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The Witch of the Westmoreland

Chapter 1

Lily Evans lay crumpled on a park bench under brown and gold leaves, sobbing, trying to forget the sight of Remus, lying so still and so pale in his bed at the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix.

He took that curse for James. I know he did. And it would have hurt James terribly, just like it's hurting Remus, but at least it wouldn't have killed James within a month, and Remus it will...

Nearby, someone coughed diffidently. Lily looked up.

Severus Snape stood several feet away, half in shadow, his hands by his sides. "I hear Lupin is wounded," he said, his voice as cold and precise as ever. "May I know what curse it was?"

"As if you weren't there." Lily threw the words at him, clenching her fists in anger at the invisible force killing her friend. "As if you didn't see."

"I was there, but I did not see. I was... otherwise occupied at the time. May I know?"

Lily fought off another surge of tears. "Dumbledore says it's called the Occasus Veneficius," she said, licking her lips and tasting salt. "It causes him pain if he does or handles magic. He can't do any spells or stand to have any done on him, he can't brew or drink any potions, he can't even touch anything that's under a charm. It hurts him even to live, because he's technically a magical creature. And when the full moon comes, with that added to the stress of his usual transformation..."

"He will die," Severus finished for her.

"Yes." The monosyllable was all she trusted herself to say aloud, though her heart shrieked pain. *Why, Remus, why you? You have so much to offer, so much to give those who see past what you are to who... you had friends already, and someday there would have been a girl, just one brave girl who could stand fast through all your self-doubts and torments... what a husband and father you would have made, if we could only have convinced you to keep trying...*

"And because he cannot have magic done on him, there is no cure," Severus went on, his words striking cruelly into Lily's heart. "At least, none that is known."

"None that Dumbledore knows. No." It was taking every scrap of control she had ever learned not to scream out her pain and loss at Severus, not to attack him as a representative of the side whose curse was even now killing Remus slowly. "Why do you ask?"

"Because there are tales," Severus said. "Tales of a healer witch who lives secluded, far from here. Tales that she can heal anything, short of death, and some say even that. But all the tales agree on one thing. She does not use magic as we know it."

Lily stared at her childhood friend, her heart beginning to race. “Tell me you know where she is,” she said, the words half a plea. “Tell me you know how to find her.”

Severus spoke carefully, as though he were hand-selecting every word. “I know how to find one who can find her. Or I think I do.”

“Tell me.” Lily leaned forward on the bench. “Please, Severus, tell me. I’ll take anything, even a chance, we can’t sit around and let him die…”

“It is very strange,” Severus warned her. “Stranger even than usual, with magic.”

“Strange I can handle. Remus dead, I can’t.” Lily gripped the edge of the bench. “Tell me.”

“Snape gave you this?” Sirius repeated, holding the parchment between two fingers as though it might be contaminated. “What makes you think it’s any good?”

“I don’t know whether it’s good or not. That’s why I want you to help me work it out.” Lily gave him one of her famous looks. “If you think you’re up to it, O great and mighty Auror apprentice. And if you think your friend’s life is worth it.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t going to help.” Sirius took proper hold of the parchment and began to read.

Peter and James appeared in the door. “Just got in,” said Lily’s black-haired fiancé, breezing over to collect a kiss. “Wormtail says you might have something to help Moony?”

“I don’t know for sure. Severus gave it to me.”

“What?” James pulled back. “You’re trusting Moony’s life to Snivellus?”

“Nobody’s trusting anything to anyone right now,” Lily said, her patience fading fast. “I want you two—you three,” she corrected herself, smiling at Peter, “to help me figure out what it might mean, before we decide if it’s worth trying.”

“Well, I hope you two are better at it than I am,” said Sirius, dropping the parchment onto the low table in the middle of the room. “I can’t make sticks or twigs out of it.”

Peter, who was closer, picked it up. “It’s like a riddle,” he said, squinting at it. “Should I read it out loud?”

“Yes,” said James, dropping into a chair. “Please,” he added at Lily’s glare.

“He who is of the moon must seek the direction-giver mounted,” Peter read in his slightly squeaky voice. “Followed by a bright star, with one above who casts a shadow, he must ride through the night and into the morning, passing by a place where are males with red hair, to seek a small one with great eyes who has much wisdom but often goes unheard.”

“Of the moon’ sounds promising,” said Sirius. “And bright star, we can do.” He patted his own chest. “The rest of it... I dunno.”

“Mounted,” James mused. “D’you suppose he can be around us in...” He trailed off, guiltily.

“In what?” Lily asked, catching the sidelong glances the boys were shooting each other. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Peter glanced around, shut the door with his wand, and faced her squarely. “Don’t scream, please?” he said.

“Scream? Why would I—” Lily broke off with a gasp. Peter was gone. In his place sat a fat gray rat, which combed its whiskers busily, then exploded once more into her friend, grinning sheepishly at her.

“Surprise,” he said.

“You—how did—” Suspicion burst into certainty in Lily’s mind, and she whirled on James and Sirius. “Show me,” she commanded. “Now.”

“I don’t know if he’ll fit,” Sirius said, looking up at the ceiling. “I know I will...” He leaned forward and was suddenly a huge, bear-like black dog.

“Let me lie down,” James said, suiting action to word. A moment later, Lily breathed wonder and crossed the room to caress the head of the liquid-eyed stag her love had become.

“How come I don’t get petted?” Sirius complained, resuming his human form.

