave, and he went there to fulfill it, and then used the potion on her that she and Draco had intended that she use on him—*

"So," said Lucius Malfoy, stepping into his quarters and casting the snowy owl from his wrist. She soared over Hermione's head, turned deftly on a wingtip, and landed at the foot of the bed as a young woman with long, dark-blond hair falling across her black-cloaked shoulders. "Here you are."

"Yes, here I am." Hermione bit the words off sharply, trying her hardest not to look at Luna Lovegood. It would only hurt her, to see the remnants of what had once been a clever (if unconventional) mind in her friend's soft blue-gray eyes. "And what will you do with me, now that you have me? Use the Imprimatus Potion on me, like you did on poor Starwing? Erase my human mind, fixate me on you, and leave me with just my Animagus instincts and my magic? Have two slave girls following you around to do your bidding, instead of just one?"

"Your 'poor Starwing', my dear Hermione, received only what she had planned to give me." Malfoy hooked the door shut with his black-and-silver cane, rattling the knob to be sure the latch had engaged, then turned back to her. "A rare case of perfect justice. Though I suppose in your current situation, you would prefer a bit of vengeance, and perhaps a touch of salvation."

About to snap back, Hermione froze in place.

"Sadly, however much of a warrior your brother Harry may have flowered into, or your young sister Meghan, Sirius Black's daughter—you do still call her Pearl, I believe?—they are unlikely even to begin an expedition to retrieve you." Malfoy's eyes, gleaming gray in the dim light of the room, flashed with what seemed like amusement. "Since they are surely not so star-crossed, or so moon-mazed, as to try to dig a fox out of his earth."

"How *dare* you." Hermione set her feet and raised her hands, crooking her fingers like claws, even as her emotions spun through a dizzying dance of uncertainty.

"I dare many things," Malfoy said softly. "Such as asking you to recite for me a bit of verse. Six

lines, Neenie, that's all—"

"You may *not* call me that," Hermione snapped, but the denial lacked force, lacked the vigor and hatred she had thought to bring to it. It sounded more like the weary protestations she had put up when she was eleven and twelve, when she had been embarrassed by her "baby name", until finally a few months before she was thirteen she had given one person permission to use it—

Appalled, she shook herself out of her momentary memory trance. "What six lines were you thinking of?" she asked, trying for a tone of equal hauteur to Malfoy's own. "I know a great many verses, some better than others."

"I think you know the ones I mean." Malfoy nodded to Luna, who drew her wand and Summoned a chair from the far corner of the room for him, then one for Hermione and a third for herself. "The ones regarding a certain young man which your sister once heard in a dream, on the day upon which you first awakened Sirius Black with a request which I will not embarrass you by repeating." He smirked. "Or do your Pack's den-nights sanitize that portion of the tale?"

Hermione's face flamed, and she hissed deep in her throat, trying to mask the impossible idea which had sprouted in her mind with Malfoy's first few sentences and was taking firmer root every second. *He knows things he should have no way to know, he uses all the terms as easily as I would, and now he's teasing me, not horrid cruel teasing but the sort of thing that makes me want to shout for Danger to come and throw a fireball at him, or Padfoot to transform and chase him around the Den a few times—*

"I'll trade you," she said, sitting down. "Six lines of verse for the answer to one question."

"That seems fair," Malfoy said slowly, waiting for Luna to settle into her chair before he took his own seat. "But of course I reserve the right to refuse an answer, should it be something that little girls have no reason to know."

*Just because I'm not of age for another week—*

Hermione caught herself before she could voice this indignant sentiment aloud, but now, now she was almost certain. There remained only one test.

"My question is a simple one," she said, folding her hands in her lap and looking her captor directly in the eye. "Are you real?"

Two breaths caught, ever so slightly. Hermione squeezed her fingers together and waited.

"As real," the man across from her said with deliberation, "as you are."

A smile burst forth on Hermione's face, and this time she didn't try to stop it. Instead she began to recite, calling up her memory of one of the earliest of Danger's prophetic dreams.

"Eyes of ashes, hair of sun,  
"A heart with paces never run,

"Salvation, justice, vengeance are  
"When flower gives the stars to star.  
"What warrior, earth, and pearl begin,  
"The moon's gray beams shall finally win."

Looking over towards Luna, she grinned even more broadly to see her friend's lips moving in time with her own words, to see sense and joy in her eyes. "I suppose blue-gray didn't scan properly," she said. "And have you considered what people are likely to do to you for scaring them like this?"

"Would they have preferred things actually happen the way we all believed they would?" The man who still had the face of Lucius Malfoy, but had dropped the vast majority of his mannerisms, leaned back comfortably in his chair. "Not to mention the lives we've saved, being where we are. And I think your suggestion is a good one, Neenie—it would make sense for Lucius to want his only blood heir under as complete of control as possible, and the Imprimatus wouldn't harm your ability to bear children, only to think about it." A wicked grin erased the last semblance of proper Death Eater from his features. "We'd better hope Wolf gets that last Horcrux pretty quick, though, or Redwing might manage to kill me before we can explain what's really going on!"

Hermione laughed aloud and bounded across the bed as Neenie the calico cat, landing neatly in the lap of her supposed captor. His true identity made sense of everything, from her comfort in this room to the draping of the mirrors.

*Because why would he want to see himself wearing his father's face?*

Rearing up, she pressed the side of her jaw against a pale-skinned, pointed chin. **My hand in yours,** she sent across the blood-link between them. **Or perhaps I should say paw.**

Her brother snickered and cupped his hand around the back of her head, rubbing gently at the base of her ears. **My wand with yours. For all the good it does me just now. We only reversed the names on the magic-stealing, it really did happen, and it's started to come back but it's being very slow about it—**

**Which is why you can have some of mine, to build on,** Hermione interrupted. **My life for yours.** She pulled back to look into his eyes, planting a paw on his collarbone. **You meant it more than anyone ever has. Don't think we'll forget that.**

**I never did.** Draco smiled at her, the tender look shining through the tears in his eyes rendering his disguise no more than a peek into the future Hermione could now see stretching before them once again. **Now and always.**

Across the room, Luna busied herself with stitching a ribbon onto her cloak, humming under her breath.

*Someday we'll find it,  
The Rainbow Connection,  
The lovers, the dreamers, and me...*



## **A Secret Never Told If You're Not Good...**

Persis Blishwick and Thackery Runcorn were the very model of a modern pureblood family. There was their marriage, carefully arranged after extensive searches through both family trees to ensure that there were no nasty little secrets lurking, such as mad cousins, aunts who'd married Muggleborns, or (heaven help us) Squib uncles. There were their two darling daughters: Calanthia, born in April of what would have been Persis's seventh year at Hogwarts had she not given up her education for the far more important task of replenishing the pureblood race in Britain, and Lucasta, born precisely ten months later, around the time "all that unpleasantness" (as those purebloods lucky enough to remain unincarcerated referred to the Second War with Voldemort) had been heating up badly.

And finally, and most important of all, there was their son. Kenelm Thackery Runcorn, eleven months younger than his middle sister, was three months too young to be considered a wartime baby, though certainly he'd been conceived during the war. Still, Harry Potter's stunning victory over the Dark Lord (as certain unincarcerated purebloods still referred to Lord Voldemort, though *very* privately, as they preferred remaining unincarcerated) on Halloween 1997 had, Persis occasionally admitted to herself, created a more stable environment in which to raise children. It would, of course, have been better had the battle tipped the other way, but even with the assistance of Lacey, the house-elf who'd been Persis's wedding gift from her mother, three babies in three years made for quite a lot of work.

Especially when one of them was...

But here Persis always stopped, took a deep breath, and reminded herself that she had no proof. Her son was still very young. True, Calanthia's fits of temper had started putting fires out when she was two, and Lucasta had been changing the colors of her dolls' dresses by the time she was three, but that only meant that her daughters were supremely talented. Just because Kenelm would soon be six and still hadn't so much as called a toy to him across the floor or made a water glass explode at dinner, it didn't mean he was...*that*.

Even to herself, she didn't dare use the word.

Besides, Persis always reminded herself after regaining her mental composure, her darling Thackery had their son well in hand. He would make a man of Kenelm early, teach him what was to be expected of a proper pureblood wizard.

So well-trained in the ways of her world was she that she did not even allow herself to think about what might become of her child, were he other than his father expected him to be.

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"Let us try again," said Father, his deep voice holding the tautness of suppressed anger. "Again, Kenelm."

The boy sighed, but got to his feet and looked at the small white ball his father had placed on top of the freestanding wardrobe across the room. "Come here," he said to it, holding out his hand, trying to put his desire into his voice, as he heard his sisters do when they absently called their books or teacups or quill pens to them, as Lacey did when she made her cleaning supplies follow her down the corridor each day. "Come here now."

The ball did not move.

"You are not concentrating," said Father sharply. "You must concentrate, Kenelm, concentrate all your focus, all your magic—"

"I don't have magic!"

Even as he shouted the words, Kenelm knew they were a mistake, knew he should never have said them, never even have thought them. Of course he had magic. He was the son of a pureblood house and line, the long-awaited heir to the name of Runcorn, his family's only hope for the future. There was no conceivable way in which he could not have magic.