James did the same. “Find your own girl, Padfoot,” he said, pulling Lily close. “This one’s mine.”

“That explains the nicknames,” Lily said, kissing James on the cheek and extracting herself. “And it’s why you all stay in on full moons—you’re with Remus, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” James nodded. “And I was thinking. It’s only stuff with active charms on it that hurts him, right? Stuff that was conjured, or transfigured, he can touch?”

“I think so. Why?”

“Because this little puzzle we’ve got says he has to ride.” James pointed. “And that can’t be on a broom, brooms are chock-full of magic. But what if it’s on me? We can fix me up with a saddle, Padfoot can run along behind to make sure Moony doesn’t fall...”

“One above who casts a shadow’ could be me,” Peter volunteered unexpectedly. “I could take a broom and fly ahead, to make sure we don’t get lost.”

“But that still leaves us with the original problem,” said Sirius. “We don’t know where we’re going. Passing by a place with redheads? We’ve got one right here...”

“Won’t work,” said James, perusing the parchment. “Says specifically ‘males,’ and my lovely Tiger Lily is many things, but male is not one of them.”

“Stop calling me that,” said Lily without much rancor. “Red-haired males... Weasleys?”

The three Marauders looked at each other. “Should’ve thought of that,” said Sirius. “Red hair and boys. Always boys. Don’t think there’s been a girl born to a Weasley in a hundred years.”

“We’ll probably want the biggest family of them there is,” James added, looking up. “Dumbledore would know, he knows everyone...”

Lily collected the parchment from James. “I’ll go tell Remus about this,” she said. “He deserves to hear.”

“I’ll see about getting a good broom,” said Peter.

“And we’ll find Dumbledore and ask about Weasleys,” said James, indicating himself and Sirius. “Let’s hurry, people, we’ve only got a week until full moon...”

The friends scattered.

Remus Lupin lay on his side on his bed, fully dressed, his eyes closed, his breathing deep and even despite the small stabs of pain that slid through his body with every movement.

I always knew I would die young. The only difference now is that I know the date. 16 September, 1978. I’ll start transforming as usual, the Occasus will take hold, and my body will shut down from pain overload. If not the first time, then surely the second.

His hand closed for a moment around the grip of his wand, then released it. He could hear the voice of Ollivander the wandmaker as clearly as the day he’d gone to the shop with his parents as an eleven-year-old. “*Twelve and a quarter inches, rowan and phoenix feather, pliable...*”

But I’ll never have a chance to use it again. Maybe I should leave it to James or Sirius, to use as a spare in case one of theirs gets broken...

He stroked the length of the wand, his fingers running up and down the polished wood. *I only have three real regrets. Well, two and a half. Dad is the half—he’s been going by inches ever since Mum died, this will just hurry him along a little, and then we’ll all be together again. But I am sorry I’ll have to miss James and Lily’s wedding. And I’d always hoped I might find someone of my own one of these days...*

He sighed deeply. *It’s likely just as well. This way, there’ll never be a chance of my waking up the night after full moon to find I’ve killed the girl I love.*

Because I’ll never wake up after a full moon again.

And I'll never be in love.

Someone tapped quietly at his door.

“Come in,” Remus called, rolling onto his back and sitting up, though not without a wince.

Lily opened the door, her eyes slightly bloodshot and the smell of tears about her, but also—

Remus blinked. Why would Lily smell of hope?

“How are you at riding?” she asked without preamble, sitting down on the end of the bed.

“Riding what? Brooms?” Remus shook his head. “Decent but no better, and I can’t now anyway, you know that—”

“Yes, I do, and that isn’t what I meant. I meant animals. Horses and such. Have you ever been?”

“Not often,” Remus said cautiously. “Why?”

“Because we might have the first step of something that could help you, but you have to be able to ride.” Lily pulled a scroll from her pocket and spread it out on the bed. “Here, look at this.”

Remus looked, and connections began to stir in the back of his mind. “Who gave this to you?” he asked.

“Oh, not you too.” Lily sighed. “It was Severus, but I don’t think he’s trying to get us killed—if that’s what he was after, he’d just have kidnapped me and set a trap for James and Sirius when they came after me...”

“That’s not why I asked.” Remus tapped at various words on the parchment, trying to get his half-recognition to solidify. “Does Severus ever make you think of anything else? An animal, perhaps?”

“Maybe,” Lily said shortly. “Why?”

The idea fractured and slid away. “Never mind.” Remus read the lines through twice. “I take it ‘he who is of the moon’ is me?”

“Unless you know someone with a stronger relation to the moon than yourself. James volunteered to be your mount—yes, I know about them now,” she said testily when Remus gaped at her, “and I think they’re wonderful and stupid and it’s a miracle none of them got caught between forms, especially Peter, I don’t know how he remembers which end of his wand to hold some days, but anyway, James has said you can ride on his back, and Sirius will be the bright star following, and Peter will fly out ahead to cast the shadow...”

Remus saw her face shut down. “And I stay home,” she finished, sitting back. “There’s no place for me. No part I can take. I’ve done what I’m meant to do—brought you this—and now I’m

finished, aren't I? I can just stay home like a good little girl and not worry my head, because the big strong wizards will take care of everything?"

"I don't know." Remus looked down at the parchment again. "He must seek the direction-giver," he read aloud. "That sounds as though this is only the first step of something bigger. Something more. And I thought I recognized it earlier—it's garbled, confused, but I've seen something like this before..." Instinctively, he reached for his wand, then released it with a frustrated sigh. "I keep doing that. It's as though I don't want to remember."

"Who would?" Lily asked softly, touching his hand. "Remus, if I haven't said it yet, thank you. I know you knocked James out of the way of that curse, took it on yourself, and I'm almost afraid to ask this question, but why?"

"I don't know." Remus stroked the back end of his wand, thinking over the question. "Perhaps, ultimately, it was because of you. Because he's the only one of us who's been lucky in love so far, and you've put up with your boyfriend's three tag-alongs astoundingly well. And there again, I know very well what James is like when he's hurt, and I wanted to save you from that."

Lily chuckled. "I have to deal with it sometime, you know."

"Save him from it, too, of course," Remus went on, barely hearing her. "He's my friend, one of the only true friends I've ever had, and I wish I could shield you all from every ill that comes your way..."

His fingers closed around his wand again, half-drawing it before he stopped. *Why am I intent on causing myself pain? Or is it something else?*

He looked at his wand, then back at the parchment, and the idea he'd had earlier moved in his mind once more. "Lily, do you have anything to write with?"

"I can." Lily stood up and crossed the room, returning a moment later with a quill and ink. "Try these. If they hurt, I'll get real ones."

Remus tapped a finger against the quill. "Perfectly fine. It's active magic that does it, not magic that's already over and done with." Loading the quill, he added a few phrases to the top of the parchment. "And I think I know what you can do. It's even something you're good at."

"What?"

"Research these." Remus pointed at the words he'd written. "In combination with all this, or other ways to say it. This is all drawing from one source, I'm sure of it, and there's more to that source than what we have here. If you can find it, we'll have some way to check whatever we find at the other end of this road." He swung his legs out of bed and stood up experimentally. "When we find it."

When, not if. Because it seems I'm not as hardened to the thought of my own death as I believed I

was. If this really can help me, if it's possible I could live beyond age eighteen and a half...

But there's a long way to go yet, and not much time.

“And we will find it,” Lily said, standing as well and first clasping his shoulders, then hugging him. “We’re not losing you yet. You have to be around to help Sirius write his speech for the wedding, for one thing. You know all the best stories.”

Remus smiled. “Mostly because I was usually the only one sober enough to remember what happened.”

“Yes, why is it that you don’t drink much?”

“Well, with my furry little problem, losing control is hardly my idea of a good time...”

By the time the other three Marauders returned, Lily and Remus had packed overnight bags for all of them, Lily putting an Undetectable Expansion Charm on a small broom-mountable holdall so that Wormtail could carry all four bags. Frank Longbottom had dug out one of the Order’s four-man tents for them to use if they were gone longer than one night, and Alice had given Lily a small book of field survival hints to tuck inside the holdall as well.

“Any luck?” Remus asked his friends, looking up from the stash of chocolate he was packing for himself.

Peter patted the gleaming broom he carried over his shoulder. “Fabian’s letting me borrow his,” he said.

“For a twenty-Galleon security deposit,” said James, grinning.

Peter flushed.

Sirius unrolled the scroll in his hand, revealing a map of the south of England with a dotted line marked in red. “Dumbledore says the biggest Weasley family lives here,” he said, pointing at a small X beside the line. “Five kids, all boys—their mum’s Gideon and Fabian’s sister, actually, and Gideon was able to sketch the house for me, so we’ll know it when we see it. From where we are, going past them means going north.”

“They’re not too far, either,” James added. “We can probably get there in one night if we leave here at sunset, but it’s your party, Moony. What d’you want to do?”

“Stay alive,” Remus said dryly, making the other Marauders and Lily laugh. “And as strange and crazy as it seems, this is a chance to do that, when I didn’t think there was any. I say we try it.”

“*After* you eat,” said Lily, picking up the bags from the bed and tossing them to her fiancé and his friends. “And after you check those for completeness, and get a nap if you can. And we still have

to get a saddle sorted out for you, James.”

“If I didn’t know what was going on here, that would sound so wrong,” Sirius muttered.

Lily smacked him on her way to the door.

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Chapter 2

As the sun sank below the horizon, the four Marauders set out, farewelled by Lily and Dumbledore (who had taken the revelation of the Animagus abilities of James, Sirius, and Peter as calmly as he did all things). Prongs the stag wore a simple leather saddle on his back, giving Remus some stability in his seat, with Padfoot the dog running along behind, ready to catch Remus should he fall. Above and ahead of them flew Peter, the holdall attached to his broom with the Marauders' four bags and the tent inside it, along with something Lily had seen Dumbledore quietly adding.

Though why he thinks they'd need it, I have no idea...

She watched them disappear into the gathering twilight, idly stroking the frame of the small mirror James had given her with their last kiss. He carried the other himself, and had promised to give her a call every morning to let her know how things were going.

Here's hoping they come back soon. Soon, and with Remus cured.

Tucking the mirror into a pocket, Lily turned to the Headmaster. "I wonder if I could slip into Hogwarts for a few hours?" she asked. "For some research on a personal project?"

"I think that might be possible." Dumbledore smiled. "Does it have anything to do with your friends' quest, perchance?"

"It might. We weren't sure."

"May I know more about it, then? I may be able to help..."

Talking quietly, the young witch and the old wizard made their way indoors.