*Except that I don't. I never did. I don't even know what magic is supposed to feel like. Callie says hers feels like a hot fire burning inside her, and Cassie talks about the way hers squirms and wiggles—I don't want things squirming or burning inside me. It sounds like it would hurt.*

*But I don't want Father to be angry with me either. And that's already happening. He risked a glance up at his father's darkly good-looking face and had to fight back another wince. And it does hurt when Father's angry with me...*

"I had thought, Kenelm," Father said in his coldest, harshest tones, "that you were past the age of senseless lies. It seems that I was mistaken. Very well, then." A wave of his wand, and the door of the wardrobe sprang open. "Inside with you."

Kenelm swallowed hard. More words tried to rise up and get out of his mouth, words like *I'm sorry, Father*, like *I'll try harder*, like *Please, I don't want to*, but he knew none of them would do any good, not when Father spoke like that. Slowly, jerkily, he crossed the floor and approached the wardrobe.

He wanted, very much, to cry, but that would only get him slapped before Father closed the door on him. Tears were for witches and Muggles—a pureblood wizard six years old, or nearly so, should be brave enough to face anything—



*But I'm not a wizard. I can't be. I don't have any magic.*

He stopped dead, five feet from his father.

*I don't know what I am, but I'm not a wizard. And I don't want to go in there.*

"Kenelm!" Father snapped. "Obey me at once!"

Kenelm swallowed again, screwed up the courage Father was always telling him he ought to have, and opened his mouth once more.

"No," he said.

Father jerked like someone had hit him with a spell from behind. Kenelm giggled a little before he could stop himself.

An instant later, he knew that he had never really seen his father angry before.

"You dare," Father snarled into his face, holding him off the floor by the front of his robes. "You *dare!* Ungrateful brat—after all I've done, all I've sacrificed—"

The first slap hurt more sharply than Kenelm was used to, and left a dribble of warm wetness down his cheek in its wake. Father's seal ring must have turned inward on his finger, he noted in some far-off, recording corner of his mind. The second, backhanded blow felt the same as ever, but the third landed just above his ear, snapping his head to one side, and the world took on a distinctly hazy tone. He barely even registered it when Father released his robes—the fall towards the floor seemed to happen in slow motion—

Father's hand caught his left wrist, and a thin, brittle *snap* reverberated up his arm. He would have screamed, but his voice was frozen with the bright, sharp shock of the pain—he'd thought he knew what it was like to hurt, but nothing, *nothing* had ever hurt like this—

The impact with the floor of the wardrobe knocked the wind out of him, and he stared up at his father, trying to get his breath back, blinking through the red and white mists covering his eyes.

"You will stay here," Father said with great precision, "until such time as you can release yourself. By magic, Kenelm, the proper magic of a son of the Runcorns. And if you cannot..." A cold smile crossed his face. "If you cannot, then you are no son of mine."

The door slammed. A moment later, Kenelm heard the lock shoot home.

*Home.*

The word started a memory playing in his mind, which he latched onto gladly. Anywhere, anytime, had to be better than here and now.

"Master Kenelm!" The voice was Lacey's, squeaky and alarmed, and he was—*how old? Little, too*

*little to know I shouldn't hide at bedtime. Maybe three, or not even that.* "Master Kenelm, you must be coming home now! It is getting late, your father is wanting you to go to bed!"

Little Kenelm giggled into the sleeve of his robes and snuggled further down into his hiding place under the big bush in the garden. If Lacey couldn't find him, she couldn't make him go to bed. Maybe he would be able to stay out here all night—that would be an adventure, like Marcus had in the storybooks Callie would sometimes read to him if she was in a good mood—

"Master Kenelm, if you is not coming home right now..." Lacey's voice trailed off. "Master Kenelm, I is not wanting to scare you," she said in a quieter tone. "But Mistress is saying just the other day that the Clans is looking for new little boys and girls, and they is liking best to steal the ones who is not coming home when they is called."

Little Kenelm squeaked and scrambled out of his bush. "Here I am, Lacey!" he shouted. "Here I am!"

*I was afraid of the Clans coming to steal me away if I wasn't good.* Big Kenelm, or as big as he was ever going to be, anyway, curled up around his hurt arm and shut his eyes to keep from seeing the darkness and tried to remember through the pain and the lightheadedness washing through him. *But that was just baby stuff. The Clans don't steal children, Cassie says, and she ought to know...*

Cassie shook her head hard, her golden curls bouncing. "Nuh-uh, not ever," she said with certainty. "Mr. Fox says that's just a silly story somebody made up, and sometimes he likes to play a joke and pretend it's true, but everybody knows it isn't really. It's usually his friends' kids that he's stealing, anyway, or somebody who *asked* him to steal their kid for a little while, but he always sends them home again after he's done."

"Why?" Kenelm asked his sister, wide-eyed.

"Why do people ask him to steal their kids?" Cassie frowned. "I don't really know. He said something about learning manners, but I didn't understand it too well. Maybe I'll ask him when I see him again next week." She picked up the long wooden tube beside her and arranged her fingers along the holes, putting it to her mouth.

*Music, Kenelm remembered as if from a long way away. The Clans like music, they all know how to make it. And they like colorful things and playing games, and they laugh a lot. And they tell stories, and they all have pets, and they cook tasty food—Cassie always says how good everything smells when she goes for her lessons, and sometimes she brings home treats and lets me have a little bit—*

He wanted to cry, but he knew the shaking would only hurt his arm worse. Instead he leaned back against the wall of the wardrobe, breathing in and out as quietly as he could, and tried not to think about food. It was almost dinnertime by now, and he'd known all morning that Father wanted to see him immediately after lunch, so he hadn't been able to swallow very much past the scared lump in his throat.

"I wish it was true," he whispered into the uncaring darkness around him. "I wish it was true, and that I never came home that night. I wish..." He had to stop, both for an extra-large wave of sick dizziness and for the enormity of the desire. "I wish the Clans *had* stolen me."

*Because maybe they'd want me. Maybe they wouldn't think I was a freak. Maybe they wouldn't hit me and take away my dinner and make me sit in the dark for hours and hours. Or for always.*

A little sad smile came to his face.

*Or maybe even the Clans wouldn't want a boy who doesn't have magic.*

*I know nobody else does.*

The tears were going to come very soon now, he couldn't stop them much longer, and after the tears ran dry the fear would come, the silent fear that lived in the darkness and wanted him to be a part of it. It would slip inside him with his every breath and press on his eyes whenever he opened them and run through his veins like his blood, the pure blood that his father was so proud of, but that hadn't brought him magic like it should have done. No matter how much he wanted the lock on the wardrobe to slide back, the door to swing open, it never would, and he was going to be here, in the dark, with the fear, alone, forever, until he drowned in it and became a part of it and went out looking for other little boys like he had once been to drown them too—

A rasping noise broke off his thoughts, and he blinked his eyes hard, raising his good hand to wipe them, because it was impossible but it was happening—the lock had just snapped back, the door was opening wide—

*But I know I don't have magic—*

The mystery solved itself as a man's dark figure was outlined against the painfully bright light of Kenelm's bedroom beyond the door. Kenelm fought back a whimper of renewed fear and instead tried to turn his body so that Father would catch his good arm instead of the one that hurt so terribly to drag him out again—Father must have changed his mind, maybe Mother had talked to him, she didn't usually concern herself with Kenelm, a boy's place was with his father, but once or twice within his memory she'd spoken up—

The man outside the wardrobe door said two words in a low tone of voice that was decidedly not Father's and drew a wand from within his robes, his *green* robes, and Father always wore black—the wand which was now coming down to point at Kenelm was too long, too graceful, to be Father's, and the man himself was too slender and much too fair, the hair shining sleekly in the light was so blond it was almost silver—*but who—*

The thought was lost in astonishment as a spell shot forth from the man's wand and outlined Kenelm in a momentary wash of blue—and his arm, his head, his chest and stomach, everything that had been hurting *stopped*, and the relief was so great that the tears he'd been holding back broke free, welling up out of him and making him shake with silent sobs—

A bright flash startled him, and he looked past the man to see a woman with wide eyes and a long fall of dirty-blond hair lowering a camera. His sister Cassie was pressed against the woman's side, staring at him in horror, which he could see because the man was down on one knee now, reaching into the wardrobe, gathering him up into strong arms, holding him close and turning to sit down on a chair which hadn't been there before—

"Let's get a close-up on the arm, love," said the man, his voice vibrating through the chest against which Kenelm was being held. "Kenelm—am I saying that right?" His grip shifted until Kenelm could see his pointed, clever face and a pair of silvery eyes, filled with concern and looking at him, looking right *at* him, not past him or over him at all. "Kenelm, we need to get some pictures of the way you're hurt, just to make sure nobody can say we're lying later on. As soon as we've got them, we're going to take you out of here. You, and Cassie, and probably your other sister too—what is it you call her, Cass?"

"Callie," Cassie volunteered from her few steps back, the hand which wasn't shoved up against her mouth fisted tightly in her robes. "Mr. Fox, I didn't *know*, really I didn't, but I was so scared when I saw Father looking like that—"

"You've got nothing to apologize for," the man interrupted, gently pulling back the sleeve of Kenelm's robes to show the place where his arm was hurt—was *broken*, Kenelm realized as he saw the new bend in the middle of his forearm, but the man's spell had stopped the hurting—

*I know who he is now.* The thought came dreamily to him, cushioned by the unusual lack of pain, punctuated by the flashes of the camera and the voices all around him. *He's Cassie's teacher, the one who gives her lessons on her recorder. Mr. Fox, that's what she called him, what she says all his students call him.*

*He comes from the Clans.*

The tears were ebbing now, slowing down enough that Kenelm was able to blot his face with the sleeve over his good arm, able to catch his breath and even smile a little at the things that were happening to him, because it felt like a story from one of Callie's books or made up out of his own head except that it was really and truly true. He'd shouted and defied his father, refused to do what he was told, and just like Lacey had always said would happen if he wasn't good, the Clans had come to steal him away.

*Or would that be Clan, if there's only one of him? But no, the woman with the camera came here with him, she's probably his wife, Cassie talks about her sometimes but I can't remember what she's called—and I know he has more family than that, brothers and sisters and cousins and things, it's what "clan" means, a great big load of people who're all related to each other, like the family trees I always see Mother looking at with her friends—*

The reason Mother looked at those family trees suddenly came back to Kenelm with terrible force, and he shivered, curling in on himself, because there was something Mr. Fox didn't know, something Cassie couldn't have told him, and when he found out, all the good things that were happening would go away, everything would go back to the way it had been, because even the

Clans wouldn't bother with a boy who—

"There, that should do it," said Mr. Fox, and his wand swirled around Kenelm's hurt arm. Kenelm swallowed as he felt the magic twisting and pushing the broken bits back into place, because even though it didn't hurt, it still felt very strange. Besides, it made him think of the thing he didn't want to say.

*But I have to. He'll only get angry if he thinks I lied.*

His imagination-stories about the Clans rose up in his mind again, tempting him all the more now that he could feel a man's strong hands holding him safe instead of hurting him, could see the woman across the room cuddling Cassie against her with one arm and giving Callie a handkerchief with the other, but he pushed them away. *I can't have you*, he told them. *You're not for someone like me. Even if I did get you for a little while, they'd find out the truth as soon as I had to do anything with magic, and then they'd send me back to Mother and Father—*

The thought of what would surely be waiting for him at that homecoming stole Kenelm's breath and made him shiver again, harder this time. Mr. Fox looked down with a worried expression. "I'm sorry, did I hurt you?" he said, his wand now sheathing Kenelm's arm in a stiff white sleeve. "Was there somewhere I missed?"

Kenelm shook his head, trying not to look at the wardrobe, trying not to think about how much worse it would be in the darkness this time, with all the new things he'd discovered to want. "It doesn't hurt now," he said. "Thank you. But..." The words made a lump in his throat as solid and painful as the one which had stopped him eating lunch. He squeezed his good hand tight and forced them out anyway. "I don't have magic."

Mr. Fox nodded gravely. "I see," he said in a considering tone. "Is that why your father got so angry with you? Because he wanted you to show him magic, and you didn't?"

"More because I shouted at him," Kenelm admitted. "And said no to him. And then laughed when he looked surprised."

"I see," Mr. Fox said again, but there was a little smile on his face now. "Well, in that case, there's only one place for a young man like you. Love, do you think you could get in touch with—"

"She says come right over," the woman interrupted, holding up a small, silvery object, from the top of which flickered a green flame until she shut a lid over it with a decisive click. "Rory and Rosie are having their naps, so she's free for the next hour or so."

"One of these days, do you think you could let me finish my sentences before you start answering me, O great Seer?" Mr. Fox asked, but he was laughing through his words, laughing as he stood up, still holding Kenelm tight in his arms, and started walking towards—

*Not* the wardrobe, but the door of the room, the door into the rest of the house—the woman was already out the door and halfway down the corridor, Callie and Cassie holding onto her hands on

either side—

"As it happens, we don't care much about magic where we come from," Mr. Fox murmured, his voice sinking into Kenelm's ears but not meaning anything, not yet, not when what it was saying was so impossible. "At least, not the way you seem to think we do. We care about making sure people use their magic, whatever they have of it, in a good way and not a bad one. And one of the ways that's the most bad, whether you're talking about using magic or anything else, is to hurt a boy like you. To punish him, over and over again, for something he can't help." He looked down and smiled, really-and-truly looking *at* Kenelm once again. "A boy like you is one of the reasons the Clans exist, Kenelm. And because of that, we make it our business to help all the boys and girls like you that we can find."

*A boy like me—they don't care about magic—and Father is the one who was bad—*

The ideas were too big to think about all at once. Kenelm thought they might be too big to think about at all. They were certainly very, very different from everything he had ever heard or thought or believed up until this moment. But he closed his eyes and tried anyway, and let the back of his mind enjoy the unfamiliar sensations of being held, of being carried through a rush of cool autumn air (which was rather like he'd always imagined flying), of hearing adults' voices talk over him, about him, but without anger, without shame, without anything he was used to hearing from his parents.

*My parents. The thought sent a tiny spiral of fear through his stomach, even now. Father might not mind losing me so much, but Mother will be furious when she finds out Callie and Cassie are gone—is Mr. Fox going to get in trouble? Because Callie and Cassie are proper witches and nobody hurt them, will somebody say they have to go back home? And maybe will Father hurt them because he's angry with me?*

A ripple of warmth, then one of cool, ran up his hurt arm, and the stiff sleeve on it split apart and fell away, vanishing on its way to the floor. A wand tip traced a line along his face, making his skin itch for a moment in its wake. He twitched once at the all-over tickle of a Cleaning Charm, but ignored it in favor of his own thoughts.

*I don't want Callie or Cassie to get hurt because of me. I don't want anybody to get hurt because of me. But I don't want to get hurt again either, or go back in the dark, or keep trying and trying to have magic when I don't. Why can't there be a way for everybody to be happy?*

He was dressed in soft pajamas now instead of his robes. Someone must have taken the not-hurting spell off him, because his stomach had the ache deep down in it that meant he'd missed a meal, but there was a covered cup hovering near his face with a straw in it. He tried reaching out for it and felt like cheering when both his hands moved the way he wanted them to.

Above and beside him, someone laughed, and his chair *shifted*—

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," said the voice that went with the laugh, and a woman about his mother's age smiled at him. He was on her lap, Kenelm discovered, both of them sitting

in a big soft armchair upholstered in a warm coral pink, in a room painted mostly gold but with one wall blue. The woman wore robes the same color as the different wall and had soft blonde hair cut short around her face, and he couldn't quite decide what color her eyes were, blue or gray or even green, but they were doing the same thing Mr. Fox's eyes had done, looking at him and not just seeing him but noticing him, paying attention to him.

He wasn't sure yet how he felt about that.

"You can call me Ms. Crystal," the woman went on. "Technically, I suppose it ought to be Mrs. Weasley, but there are so many of us around by now that we tend to go by our first names instead. And you're Kenelm, is that right? Kenelm Runcorn?"

"Mm-hmm." Kenelm sucked on the straw and got a mouthful of apple juice. He knew the name Weasley. His father liked to put it together with some very rude words on days when things hadn't gone right for him at work. But there was something else about the Weasleys, something important he was forgetting...

He swallowed quickly as it came to him. He'd heard his mother and her friends talking over tea one afternoon not too long ago.

"Breeding us into extinction, these *Clans*," Mother said bitterly in his memories, "and we the only ones with enough sense to try for more than one child apiece! Not that it's anything new. Look at the way all the best families were in denial for so many years, fussing about keeping their lines clear, while the Weasleys, blood-traitors or not, at least had the right idea—not that it's any help now, they've thrown in with the Clans, core, grip, and wand-shaft..."

Kenelm had another sip of the juice and glanced from the corner of his eye at Ms. Crystal. She was looking into the distance, humming a song to herself, nothing he knew, but then, he didn't know a lot of songs.

*But if she's from the Clans, then she would. She does.*

*Maybe she'd teach me.*

"You have two sisters, I think they told me?" Ms. Crystal said into the quiet, breaking off her song. "Older, or younger?"

"Older. I'm the youngest one." *The baby. The tag-along. The "go away, Kenelm, we don't want you." So I started making my imagination-pictures, because they don't ever not want me...*

"You'll have to meet my twins, once they're awake. *Girl* twins, and didn't that just rock my husband's world three years ago next month, and his whole family, too." Ms. Crystal laughed. "But Weasleys *always* have boys," she mimicked a man's stunned voice. "Well, darling, surprises are what you're going to get when you go and marry a Muggle."

Kenelm almost dropped his cup.

*She's—she's a—*

*But she's just joking, she has to be. She can't be a Muggle. She's nice. All the stories say Muggles are stupid and nasty and hate wizards—*

*And what do all the stories say about the Clans?* whispered another part of his mind. *They were wrong once. Couldn't they be wrong twice?*

*Besides, a Muggle is just somebody who can't do magic.*

*Maybe I do know the name for what I am after all...*

"Didn't know, did you?" Ms. Crystal put one of her hands around his, steadying his shaking grip. "I don't bite, I promise. The girls might, but only if you try to get between them while they're fighting. Something for you to remember, since you're going to be stopping with us until things get settled. Unless..." She held up a finger of her free hand. "Unless you'd rather somewhere else." Her eyes seemed to have settled on blue for the time being, and were looking into his as intently as if he were another grownup. "If you don't want to stop here, Kenelm, if you'd rather be with a family that's all magic, just say so." She smiled a little. "But we thought you might want to meet somebody who could tell you it is possible to live in this crazy, mixed-up world without any magic of your own."