The night fell into a dreamlike rhythm for Remus as he dozed against the supporting straps Dumbledore had added to the saddle. The easy beat of Prongs' hooves, Padfoot's snuffling breathing behind, Wormtail's tuneless humming from above, all blended into a soporific soundtrack, and he watched with little surprise as the stars crossed the sky between blinks and the moon rose bright and half-round to his right. At one point, Peter flew directly across it, his cloak flaring out behind him, and Remus' half-sleeping mind saw wings and talons and a cruel, pointed beak in the silhouette.

Though hawks eat rats, so I can't imagine Peter would care for them. Still, he's being our hawk-eye, up in the air to spot troubles, and do whatever wandwork we need until Sirius can get there...

He fell back into a doze as Wormtail's shadow passed by him once more, and dreamed of a woman's husky voice, singing to the strumming of a guitar. Snatches of words caught his ear: "... loud and cruel...cold and clear...hale and sound..." A flash of silver, a glimpse of blue, a flicker

of brown, caught at his mind's eye, as the singer danced to her own words and the playing of another, turning as she bade the knight of her song, spinning in a dizzy whirl for the joy of the night and the music. He felt as if he could have watched her forever.

I wonder who she is?

Prongs, Remus asleep on his back, slowed to a stop outside a ramshackle house. It was obviously a well-lived-in home, and just as obviously held up by magic. Padfoot halted a few paces back and retransformed into Sirius, Peter landing beside him. "What is it?" the shorter wizard asked, dismounting.

"That's the Weasleys' place. The Burrow, Dumbledore said they call it." Sirius grinned. "Have to get to know them at some point, I like their sense of humor. But where do we go from here?"

Peter pulled the scroll from the bag hanging on his broom, his hand brushing by patched fabric as he did. "Maybe there's a clue in here," he said, unrolling it and holding it where Sirius could see it. Prongs backed up delicately, his ears twitching towards his friends. Remus sagged against his straps, snoring faintly.

"Passing by a place where there are males with red hair," Sirius read, pointing at the line. "Passing by... does that mean we should just keep going? How far?"

"We can't go too much farther, if we're only supposed to travel at night," Peter said, peering at the sky. "It'll be dawn soon."

Prongs tossed his head, impatient with the discussion. *Let's get a move on*, he seemed to be saying. *You two haven't got a bloody great weight on your back, and I do!*

"Further north," murmured a sleepy voice. "North until the stars sink below the earth, and we hear our guide's voice calling."

"Moony?" Sirius lifted his head to focus on his friend. "That you?"

"Have to hurry," Remus said indistinctly, shifting his position as though he were uncomfortable. "She's waiting..."

"Who?" said Sirius and Peter together, but Remus' face had relaxed once more, and there was no response.

Prongs dug a hoof into the ground, snorting. Obviously he was all in favor of hurrying.

"Onwards it is." Sirius flexed his hands with a wince. "I'm not going to be able to hold my wand straight for days."

"Fabian said once he gets better performance on a broom when he thins the Cushioning Charm."

Peter massaged the part of his anatomy most directly affected. "I never quite realized what that meant before tonight."

Sirius barked a laugh, transforming in the middle of it without changing the sound very much. Prongs leapt forward, and Padfoot bounded after him, Wormtail hastily mounting his broom and kicking off the ground to follow.

Remus came fully awake as an owl hooted. The first light of dawn was sending golden shoots across the sky, and he could hear a stream flowing somewhere nearby, but he was quite sure it was the owl that had awakened him.

And I'm also sure we should be following it. I'm not sure why I'm sure, but I am.

He tapped Prongs' shoulder. "That way," he said, pointing, when the antlered head turned enough so that one incongruous hazel eye could focus on him. "We're close now."

"We'd better be," Peter said from above, descending to Remus' own level to fly beside Prongs. "I'm so tired I keep catching myself just before I fall off the broom."

Sirius turned human behind them. "Maybe we should've strapped you in too, Wormtail," he teased. "I can right now if you like..."

"You said you couldn't even hold your wand straight."

"I can hold it straight enough for this."

"Stop it, you two," said Remus as Prongs passed over the crest of a hill. "I think I see where we're going."

Peter turned to face front again, and his eyes widened. Sirius, coming to the top of the hill a few seconds later, let out a low whistle of amazement.

The house on the next hill north was slender, tall, and perfectly round, as though it were an inaccessible tower in a story. A small owl perched on its roof, eyeing the Marauders as they descended into the valley between the hills. Once there, Remus undid the buckle on his straps and pulled his leg over Prongs' back, clenching his teeth against pain.

"I'll be back when I know where we're going next," he said, sliding to the ground. "You three see if you can't get some rest while I'm gone."

"Hold up," Sirius objected. "We're not letting you go alone!"

"I think I have to," said Remus. "I'm the one looking for help."

"But we're looking for it with you!" Peter looked at Remus' face and sighed, then pulled Remus' bag from the holdall and extracted a bar of chocolate. "At least take this. You haven't eaten."

“Yes, Mother,” Remus teased, accepting the chocolate. “And don’t worry too much, Padfoot,” he added to Sirius. “I’ll be in sight the whole time. If I collapse or get ambushed, you can rush in and rescue me. Otherwise, let me try and save my own life for once?”

And taking a bite of chocolate to give himself courage, Remus turned and started up the hill, aware every step of his friends’ eyes on his back and the owl’s eyes on his front. It was female, if he remembered his father’s lessons properly, and the only response he’d had to his approach so far was a slight fluffing of feathers.