Kenelm opened his mouth, not sure even as he started to speak what he was about to say—

"What're their names?"

"My girls?" Ms. Crystal made an odd face, as though she weren't sure whether she wanted to grin or grimace. "Well, you have to understand. Their father and I made a deal when I found out they were twins. I'd get to pick the first name for one and the middle name for the other, and he'd get the opposite choice. And what did we end up with? Aurora Hesperia and Eglantine Rose Weasley." She sighed and shook her head, laughing under her breath. "But everyone calls them Rory and Rosie, so I suppose it all worked out in..." In the middle of her sentence, she stopped, as though a thought had just come to her. "Does anyone ever call you Ken? Just Ken?"

"No." Kenelm considered it. "Not yet," he added daringly, and Ms. Crystal laughed again.

He liked the way she laughed, and the warm bright colors all around him in the room, and the idea of being a big brother for once instead of a little one. Especially he liked the idea of girls called Rory and Rosie, girls who sometimes fought and sometimes bit but who might also sometimes like to sit still and listen to him read a story to them (or, daring thought, listen to him *tell* a story, one of his own from his imagination-pictures in his head). It would be nice to see his own sisters sometimes, especially Cassie, but it would also be nice to know that they were going someplace else at the end of the night.

*And I don't ever have to see Father at all.*



His mind made up, Ken settled his weight more comfortably onto Ms. Crystal's lap and took another drink of his juice. "Do you have animals?" he asked.

"You mean other than the wild twins?" Ms. Crystal made a roaring face, and Ken had to giggle a little at it. "Yes, we have a dog and two cats. The dog is five times bigger than the cats put together, and still it's the cats who manage to run the household. Don't ask me how that works, I don't understand it myself..."

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Late that evening, Crystal looked up from the pile of sleeping children and creatures by the fireplace as her red-haired husband stepped through the front door. "Luck?" she mouthed to him.

With his usual careful neatness, her husband removed his cloak and hung it in its proper place beside hers, then pointed towards them and the twins' cloaks, hung low on the wall where the girls could reach them. Crystal frowned. *Why does he want me to look at—*

Her eyes widened in glee.

With a precise swirl of a wand, a fifth coathook, neatly splitting the difference between adult and three-year-old, had sprouted on the Weasleys' wall.

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Persis Runcorn sat alone in her boudoir. Except for Lacey, she was alone in the house.

It was a state of affairs she thought was likely to continue for quite some time.

"Consider yourself lucky that you're not being arrested along with your husband, Mrs. Runcorn," Casewitch Anne Davies of Wizarding Family Services had informed her, arms crossed over her slender chest. "The physical injuries to your son are bad enough, but what has us quite a bit more alarmed is that he apparently expected to be immediately abandoned when he revealed that he has no personal magic. We've matched him with a foster family who are...well-suited to help him adjust to his circumstances, and to teach him about the new adaptations being developed every day to help him lead a normal life." Her eyes were cold and hard. "Once he's settled in, if *he* decides that he wants to see you, you may be permitted visits."

"And my daughters?"

"Lucasta is remaining, for the time being, with her music teacher and his wife, in his family's home." A raised eyebrow warned Persis that any outcry against said music teacher would be futile, which she'd already known. He was, after all, related to the Minister of Magic, in a complicated, Clan sort of way. "And my brother and sister-in-law have volunteered to host Calanthia."

"Your—" Persis cut herself off, but she was sure her color was already rising. She remembered Davies's sister-in-law quite well from Hogwarts.

*We dueled at one point in my final year, and her fifth. After I had pointed out how she was*

*shaming our House by choosing a partner like Davies, and she responded that the only way I could get a man was to "pay" him. As though a dowry were anything of the sort!*

But old injuries and slights aside, she had to face facts. Thackery had been arrested, and current wizarding law, to say nothing of public opinion, did not look kindly on one who harmed a child, so she was unlikely to see him again for quite a long time. Her daughters might be retrievable, once she had reestablished some form of domestic stability, but for that she would need money, and the same dowry over which she had once dueled with the elder of the Moon sisters was long since spent. And even if she could find work, even if Calanthia and Lucasta eventually returned home to her...

*I seldom saw my son after he grew from an infant to a toddling child. It was more proper, more fitting, for his father to have charge of him. It was the right thing to do, what was best for everyone, the way purebloods have always done things.*

*How many other children, I wonder, over the centuries, have suffered as my Kenelm suffered today, for the sake of " what was best for everyone" ?*

*And for how many of them did a rescue never come?*

Laying her head down on her dressing table, she wept for what she had lost, and what she had never had to begin with.

## **A Secret Never Told Among the Clans**

Harry Potter glared at the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, over the top of which a shock of ginger hair could be seen, before turning back to the stove to turn the bacon he was cooking. "It was supposed to be a *joke*," he said, flipping the slices with his bare fingers. "Har har, there's getting to be a lot of us, we really fill things up when we all get together, it's like a gathering of the clans. Hey, why don't we call ourselves that? Easier than saying the Pack, and the Pride, and the Weasleys—the rest of the Weasleys—and the second Pride, the Jordans and the Davieses and the Thomases and the Pritchards, and, and, and..."

Shaking the excess grease off his hand, he reached for a knife and started slicing the cold potatoes which sat on a cutting board beside the stove, still talking. "Next thing you know, everyone's using it, it's showing up in the newspaper, pureblood parents are using it to scare their kids off to bed—people are asking me how they can join the Clans, what the rules are, whether they have to live the same way we do or if they can change things around—what are you asking me for? I don't know any more than you! It was a *joke*!"

A discreet snicker from the seat beside that of the man reading the newspaper made him change the direction of his eyes slightly. "What's so funny?" he demanded of his sister, who looked up from the nursing baby in her arms to return his glower with equanimity. "And if you say 'But you *said* it was a joke...'"

"I wasn't going to." Hermione Weasley adjusted her second son's position slightly. "What I was going to say is that this all sounds very familiar." She smiled. "Only last time, the word was 'Pack'. And after that, 'Pride'."

"And look where that ended us up," said Ginny Potter, motioning to the breakfast table before she got up to replenish the supply of toast. "Anyone need more juice?"

"Me," chorused the trio of redheads along the table's other side, with Esther Weasley throwing in a last-minute "Please!" and elbowing her ten-minutes-older brother David, who stuck out his tongue at her. Their cousin Nadia ignored the ensuing bickering with the queenly supremacy that only being five to the twins' three-and-three-quarters could bestow, instead picking up her little brother's cup and shaking it.

"Brian needs more too, Mummy," she said, turning her brilliant smile and the bright green eyes she'd inherited from her father on Ginny. "Please?"

"Yes, more juice all around. If you two *stop it this instant* ." Ginny's mother voice, half-inherited, half-learned, sent the twins shooting back into their seats with their hands in their laps, and had Ron shivering as he folded up the newspaper and set it aside in favor of the bacon Harry was now delivering to the table.

"I swear, Gin, every time you do that, I'm right back at the Burrow again," he said, helping himself to three slices, then waggling the tongs at Hermione, who held up two fingers with the hand not supporting little Luke. "Listening to Mum yell at..." He trailed off as he set the bacon on Hermione's plate. "Never really going to be over it, are we?" he asked conversationally. "Used to it, some, but not over it."

"Not unless we forget them." Hermione glanced down the table at David and Esther, who were sipping from their newly-replenished glasses and eyeing one another balefully. Clearly they were only waiting for a chance to be away from parental oversight. "Which I don't see how we can, given where you're going to be in about half an hour." She laughed a little, though her eyes gleamed momentarily with tears. "Of all the things we used to discuss doing when we grew up, helping run the shop Fred and George founded was never anywhere on the list!"

"Neither was single-handedly, or single-Pride-ly, changing the wizarding world," Ginny pointed out, accepting the tongs from Ron to serve herself two pieces of bacon, then flicking her right wrist and using her wand to drop one slice on each cub's plate. "And we seem to be doing that pretty well just by existing."

"Some days a little more actively than others." Harry turned off the stove and set the fried potatoes in the center of the table, hooking out the chair beside Ginny's with a foot. "Wonder how their newest member is settling in, down in the other wing?"

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Draco Black stood in the doorway of a bedroom where the sun lay in stripes along the polished wood floor and watched a little girl sleep, deep and dreamlessly, her golden hair spread out behind her on the pillow. A small sound from beside him brought a smile to his face as his wife joined him, fitting herself naturally against him and sliding her arm around his back. "Been thinking of you," he murmured, dropping a kiss on her temple. "Glad you're here."

"How is she?" Luna asked softly, nodding into the room. "Has she woken at all?"

"Not a bit, and no nightmares, either." Draco grinned briefly. "Not that I'd let her." The smile fell away from his face. "She's had enough to deal with. Even just living with that so-called father of hers, even if he never went after her physically the way he did after little Ken..." He clenched his fists, then exhaled a long breath and consciously relaxed. "The pureblood supremacists have a lot to answer for," he said, "but nothing worse, to my mind, than that nasty habit of teaching their boys that they were the ultimate masters of the world. That everything would always go exactly as they planned it, that nothing and no one could ever stand in their way."

"Because so often, with the way their worlds were structured, the first thing they met that didn't follow those rules was one of their own children." Luna laid her head against Draco's shoulder.

"And their most usual reaction to that was to get angry. Which isn't right, not at all, but I can understand it, at least a little." Her voice dropped half an octave, becoming somehow booming and masculine without waking the sleeping girl. "How dare you defy me? I *created* you! Now be what I expect you to be, or you'll be sorry!"

"Ignoring the fact that children are more akin to forces of nature than to anything which might conceivably become a recognizable human being in the near future." Draco laughed under his breath. "Cubs and other Clan-children, doubly so."

"Yes, speaking of which." Luna tugged at Draco's shoulders, starting him moving down the hall. "Dobby is listening for her, he'll tell us when she wakes, and Meghan will have her hands full keeping track of Irina and Jacob and Liam over breakfast, especially when her shift at St. Mungo's ran late last night. Besides, you have three lessons scheduled today, and there are bound to be reporters who want to talk to you after yesterday. And Moony firecalled while you were upstairs, he's hoping you can spare him some time around ten, since he has a free period then..."

Draco sighed, allowing himself to be tugged. "Probably he either wants to shout at me or tell me how proud he is," he said. "Or both. Maybe even a few words about apples and trees, and about not believing one's own publicity."

"Is it such a bad thing to do, really?" Luna paused at the top of the stairs, glancing back towards the open door beyond which Lucasta Runcorn was sleeping. "Stealing the children like her and her brother, the ones who *need* to be stolen?"

"No, but only when we have proof. And places to put them all." Draco looked around at the spacious hallways and commodious rooms of the house which had once been known as Malfoy Manor. "Though I have to admit, if the Clans keep growing at the rate they have been..."

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Assistant Professor of Herbology Neville Longbottom said something under his breath which would have earned him a smack on the back of the head from his wife as his mother-in-law called his name from partway up the marble staircase which led down into the entrance hall of Hogwarts. "Good morning, Letha," he said brightly, turning to face her. "How are you?"

"I'm quite well, thank you." Professor Aletha Black beckoned him nearer. "Can you spare me a minute, or does Pomona need you right away?"

"No, I'm early." Mentally, Neville cursed the fact that he never had, even after so many years as a member of the Pride, learned to lie convincingly. "Is something the matter?"

"Why don't you tell me." Aletha spread out the newspaper she had been carrying under her arm, pointing at the headline. "I'm sure Remus or Danger, or both of them, will be stopping by the Manor Den later this morning to get the whole story directly from the source, but I have a full day of classes, so I thought I'd just ask you." She folded her arms. "What in the world was Fox thinking? Or was he thinking at all?"

Silently, Neville reached into his pocket and extracted a photograph, handing it across.

Aletha accepted it and glanced at it.

Her second look was decidedly less casual.

Neville breathed a quiet sigh of relief and tossed a salute in his father-in-law's direction as Sirius Black appeared along the balcony above them, trotting down the stairs to join them, fastening his Auror-red work robes as he came. "Morning," he said through a yawn, the silver-gray eyes he'd bequeathed to his daughter Meghan roving over his wife, the newspaper, the photograph—

A snarl started low in Sirius's chest, followed by a trio of half-understandable curses. Aletha looked up at him, her own brown eyes as cold as stone. "Usually I object when you use language like that," she said. "This time I'll make an exception." She turned back to Neville. "Scratch everything I just said," she informed him. "This is a *perfectly* good reason to make a few waves through the Ministry and get an unpleasant headline or two in the *Daily Prophet*. Maybe now Arthur can finally get that mandatory reporting bill pushed through."

"Don't hold your breath." Sirius scowled at the photograph. "And the best part is, I'm probably related to whatever piece of slime did this. Just tell me he's been arrested already, would you? I'd hate to get an official reprimand for going out and punching his teeth in." He blew out his breath at Neville's nod. "Well, that's something at least. Though these days, just because he got arrested doesn't mean he's going to *stay* arrested. It's enough to make you understand why the Ministry used the dementors at Azkaban all those years—surprised the hell out of me when I found out there was an actual reason behind it..."

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"Magic, in its most basic form, is the conjunction of belief and power," said a precise voice at the edge of Ken's hearing—or was it at the edge of a dream? He couldn't tell. "While depriving lawbreakers of their wands robs them of a great deal of their control over that power, the power itself remains with them, and we have no way of removing it short of very drastic measures indeed."

"So the Ministry went after the other half of the equation instead," Ms. Crystal's voice took over. "Take away people's belief in a better tomorrow, or a better yesterday for that matter. Force them to accept the way things are as the way things always will be, simply because they can't remember or conceive of anything more than they have. Horrible from an objective standpoint, and in the case of mistakes being made, but very practical if you're the one tasked with keeping control over a load of immoral, obscenely powerful, overgrown juvenile delinquents..."

Ken scooted further down in the bed between the two small and softly breathing forms which had cuddled up to him sometime during the night, letting the confusing grownup words slide past his ears. They weren't important anymore. He wouldn't ever have to listen at doors and around corners again, and try to figure out from the scraps he understood how long he should stay away from his father this time. His biggest problems from now on were going to be keeping Butler the dog from stealing his food right off his plate and teaching Rory and Rosie it wasn't nice to swing the cats,

though to be fair, the cats didn't seem to mind being swung, given the way they kept coming back to wind themselves around people's legs and purr.

Being a Weasley, he thought drowsily, was going to be very, very different from being a Runcorn.

In his mind, a family tree like one of Mother's—or was she going to be his mother anymore, now that he belonged to the Clans? He could ask Ms. Crystal at breakfast, which, judging by the good smells sneaking into the room, would probably be soon—spread itself out in an array of colors. He had a lot of uncles now, he knew that much (though not as many as he once would have had, which had made Ms. Crystal look sad when she told him so), and a lot of aunts to go with them, and a *whole* lot of cousins. And some of those uncles and aunts had very famous names, the sort that appeared in the books his sister would sometimes read to him, the sort his father had liked to put with the same rude words he used for the name Weasley. Names like Harry Potter, Hermione Granger-Lupin, Meghan and Draco Black...

He'd never realized before yesterday that Cassie's music teacher was the same person as the clever spy in Callie's storybooks, the one who'd pretended to be his own blood father and made sure the Death Eaters got tangled up with each other instead of being ready to fight Harry Potter and his Pack and Pride (more words that Ken usually heard used together with the rude ones). And there was one very, very important thing that hadn't been in the books.

*He had his magic stolen, Mr. Fox did, before he started being a spy. All the time between when he pretended to die and when his sister came to be with him, he didn't have any magic at all. And he was still a spy, and a hero, and tricked the Death Eaters, and even their Master.*

*And earlier on in the war, Mr. Padfoot, Sirius Black, he lost his magic, and even got stuck as a dog, but he never gave up. He just kept fighting. And he could have kept fighting, and doing important things, even if he never got his magic back, because he's not just an Auror. He's a writer. He wrote a lot of those books Callie used to read me.*

*And you don't have to have magic to be a writer. You just need a good imagination.*

*I might be a writer someday. Or own a restaurant, or help run a shop, or teach something I know how to do, but I think I'd like being a writer. And since I'm Clan now, no matter what I am, I'll be a fighter too.* He smiled at the coincidence of the two words rhyming. *A warrior, who fights against evil.*

*But first I have to grow up.*

He tucked the covers closer around himself and whichever twin was cuddled up to his front, removing a small thumb from a mouth by feel, then reaching around behind him to do the same thing to her sister. He had a feeling he'd be doing that a lot for the next few weeks, and months, and maybe even years, but that was all right. It was just part of being a big brother.

*Ken Weasley.* The words sounded good inside his head. He thought they would sound even better said out loud. *Ken Weasley, and my little sisters are Rory and Rosie, and our mum's name is*

*Crystal, and our dad is Percy...*

Part of him would always be Kenelm Runcorn, whose older sisters were Calanthia and Lucasta, whose mother was Persis and whose father was Thackery, but that was all right. There was enough room inside his mind for both of them.

*As long as Father doesn't come back anywhere except inside my mind. A little chill of worry ran through his happiness. If he was angry just because I said no to him, how much angrier would he get now, when I don't belong to him anymore at all? And would he try to hurt Rory and Rosie, or my new mum and dad, or maybe even Mother and Callie and Cassie like I was worried about before?*

But if he could think of that, Ken knew, so could the Clan-adults. He didn't need to be too afraid. Everyone who was Clan would be looking out for him now, and for his sisters, both sets of them, and his mum and dad, and probably even for Mother.

*Because that's the other thing Clan means. You look out for each other.*

He sighed deeply and slid back into sleep. Breakfast could wait a little while. He was busy enjoying being safe, being happy, being among the Clans.



## **A Secret Never Told Camelot**

The Center for All to Magically Explore the Lifestyles of Others Today, or Camelot, had been started shortly after the dramatic ending of the Second War against Voldemort by a group of concerned purebloods who felt the proper answer to the "Muggleborn problem" was not to shut the doors of the magical world, but rather to open them earlier and more fully, and (as daring a thought as this was) even to make them swing both ways, exposing pureblood children to Muggle culture as their Muggleborn counterparts learned what it meant to be magical.