Is she an Animagus too? Is she the one I’m supposed to ask for directions?

He stifled a smile. And here I thought men weren’t ever allowed to do that.

The little owl took wing, swooping down from the roof to what Remus could now see was a brightly-painted gate around a rather odd-looking garden. She perched there and watched him climb, and he felt it somehow incumbent on him to keep going even when his side began to burn and his legs to ache. He made it to the top without falling, but it was a near thing, and it was not only for show that he leaned on the gate beside the owl.

“So,” he said to her. “Here I am.”

“Yes, here you are,” agreed a woman’s voice from nearby.

Remus hastily straightened up as a witch in white robes emerged from behind one of the gnarled trees which decorated the garden. She had long hair which was neither quite blonde nor quite brown, a bit like Remus’ own, and her eyes were a slate blue and rather wide, giving her a look of wonder.

“Here you are,” she repeated, coming to the other side of the gate and stroking the head of the owlet. “But why have you come here? What is it you seek?”

Remus took a moment to get his thoughts in order. This sounded like the sort of question he’d only have one chance to answer. “I seek healing,” he said finally. “Or one who can tell me where healing can be found. I am under a curse which has no cure in the magic we know, so I seek one who knows other magic and might help me survive.”

The witch nodded, as though this were only what she’d expected. “The path is still long,” she said in a tone of warning. “You will be sorely tested, and the price for what you seek is high. But you seem determined. I will give you what you need from me.” She smiled, looking over his shoulder. “You have much of what you need already, or close enough to it that it makes no difference. Treasure those who come this way with you, for without them, your quest would have been doomed from its beginning.”

Remus bowed his head in acknowledgement, then listened as she began to speak again. Though her words seemed to make no sense, he stored them away in any case, reminding himself that the original scroll from Snape had made just as little sense when he’d first seen it.

And it led us here. To someone who seems to know what I'm talking about, and to be willing to help me. I suppose she could be a Death Eater plant, but why go to all this trouble just to get my hopes up?

For not even to himself could he deny that this quest had given him hope again.

“So?” said James through a mouthful of sausage when Remus returned. “What’s the verdict?”

“Don’t anyone get too comfortable,” Remus warned, sitting down beside Peter and accepting the plate of sausages and charred bread his friend handed him. “We have to go again as soon as we’re done eating.”

“What?” Sirius yelped. “We were up all night, and now you want us to keep going?”

“She said the path we have to take will only work if we’re tired.” Remus bit a sausage in half.

“She’s having you on, Moony. Paths are there no matter what.”

“Maybe not, Padfoot,” said James thoughtfully. “Remember that one funny door at Hogwarts, up on the seventh floor, that would always disappear as soon as we got close to it? It was like it could tell that we wanted to know what it was, and it didn’t want us to know.”

“At the risk of being obvious, Prongs, this isn’t Hogwarts.”

“But it is a magical adventure,” Peter put in. James and Sirius both looked at him, and he flushed, but went on. “Why can’t there be a path that can tell if we’re tired or fresh?”

“And as it’s my life we’re playing for,” Remus said, swallowing his sausage, “I say we follow the directions exactly.”

“It may be your life, but it’s my paws doing the walking!” Sirius held up his hands, which were starting to look rather battered. “And my legs, two of which, let me remind you, are not used to carrying my weight for this long! And this after I’d already had a full day out training—”

“You can stay behind if you like, Padfoot,” said James, taking a slurp of tea. “Hold down the fort here. Wait to hear how it all comes out.”

“Like hell I will,” Sirius shot back. “Marauders together, Marauders forever. Even if I do think you’re all Fwoopers.”

“Go on, Moony,” Peter urged. “What do we do once we’re on the path?”

“Follow it through the fog until we find a pass marked with a stone that looks like a church steeple. Through that we should be able to see an oxbow lake. You three have to stay behind there like you did here, until I call you.” Remus held up a small object. “With this.”

“Wow,” said James, examining the carved horn Remus was holding up. “Is that meant to look like a lion?”

“I think so. It might even be enchanted to sound like one, but I haven’t tried it.”

“Give it a go, then,” said Sirius, draining his mug and cleaning it out with a casual flick of his wand. “Let’s hear what we’re supposed to come running to.”

Remus looked tempted, but shook his head. “I think this is another one of those things that should only happen when it happens. No practice.”

“We won’t have to wonder very much,” Peter added. “It’ll be the loudest noise we hear. So when you blow the horn, then we have to come?”

“As fast as you can, she said, because we have to chase the witch down and catch her without hurting her if we want her help.” Remus looked around at his friends. “She seemed to think you were funny for some reason, Wormtail, but she approves of us as possible witch-catchers. Apparently the only way it’s ever been done is with a group like ours—and these are her words, not mine—‘wise and clever, brave and true, for the one you seek values them all.’”

“Sounds like she’d be a tough case for Sorting,” said James. “Speaking of which…” He dipped his hand into the holdall and came up with a rather battered black object. “Does anyone have even an inkling why Dumbledore thought *this* would be useful?” Three shaking heads greeted him. “Thought not. And he’ll probably take it out of our hides if we lose it. Oh well.” He tucked it away again. “Maybe we’ll find out when we get there. So what happens after we catch up to this witch of yours, Moony?”

“She’s not mine,” Remus protested automatically. “And I don’t know. I assume she heals me, and we thank her and go home. Or she says she can’t help me, and we thank her and go home anyway.”