At any other time in wizarding history, such a proposal would likely have been greeted with shouts of condemnation. A wizarding world reeling from the suddenness of Voldemort's defeat, along with the revelations of what he had been planning to do next, meekly acquiesced to what seemed like a fairly harmless project. Besides, its backers were so well-connected (many of them had direct ties, whether by blood or friendship, to the Minister of Magic himself), and they weren't even asking for money—most of them had their own well-stocked vaults at Gringotts, and had even convinced the goblins themselves to help finance the Center's building. What could possibly go wrong?

By the time most of the traditional purebloods realized the answer to this question, it was already too late. Camelot, in all its glory, was a fully functional reality, and though the most proper and oldest families shunned it as they did anything which smacked of Muggle influence, its seductive song reached out to their children, luring them with the promise of forbidden delights. Such wonders as personal music players, televisions, and computers, pureblood children whispered to each other, could be seen every day at Camelot, and even purchased! The conversion to run on certain spells, periodically renewed, instead of Muggle batteries or plugs might be a bit pricey, but what else was money for? Besides, Muggles had some good ideas sometimes, even if they were so silly as to deny magic existed...

And day by day, year after year, Muggles, Squibs, Muggleborns, half-bloods, and purebloods came and went, met and mingled, at Camelot, as did house-elves, goblins, and even the occasional centaur or vampire. Werewolves, though, seldom came there any longer, if only because the Black-Longbottom Treatments (named after the mother/daughter pair of Healers who had discovered and refined the complex series of magical therapies) had all but eliminated lycanthropy in the British Isles. A public assistance program through which the Wolfsbane Potion could be acquired both cheaply and anonymously helped to fill the gaps.

Though the exact nature of the Treatments remained a closely guarded secret, it was self-evident

that they worked. One had only to look at the assistant manager of Camelot, or the part-owner of one of the most successful chains of shops in the wizarding world (locations in Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, Godric's Hollow, and Camelot itself), or even the current Deputy Headmaster of Hogwarts—ex-werewolves all. And those were only the famous ones.

There were, of course, rumors about this or that set of Treatments which had either failed to cure its subject's lycanthropy or killed him or her outright, but the Healers, when asked, were adamant that this was not only unintentional but actually to be expected. All medicine, Muggle or magical, involved risks, both of the condition not being helped or even worsening and of outright death. All patients were thoroughly informed of those risks before any course of treatment began, and chose freely whether or not to continue. And even the most skeptical had to admit that the reported deaths or failures from the Black-Longbottom Treatments were quite few in number, and paled against the documented numbers of successes.

Life in the wizarding world, as many a wizard or witch would and did testify over a cup of tea or a pint of beer at one of Camelot's pubs or restaurants, was no more perfect than life in the Muggle one. But, most of those same wizards and witches would then add, it was getting better all the time. Especially under the current Minister of Magic—excellent fellow, known him for years, everybody had, really, bit of a surprise when he was chosen, but you can't argue with the way it was done, now can you? And any of their companions who happened to be Muggles would shake their heads and make interested noises, and perhaps signal for another round, preparing themselves to hear yet another astounding story.

They might have been surprised to discover that those who had lived the stories, by and large, found them almost as astounding at times as those who only listened to them.

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Remus Lupin stepped out of the Floo fire in the welcoming living room of the house now universally known as the Manor Den, his thoughts, as they always did when he arrived here, ranging back through time to the first day, or rather night, he had ever seen it. The décor had been far less pleasant then, though he'd barely noticed it—his attention had been focused first on his miraculously recovered cubs, and then on the unbelievable request made of him and his Pack by Narcissa Black Malfoy.

*And from that request, and our granting it, comes so much of what and who we are today.*

He followed the sound of voices through the hallways and located his Pack-son and daughter-in-law, as he'd half-expected, in their wing's comfortable kitchen, Draco sitting at a parchment-littered table and talking on his Zippophone, Luna coaching their four-year-old daughter Irina and a girl of about seven with golden curls whom Remus suspected was Lucasta Runcorn through finding the proper places to put away clean dishes. Under the table, Irina's brother Jacob, soon to celebrate his second birthday, was giggling madly as he clung to the twig end of his three-year-old cousin Liam's tiny Meteorite broomstick, which Liam was shaking back and forth in a vain attempt to dislodge its passenger.

*This looks familiar.* Remus propped himself against the doorframe and enjoyed the scene, in these last few moments before any of its participants should look up and notice him. *Doubly familiar. Once from that same trip back through time, and once from not even five minutes ago...*

A gentle twist inside his mind, and he could hear the gleeful yells of Marcus and Ruby Black, mingled with the joyful shouting of his own Abigail and John, as they played pirates with all the dedication their older siblings had ever brought to that task, coupled with the extended magical abilities that resulted when members of the group thus playing were also the first Heirs of the Hogwarts Founders in nearly a thousand years to be born at the castle itself.

*And when others are the very first children ever naturally born to a werewolf.* He slid a hand along his left arm, smiling. *Or should I say, an ex-werewolf?*

**Enjoying all the little twists and turns of life, are we?** Danger inquired, looking up from the Muggle Studies essays she was marking so that Remus could see the door in their quarters at Hogwarts which led into the cubs' playroom, with the enormous climbable ship in the center of a padded "sea" it had sprouted. **All the things you've experienced at age forty-four that you'd never have believed were possible if you'd been told about them at age twenty-two?**

**As usual, Danger of my life, succinctly and cogently expressed.**

**Ooh, big words. I'm a sucker for big words.**

**Which is why I use them.** Remus sent a small rumble of lion-purr through their bond.

**Mmm.** Danger hummed wordlessly in pleasure. **Keep that up and I'll pawn our two off on Sirius and Letha tonight.**

**Keep that up and I'll let you.**

Even as he sent the thought, Remus saw Irina's head start to come around. **Talk about it later,** he said swiftly, and knelt to receive an armful of shrieking little girl.

"Moony! "

Jacob and Liam immediately abandoned the broomstick to swarm him as well, and Remus was very busy for a few moments administering hugs and listening to the most important things that had happened to each of his grandchildren since he had last seen them (all of four days). When he was finished with that, Luna was waiting for him, ready to introduce Cassie. Remus bowed formally in response to her solemn curtsy, then stroked his fingers along his cheek and held out his hand, and Cassie giggled and scent-shook with him as well. "Mother says it's good manners to do as your hosts do," she said. "Even if they're—" She stopped, looking momentarily stricken.

"Even if they seem a bit strange to us?" Remus suggested, and Cassie nodded gladly. "She's quite right. Different people have different customs, and we should be as mindful of that as we can without violating our own ways. Speaking of which..." He glanced towards Draco, who had

finished his Zippo call. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"I think so, yes." Draco nodded, standing up. "My next student isn't due until—twelve, love?"

"Twelve-thirty," reported Luna after a glance at the large calendar on the kitchen wall.

"Even better. Though I'm sure you'll have to get back well before that, Moony."

"Sadly, yes." Remus led the way out of the kitchen. "The life of a Hogwarts Professor is not an easy one."

"Especially not since the Headmistress named you Deputy." Draco drew his wand as they stepped into one of the smaller rooms along the main corridor and flicked an Imperturbable Charm onto the door, then closed it. "I'm guessing this is about that damned front-page article in the *Prophet*? It's *not* true, at least not the way they were making it out to be—"

"Which I knew as soon as I saw those photographs Luna took, and strongly suspected before that, so there's no need to defend yourself to me when I haven't yet accused you of anything," Remus cut in. "And you know that, so I'm guessing it's someone else you're angry with instead of me."

"Several someone elses." Draco paced back and forth across the room, his fists clenching and unclenching. "Thackery Runcorn, to start with, though he'll get his, more or less—I could wish our laws allowed for him to receive at least the *sensation* of the pain he doled out, we have the capability to do that without any actual harm to him, and I think understanding what it feels like to be beaten about the head by someone three or four times one's own *size*, have one's arm just casually *broken*, and then be *thrown* onto the floor of a sodding wardrobe, might do him a world of good if anything will..."

Remus sat back in his chair, watching his son's restless movements. Draco would, he knew, have seen both himself and his brother in little Kenelm Runcorn, though Harry's childhood traumas had been inflicted on the other side of the magical-Muggle divide. Still, harm to a child was against every instinct he and the other Pack-adults had instilled into their cubs, no matter who or where that child might be.

"And yes, the bastards at the *Prophet* —I understand Zacharias Smith ended up there after all, going into the family business, I suppose it's the only place that would have him—but you'd *think*, after all the shite we went through in the wars, that they would take ten bloody seconds to go out and *ask* the people their front-page stories are about what actually *happened* instead of just printing what they're told second- or third-hand!" Draco slammed an open palm into the wall as he reached it, then turned and stalked back down the length of the room. "I'd sue them for libel if I thought I had a prayer of getting anything other than some damned monetary award, which I *hardly* need, or an apology which they won't mean!"

"So there's no real risk that we'll be posting bail for you any time soon?" Remus asked lightly. "That was Danger's one worry, that there might have been formal charges made, and that some overzealous MLE might decide it would redound to his credit to try and arrest a prominent

member of the dreaded Clans for breaking into a respectable pureblood home and kidnapping their three children."

Draco snorted. "Operative word, try. If he made it past the Den's security charms, which I doubt, he'd then have to brave the swarm which is the Pride-cubs, and that daunts even the most Gryffindor of the Weasleys." A flicker of sorrow crossed his features. "Or it would have done."

"So it would." Remus sighed, moments of memory passing through his mind. "Their legacy lives on, though. And their names."

"Every time the twins—our twins, Ron and Neenie's—get into trouble. Which, as befits Weasley twins, is quite often indeed." Draco grinned and mimicked his twin's angriest tones. "David Frederic and Esther Georgiana Weasley! What in the *world* do you think you're doing up there?"

"Up where now?"

"Tree." Draco snickered. "Just about the tallest one on the grounds. Looks like more things than the red hair and freckles bred true. Though from the other side."

"Did you ever expect they wouldn't?"

"I didn't expect to live to see them," Draco retorted. "And it's *your* fault I did." He leveled a mock-angry glare at Remus. "You ruined a perfectly good prophetic vision with that curse you laid on Lucius, you know. If you'd just stayed out of it, I could have died on schedule like I was supposed to, but no, you had to bind him with his own magic that he'd die if he tried to kill me..."

"Because knowing Lucius, I had no doubt what he would try to do once he was finally convinced that you wouldn't return to him." Remus smiled reminiscently. "And if being married to a lady with true dreams for the last twenty-odd years has taught me anything, it would be that visions are not always what they look like."

"But we had to believe it. Believe it meant *exactly* what it looked like." Draco sat down opposite his Pack-father, his restlessness quieted for the moment. "All of us had to believe it. Me for my reasons, and you for yours. Because if we hadn't, if we'd suspected what it truly meant beforetime—or in your case, if you'd voiced your suspicions to anyone but Danger—"

"Then things would have gone a great deal worse than they did. For all of us." Exhaling a long breath, Remus returned to the present. "So walk me through this. What exactly happened, and when, and how? And what did you do about it?"

"Well, the first *I* knew anything was wrong was when Cassie came tumbling out of the Floo yesterday afternoon." Draco nodded towards the room in which Remus had arrived. "Terrified almost out of her wits, shaking and crying. Luna was able to get her calmed down enough to tell us what she'd seen that had frightened her so badly, which was her father stalking down the hall from her brother's room, looking angrier than she'd ever seen him before, and no sign of her brother at all. With everything else she's told me about her family, I thought it was worth at least checking

out." He shrugged. "If we hadn't found anything, we'd have calmed Cassie down and got her settled in her own room, then come straight home, and no one would ever have been the wiser."

"But you found quite a lot." Remus flattened his hands against the arms of his chair, holding to his human form with the strength of many years' practice in this art, quieting the two predatory shapes which were also his to call upon with assurances that the cub who had been endangered was safe now, and that the one who had harmed him was being punished. "And very wisely took pictures before you did anything else."

"Luna's idea." Draco smiled. "As are most of the best ones around here. Though I was the one who remembered we have a contact or two at WFS, and made sure to pull those strings and get the reports into the proper channels. The staff at the *Prophet*'s going to have a great deal of egg on their faces if they ever bother to look up the paperwork."

Remus chuckled. "Ah, but that would require admitting they were wrong in the first place."

Father and son looked at one another. "Hmm...no," they said in unison, and shared a laugh.

"So your 'ruthless kidnapping' was more along the lines of removing children too young to defend themselves from a situation which was clearly dangerous to them," Remus said when he had his breath back. "And you made sure to have your actions vetted by the correct authorities at the earliest possible moment, and the birth father of those children—as Sirius had to tell me, since the *Prophet* didn't see fit to print it—has already been arrested for what Luna's pictures make it obvious he did to his son." He knew his eyes must present something of a kaleidoscopic appearance at the moment, since Danger had set her essays aside as soon as the explanations had begun. "I'd say that covers you quite well, in the eyes of anyone reasonable."

"And since our enemies tend to be entirely *un* reasonable on the subject of the Clans, to the point where they'd believe a two-tailed fire crab if it started telling stories against us..." Draco smirked. "Side effect of being successful, I'd say. We won the war resoundingly, we've got the goodwill of house-elves *and* goblins, and the Clan lifestyle as we've set it up is a blend of just enough of the familiar and the exotic to be appealing on both counts."

"More exotic than familiar, to the purest of the purebloods," Remus pointed out. "But as tradition-fettered as that society has become, I would imagine it's an exciting difference to most of their children, or appears that way from a distance."

"And then you get what the purebloods like to ask me, or Harry, or sometimes one of the ladies, to do." Draco leaned back in his chair with a sigh of purest Marauder happiness. "Steal your child for a few days to throw a little scare into them, get them to stop misbehaving, make them 'appreciate what they have'? Why certainly, I'd *love* to."

A wordless question hummed through Remus's mind, and he mentally stepped back from control of his body in reply. "And have any of them worked out yet how hard you have to argue to get most of their children to go home again?" Danger's voice inquired from his lips. "Or that the 'follow-up lessons' you suggest to most of the parents are really just play sessions for their

children and your cubs, or visits to Camelot to meet the Muggleborn children who'll be in their year at Hogwarts? And the amount of letter-writing, firecalling, and other forms of communication that take place in between times?"

"Never a one." Draco blew a kiss to his Pack-mother. "I'd say it's like taking sweets from a baby, except most babies would fight harder than this. They're *asking* us to 'corrupt' their children, and when we do, they're *thanking* us for it!"

"Because you're taking away a burden most of them never really thought about, and weren't ready for," said Remus, sending a mental kiss of his own as he resumed control of his voice and movements. "It never occurred to them that raising children is *work*. House-elves can do most of the heavy lifting, yes, but to learn to be human, a child needs other humans around. But the traditional purebloods, many of them, missed that step in their own lives, so it doesn't occur to them that their own children need it."

"And they're surprised when they end up with spoiled little monsters, just like their parents were before them." Draco sighed, then allowed his grin to return. "But in this generation, they have something they never had before. There were always the stories of who or what would get you if you weren't good—werewolves and Mudbloods were the usual fare, though I seem to remember Padfoot got his innings when I was young, notorious escaped prisoner and all that."

"Check, check, and double-check." Remus pretended to mark off items on a list. "In the Pack as we then were, at any rate."

"I must have been *very* bad." Draco pulled a sad face. "Poor me."

"But I do see what you're saying." Remus nodded. "Most of those stories never came true. By their very nature, they couldn't. Whereas the Clans patently do, and will, steal children—on request and temporarily, most of the time, but still, it happens. And the children know that. It isn't something that happened to the friend of a friend's friend, hundreds of miles away, before they were even born. It's going on now, today, and they all know that they could be next."

Draco held up a hand. "Something's happened with that we weren't expecting," he said. "Though I suppose we should have been. The kids themselves are starting to spread the word about what being stolen by the Clans really means. And some of them are working out ways to come and meet us without ever getting in trouble. Asking for lessons in some of the areas they know we tend to be the chosen teachers, or getting their half-blood relations to take them out to Camelot. That sort of thing."

"Future Slytherins, I see." Remus chuckled. "If you come to the Clans on your own terms, then you don't get stuck with double chores. Which is your usual first step for the ones you 'steal', isn't it?"

"Double chores and no sweets, at least to start," Draco confirmed. "But every other way, they're one of us while they're here. And as soon as we start seeing an improvement in attitude, some basic politeness and the occasional smile, we lighten the workload a bit, let them swap chores with

our cubs or with one another to get things they like better. Even with the grownups, if they can figure out a fair trade."

"And all the while," said Danger, sliding back in with a mental caress to Remus, "you're corrupting them horribly. Giving them things they'd never have at home. Like the full attention of an adult, a listening ear and some words of advice or comfort for their problems. Like stories, and music, and even the occasional hug if they allow it. Like permission to get sweaty, and dirty, and soaking wet, and scratched up. Et cetera, et cetera, ad infinitum."

"In many of their cases, the first real friends they've ever had." Draco smiled ruefully. "Though we should probably be careful of telling them too much about Clan ways to start with. I understand you're starting to see proto-Prides arriving at Hogwarts."

"Arriving in some cases. Forming after arrival in others." Danger laughed. "And we've also got groups calling themselves Aeries, Nests, and Cetes."

"Cetes?" Draco's brow furrowed, then cleared. "No, don't tell me, I think I see it. An aerie is a group of eagles, a nest is a group of snakes, so a cete must be a group of badgers, yes?"

"Yes." Danger blew a kiss back to Draco. "Though the basic configuration remains the same. Either between six and ten students with a more-or-less even split of boys and girls, or a smaller group, four to seven, all one or all the other. Usually with some pre-existing connection between most of the members, siblings, cousins, friends, and so on, but also with a wide range of talents and abilities."

"In other words, very like the original Pride. Or Prides." Draco ran his hands through his hair. "What *did* we get ourselves into?"

"Nothing any of us could ever have imagined to start out with," Remus said speculatively. "But, in my admittedly biased opinion, something surprisingly wonderful. So far." He glanced through Danger's eyes at their wall clock and got to his feet. "And I should be getting back. I have a class of fourth years later today which includes a Nest of mainly Slytherin boys, plus one Ravenclaw, and a Cete of mixed Hufflepuff and Gryffindor girls..."

Draco snorted. "And how many couples is *that* going to result in?"

"At least three, I think. Danger's tentatively leaning towards four. Most of them are still in the 'get away from me' stage, but somehow their wandwork mysteriously improves whenever the other group is observing them..."