“And you die,” Peter said quietly.

Remus flinched. “I was trying not to think of that part,” he said. “But yes. If she can’t or won’t help me…” He looked up at the sky, where the moon was still visible in the early morning blue. “Six days. Five, if this takes as long as I think it will. Not quite the life I’d hoped for.”

“Which is why it won’t happen,” James said, clapping Remus gently on the shoulder with his free hand. “We’ll find this witch and chase her down—four legs are faster than two, she won’t get away from us—and get her to fix you up, and then it’s back off home to keep on fighting old Moldymort.”

Who might still kill us all in the end, but that’s not the point. The point is to get Remus through this, because if we don’t, if we just let him die without trying to help him, we’re no better than the ones we’re fighting against, and we aren’t that way.

I won’t let us be that way.

“Finish up, all,” he said, setting a good example by taking a huge bite out of his last piece of toast. “The sooner we’re done, the tireder we’ll be when we start on this path.”

The path, which Sirius secretly thought they could have found even if they hadn’t all been tired, followed the twists and bends of a river in a deep valley, and was indeed covered with fog. He reassumed his human form for the walk, as it facilitated pinching himself on the arm whenever he felt himself starting to doze.

Which is about once every five minutes. Though time seems funny here. I know we got on this path at sunrise, and I don’t think we could possibly have walked all day—though I’m worn down enough for it—but here it is night again already...

Wormtail, high overhead, seemed to feel the drowsiness too, as his broom took odd little dives from time to time which broke off abruptly with gasps from its rider. Prongs was picking his way wearily through the clumps of ferns which grew thickly along the trail. Only Moony was alert, sitting straight in his saddle and peering ahead through the thick mist, as though he could see where they were going if he just paid good enough attention.

I suppose I’d be interested too, if I thought I was going to die if whatever we were headed to didn’t pan out. Or maybe not die, not in my case, but be stuck for a long time, possibly forever, not being able to do magic. Sirius pinched the inside of his elbow and hurried ahead to catch up with Prongs, who had got several yards ahead of him while he was daydreaming. *What would that be like?*

Setting his feet to keep pace with the stag, he let his mind wander. *I’d probably have to stay at Headquarters, make sure no little Mortality Munchers got hold of me and tried to use me as bait for Prongs. He’d come running to rescue me if I were captured, I know he would, and Moony and Wormy wouldn’t stay home either—Lily might even insist on getting a piece of the action, and wouldn’t that thrill Prongs to pieces, his precious Tiger Lily putting herself in danger because of me?*

So I’d be stuck inside. Sirius made a face at the thought. *Nowhere to go, nothing to do, at least not until other people showed up. People who were useful, who could do things that mattered. I could help them out while they were there, but then they’d leave, and I’d be alone again. Probably start drinking just to pass the time. And how long before I decided I’d find some way to fight even without my wand, and went out and got myself killed?*

He shuddered. *Think I’ll leave well enough alone, thanks. I’ve got my magic still, so do Prongs and Wormtail and Lily, and we might be able to save Moony if this mad little escapade works out. If it doesn’t...* A furtive glance at the upright figure on Prongs’ back. *He knew it was a war when he signed up for it. People die in wars. And he may not always show it, but he’s Gryffindor to the core. He’ll die with a smile on.*

But deep in his heart, Sirius knew what a gaping hole in his life Remus’ absence would create, and the knowledge sent his shoulders back and his head up.

Moony's not going to die, he vowed to himself. Not before me, at any rate.

The Marauders plodded wearily on.

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The Witch of the Westmoreland

Chapter 3

“I think I see it!” Peter called out, circling high above. “The steeple rock, and the pass beside it! And there’s water on the other side, and it’s curved!”

Remus shook himself out of a daydream of the singer from his dreams the previous night—she’d sung twice for him this time, once about a maiden who tricked a greedy sea captain and stole his treasure, once about an ill-fated crew of privateers with a leaking ship and a drunken cook, and he’d hoped to hear more, but this was reality. Dreams would have to wait.

“This is it,” he said, dismounting from Prongs once more. “Rest your legs, eat if you’re hungry, but be ready to come running when you hear my signal.” He tapped the horn where it hung on its strap by his side. “We’ll only get one cast at this.”

His friends shook his hand or slapped him on the back, wishing him well in words sincere and profane, and Remus turned to walk into the strange valley.

I wonder. Have I been dreaming of the Witch herself? Does she know I’m coming? Will she answer when I call her?

With a quick glance over his shoulder to ensure he was out of the others’ sight, he drew his wand, holding fast to the means by which the woman at the tower had told him the Witch could be summoned.

I’m glad I didn’t tell the others I’d have to conjure something to call her up. They’d have insisted on coming with me and doing it for me, and then it wouldn’t work. I have to do it myself, to prove I’m sincere about this, or she’ll never agree to heal me. Not even for the price I’m ready to pay.

He’d have to be prepared to shield the others if they tried to attack the Witch when that price was revealed. It would hurt, but his willingness to use magic for it ought to slow them down a bit on its own.

They won’t like it, but they’re my friends, not my keepers. I can make my own decisions.

The valley widened out around him into a lush, green paradise. The trees had not begun to turn here, and flowers still bloomed in profusion, sweeping in a carpet of color down to the bank of the lake. Remus could see several sprays of the particular flower he’d been told he’d need to conjure, and was tempted for a moment to pick some and use that instead...