"And I'm sure you're assigning as many projects as possible that make them work together." Draco accompanied his Pack-father to the door. "I've actually got to pop out for a bit as well. Pearl's taking a shift at the Camelot clinic and asked me to bring Liam by. It seems some of the Muggle parents do better with their introductions to magical healing when the Healer is clearly working on someone she wouldn't want harmed."



"That makes sense. And if she's in with a patient when you get there, you might be able to leave him with his father for a few minutes."

"With—oh, that's right, Captain was taking a few of his upper-level students out there to do some of the groundskeeping today." Draco shook his head with a lofty look. "Hogwarts students, being taught to use their magic for the benefit of others. How *else* can these 'Clans' corrupt the perfection which was pureblood society?"

"In every way we can possibly think of," retorted Danger. "And a few we haven't, that I'm sure our children will."

**And in the simplest one of all**, Remus said silently as Liam pelted out of the kitchen and into Draco's arms, squealing happily as his uncle swung him around once or twice, then hoisted him into a piggyback in order to get a kiss from Luna. **By outliving, outbreeding, and outjoying them. If that last one is a word.**

**I don't think it is, but I take your meaning anyway. We, by and large, are happy, and they, by and large, are not. And human nature, especially in childhood, is to look for what will bring us the most happiness.**

**Thus, their children, being wiser than and not yet so indoctrinated as their parents, come to us.** Remus smiled, and felt Danger do the same, as Cassie shyly presented herself after Jacob and Irina for her own goodbye hug. **And we happily teach them what we know, and they take that, and change it as seems good to them, and go forward into the future.**

**Making mistakes along the way**, Danger added. **But who doesn't?** A loud crash from the playroom caught her attention. **Speaking of which—**

**Yes, please, go and deal with whatever that was. I'm on my way back, let me know if you need me.**

**I shall. Much love.**

"Ready to go to Camelot, sprout?" Draco inquired of Liam as he carried him along the hallway.

"Camelot!" Liam pumped one small brown fist enthusiastically. "I wanna ride the Broomstick Swoop! And go to the conservat'ry, and the liberry!"

Remus chuckled, following the two into the living room. "In case there were any doubt whose child he is," he said. "Adventures, plants, and books, in that order. See you for dinner on Sunday?"

"Try and keep us away." Draco shifted Liam's weight to his left arm and tossed Remus a scent-salute, then turned to allow the little boy to take a handful of Floo powder from the flowerpot on the mantelpiece. "That's right, and in it goes!"

The fire roared up emerald green. Remus idly reached out a tendril of magic to steady his son and grandson as Draco stepped into the flames. "Camelot!" he announced over Liam's gleeful squeal,

and whipped out of sight.

Humming the namesake song of the place the two had gone, Remus waited for the fire to return to its original golden-yellow, then stepped into it without bothering to add anything. "Remus Lupin's office, Hogwarts," he said clearly, and disappeared in a swirl of flame.

Gifts, after all, were not generally given with a time limit attached to their use.

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Ken thought his eyes might stick wide open from all the staring he was doing. Not even his wildest imagination-picture had ever shown him a place this big, this crowded, this colorful. Rory and Rosie, Rory holding his hand and Rosie holding Ms. Crystal's other one, were bouncing up and down with excitement, both trying to point things out to him at once.

"Girls," Ms. Crystal said mildly, and the twins settled down right away, though Ken could still feel Rory's excitement in the way she was squeezing his fingers. "Now, what shall we do first? We could get ice creams, or see if my books are in at the library, or what about—well, well! Dora! Andy!"

"Crystal, how've you been? Wotcher, Weasley girls!" The woman who answered the hail had a pretty, pale, heart-shaped face, as did the girl about Ken's age who was holding her hand, but none of that was what made Ken's eyes open even wider still. He'd known hair could be black (like his father's), red (like Rory and Rosie's), brown (like his own), or blond (like Ms. Crystal's), but he'd never known it came in *pink*.

"And who's this?" the woman was asking now, smiling at Ken. "Your newest arrival? Kenelm, wasn't it?"

"Just..." Ken tried to say, and felt his throat get tight. He swallowed once, then saw the pink-haired girl looking at him with warm, dark eyes that seemed to smile even though her face was still. "Just Ken, ma'am," he managed to get out on his second try. "Ken...Weasley."

"Are you, now." The woman looked up at Ms. Crystal. "Quick work."

"Not my idea." Ms. Crystal had the hand which had been holding Ken's planted on her hip. "Though he does even things up nicely for Arthur. Six of each."

"So he does. And if he's made his decision, who're we to fault it?" The woman turned back to Ken. "Glad to meet you, Ken Weasley," she said, holding out her hand. "I'll be your Auntie Tonks, and this's your cousin Andrea." She nodded to the girl beside her. "Welcome to Camelot."

Ken shook her hand, then that of the girl, Andrea, and held on for an extra moment. Andrea didn't seem to mind.

"You're a stolen child," she said in a high-pitched voice that somehow managed to miss being squeaky. "Like me, except I was more inherited. Or maybe given, if we knew who gave me." Now

she really smiled, and Ken had to smile back. It was just that kind of smile. "It's nice to have company. Almost all the other cousins are born children."

"And you're going to confuse Ken terribly, Andy love," Tonks put in. "He doesn't know the stories yet, about all the different ways how the Clans get their children, and what that means for how I got you." She hooked an arm around her daughter and pulled her close, making Andrea squeal happily. "And I think you must've been inherited, or where'd you get *this*?" A tweak of Andrea's pink hair, eliciting another squeak. "Not like Metamorph's exactly common!"

"You know, that's not a bad idea," Ms. Crystal said thoughtfully. "Stories. Why don't we head over to the library and pull out one or two of the better picture books of the Battle of the Manor, and then go and get ice creams and explain what *really* happened to Ken while we're eating?"

"Ice creams!" shouted Rory.

"Stories!" clamored Rosie.

Ken felt a smile stretching his face, as broad and beaming as the one he could see on Andrea. "Yes, please," he said firmly for both of them.

If he was going to be a child of the Clans, it was only right for him to know how they had begun.

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Percy Weasley looked up from the three mutually exclusive demands his aide, Chris Parkinson, had discovered in the latest copy of a diplomatic letter from the Ukranian Ministry as a broad-shouldered wizard, his dark hair streaked with silver, stormed into his office. "Good morning," he began to say, but was cut off.

"Is this true?" the older wizard demanded, slapping down a copy of the *Daily Prophet* on Percy's desk.

"Not in its wording," Percy said coolly, picking up the newspaper and regarding the headline as he might something with a great many legs he'd discovered on his shower wall. "My brother-in-law did enter the house in question, but only at the request of one of its inhabitants, and while he did remove the children residing there, he did so upon discovering one of them in such a condition that no prudent person would have considered it safe for any of them to remain."

"Semantics, Weasley." The older wizard waved a hand impatiently. "I mean the piece further down. Did young Black, or did he not, after snatching these children away from their rightful home, hand over the boy to...to..."

"To a recently inspected and fully accredited foster family, including one member uniquely suited to help Kenelm learn how to handle his challenges in life?" Percy smiled thinly, enjoying the reddening of the older wizard's face. "He did, Mr. Runcorn. And quite rightly, if I do say so myself."

"Now see here, Weasley," Albert Runcorn growled, leaning across Percy's desk. "You won't get away with this one, son of the Minister or no! If you and that—that *animal* you married don't send my grandson home within the next twenty-four hours—"

Percy held up a hand, halting both Runcorn and Parkinson, who had started to reach for his wand. "I would suggest that you not insult women in this office, Mr. Runcorn," he said without a trace of inflection in his voice. "Be they Muggles or be they witches. As for your grandson, Wizarding Family Services has made its determination. Kenelm remains with my family until such time as they—they, Mr. Runcorn, not I—believe it is safe for him to return to his mother." He let his smile grow even thinner, until he thought he could have satisfactorily shaved with its edge. "If, of course, at such time, he *wishes* to so return. As you can see, I have nothing to do with the decision in either case. Good day, Mr. Runcorn." He drew his wand and flicked it at the door, which sprang open. "Good day."

After one more angry glare, Runcorn straightened up. "This is not finished, Weasley," he said in a low tone. "This is nowhere *near* finished."

Turning on his heel, he strode out of the office.

Parkinson watched him go, then blew out a long breath. "And people wonder," he said conversationally, "why I ran off with the chauffeur."

"Because she could hold a conversation for longer than two minutes on a subject other than herself?" Percy hazarded.

"So she can. An art my sister, by the by, has never yet managed to master, unless she's insulting someone." Parkinson laughed half-heartedly. "All right, so where were we? They want us to stop interfering in their internal politics, but at the same time they want our help chasing down that little homegrown Dark wizard they've sprouted, and just for a kicker they're asking if we'd like to extend a loan to the present government. That sound about right?"

"Fairly close, yes." Percy leaned over the letter again. "We can give them a flat no on the loan, unless they can come up with better security than they've offered so far, and we don't happen to *be* interfering in their internal politics, they just think we are, but we might want to consult with MLE and the Auror Office about their second point. Dark wizards don't tend to respect national borders very well, and the last thing we need is another war..."

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Listening outside the door, Albert Runcorn curled his lip.

Percy Weasley might not want another war, but by Merlin, he was going to *have* one.

No one stole a son of the Runcorns from his proper family and got away with it.