As if she wouldn’t know. She’s a creature of magic, and that magic, and by extension what and who she is, will be intimately linked to this place. No tricks, no games. I may be a Marauder, but I’m playing this one strictly by the rulebook.

He came to the edge of the water and leaned over, curious to see how he looked in the pale pre-

dawn light. His own face looked back at him, covered with ever-shifting lines as the water rippled against the toes of his shoes, more drawn than usual with the pain of his curse but otherwise no different than the face he was used to seeing.

That will change in a few moments.

Lifting his wand, Remus aimed it at the center of the lake. Even the movement drew a protest from the muscles and nerves of his arm, as the Occasus Veneficius registered that he was about to do magic and prepared to wreak its havoc on him.

Enjoy it while you can, curse. It won't last.

“Bactaurelius ! ” Remus shouted, the final sibilant held out longer than he'd intended as a hiss of pain. It felt as though someone had run a firebrand up and down his arms and legs, his spine had turned to pure ice, and surely he'd been gut-punched, nothing else could have made his muscles tighten like this...

A great spray of bright yellow blossoms shot from the end of his wand and fell into the water of the lake with soft plopping sounds.

“There was never a woman born who didn't like flowers,” said the witch in white in Remus' memory as he went to one knee with the pain, fighting to stay awake. *“She prefers this kind to all others, and says anyone who wants her help should endeavor first to find out what she's fond of. One silly young man spent a whole week by the lake casting roses into it, since he hadn't bothered to ask me.”*

But Remus had asked. And it seemed the answer had been true.

A woman's head rose from the center of the lake, regarding the flowers which floated placidly on the water's surface. Remus blinked and stifled a groan of disappointment; apparently he hadn't dreamed of the Witch after all.

Have to be sure to keep Sirius quiet, or he'll make some joke about her being Dark...

The woman—the Witch—turned to look at him, then advanced towards him, more of her chocolate-colored skin becoming visible with every step she took. Remus made a concerted effort to keep his eyes on her face, but it was becoming harder by the second, especially when her waist was about to emerge—

And then where the Witch had stood was a night-black horse, which reared in place, screaming challenge.

Remus snatched up the horn hanging by his side and blew into it, and a lion's roar echoed across the valley, shooting pain through him again from the use of an enchanted object. The Witch-mare screamed once more at the sound, galloped from the lake, and thundered past Remus, but her hoofbeats were oddly doubled—

No, that was Prongs, even now skidding to a halt beside him, as Padfoot shot past on Remus' other side and Wormtail above, the one sounding his challenge in resounding barks, the other with his wand gripped in his hand and a face of grim determination—

Remus pulled himself into the saddle and slapped Prongs on the shoulder. “Go,” he wheezed, clinging to the straps in lieu of buckling them on. “Go—we’ve got to be there, it can’t be all them —”

Prongs bounded forward, and Remus held on even tighter, leaning forward against his friend’s soft neck and praying he didn’t fall.

One hard part over. One yet to come.

I’m glad none of the others know what those flowers in the water really mean...

Catch her without hurting her, Peter repeated to himself, keeping pace with the galloping mare below. Catch her without hurting her. I hope Padfoot remembers that...

But the great black dog seemed to have the stricture in mind as well, since he was bounding up behind the mare and well to one side, obviously meaning to dart in front of her and cut her off, force her to turn and face Prongs and Moony—Peter readied himself to dive down and stop her from fleeing the other way, a Shield Charm or an Impediment Jinx might do the best—

A flicker of movement along the mare’s flank caught his eye, and he stared. He’d grown up in a small village, several of his neighbors had kept horses, and no horse should have anything that moved in that spot—

Unless—

Padfoot charged for the mare’s forelegs, barking hoarsely.

The mare leapt over him, and great black wings unfurled from her sides—they beat once, twice, and she was airborne and climbing steeply—

Sirius, human once more, tumbled to a halt against a bush. “Wormtail!” he shouted upwards between gasps for breath, as Prongs and Moony pulled up beside him. “It’s all you!”

All me.

Peter sent his broom shooting forward, climbing a bit to keep his height advantage over the Witch.

All me.

It was hardly a comforting thought, and the mutter of “For all the good it’ll do” he’d half-heard from Sirius wasn’t helping.

All me.

The Witch looked up as his shadow passed over her and snorted warningly, echoing Prongs' sound of a moment ago, though Prongs' snort had sounded more skeptical that Peter would be up to his task.

But there's no one else. And Moony's life depends on this.

Peter thrust out his wand towards the Witch, trying to hold his arm still, praying his voice wouldn't shake. "Land!" he ordered, trying to force some of the authority he so often heard in James' voice or Sirius' into his own. "Land now!"

A long black horsehair tail flicked up unerringly, and Peter yelped as his wand went spinning away. The Witch blew in amusement, then tossed her mane and set her wings to glide away from him.

She's not even looking at me. She barely looked at me to disarm me. She thinks what they think—what everyone thinks—

A surge of anger rushed through Peter, and he threw himself flat on the broom, swooping forward and down like a raptor until he pulled up in front of the Witch's nose. She threw up her head, startled, and Peter thrust his hand into the bag hanging under the broom, hoping to find the rope with which they would have set up the tent if they'd needed it—

His hand encountered grooved metal. Without thinking, he grasped what he'd touched and pulled it out, and only as it emerged from the bag did he see clearly what he was holding, and wonder with a scrap of his mind how it had come there—

There's no time, she'll get away—

He swung the silver sword high, threatening the Witch with it. "*Don't you dare fly away from me!*" he shouted, barely caring when his voice cracked in the middle of the second-to-last word. "My friend is hurt—he'll *die* if you can't help him—*get down there right now, or else!*"

For the space of three breaths, nothing moved but the Witch's wings, beating in a slow hover, and Peter's heart, thundering inside his chest. Padfoot, Moony, and Prongs seemed frozen in their group below—the Witch held Peter's blue eyes with her great brown ones—Peter dared not lower his arm, though it was burning with the strain of holding the sword aloft—

And then the Witch folded her wings and plunged, and landed neatly on the ground before the other three Marauders as a human woman about their own age, wearing a long gown of red velvet with a gold chain belting it in at the waist, her dark and tightly curled hair forming a soft helmet about her head and her warm brown shoulders bare. Peter guided his broomstick down behind her, still holding the sword ready to strike, as Padfoot and Prongs, now devoid of saddle, moved out to flank her, and Remus drew his wand.

“Pray, good sir, lay your sword down,” said the Witch, looking over her shoulder at Peter with a smile. Her voice was soft and silvery, her eyes full of approval, and Peter smiled back before he could stop himself, setting the sword on the ground at his feet.

“And you, my friend,” she said, turning back to Remus. “Sheathe your wand, for I can see the pain it costs you to use it, and I shall run no more. I am fairly caught and your healing fairly won, if you are truly willing to pay the price you have offered with your gift.”

James and Sirius retransformed, shooting wary glances at each other and at Peter. The message was clear, even without the fist Sirius made, thumb first inside, then out.

Price? Gift? What is she talking about?

“Answer first this one question,” Remus said, lowering his wand but not yet putting it away. “Is your life as dedicated to healing as the stories I have heard about you seem to say?”

“It is,” the Witch answered firmly, “and neither I nor any who dwell with me shall do harm or wrong to another unless we or innocent ones are menaced first.”

“Then my gift spoke truly.” Remus slid his wand away and held out his hand to the Witch, who clasped it in hers. “I will pay the price.”

“Moony,” said James carefully. “What price?”

Remus and the Witch exchanged a long look. “They do not know,” the Witch said, her tone making it a statement, not a question.

“I thought they might not like it,” said Remus, letting go of the Witch’s hand. “Will you tell them, or should I?”

“I can, if you prefer.”

“I think it would be better coming from you.”

“Very well.” The Witch turned, so that she was facing the other three Marauders rather than Remus. “Your friend cast flowers of his own making into the lake by which I dwell,” she said, waving her hand back towards the water. “In so doing, he offered the only true price for the saving of his life.”

“What’s that?” Peter asked.

“A life for a life is only fair,” said the Witch with a faint smile. “If your friend’s healing can be accomplished, he has agreed that he shall remain with the one who performs it, to serve her all his days and never leave her side again.”

“*What?*” James and Sirius yelled together.

I knew they'd take it badly. Remus sighed and started back towards the lake, walking slowly, not because he hurt—in truth, he was feeling remarkably good for being under a curse and not having slept in two nights—but because he was busy looking around. If he was going to spend the rest of his life here, he might as well get to know the place.

It's a beautiful spot, at least. Quiet and peaceful. He trailed his fingers along the overhanging branch of a tree as he passed beneath it. *And judging by the friend of that witch who gave us the directions, owls have no trouble coming and going, so I'll be able to write. She might even let me visit sometimes. For James and Lily's wedding, or the day he and Sirius become Aurors...*

During the long ride along the mist-covered path, he'd wondered why he was so sure his friends would object more to the price for his healing than he did himself, and he thought he had found part of an answer.

All three of them still cling to the illusion that they are the masters of their own lives, with no one and nothing else to tell them what to do or where to go. James has Lily, true, but she isn't really exerting much pressure on him yet. Sirius never found a girl he liked enough to change his ways for her, and he cut his ties with his family years ago. Even Peter's winning free of his mother bit by bit, starting to believe he can go his own way, chart his own course.

But as Remus knew all too well, no one was ever truly as free as his friends believed they were. Powers both magical and natural changed the courses of human lives every day, taking them over and altering their destinies. He had been subject to one such power from the age of four, and knew from bitter experience that life was neither fair nor fully under his control. Everyone had someone or something they called “master,” or in his case “mistress.”

Which is why I asked her what she spends her life doing. She's a Healer, which makes her almost by definition on the side of good, but there's plenty of room in that “almost” for nasty things to creep through. Still, that answer she gave me sounds definite enough. She follows the same code I do—only fight to defend your own life or those of your friends, or innocent people who can't fight for themselves.

Remus looked out over the lake, tracing the sparkling ripples on its surface with his eyes as the sun rose behind him.

But now she's got me wondering. She mentioned “any who dwell with me” specifically when she told me that, and I don't think she'd have done that if we were going to be alone together...

So who else lives in this valley?

“I don't care what you're going to do for Moony, you can't just demand he give you his whole life!” Sirius bellowed at the Witch. “That's not the way things work!”

“Who said that it was? Surely not I.” The Witch drew herself up, looking down her nose at Sirius—they were within an inch or so of each other's height, James noticed, and there were strong

muscles under that brown skin. “I have demanded nothing.”

“You bloody liar!” Sirius bared his teeth as Padfoot might before a battle. “You said yourself, not even a minute ago, that you expected him to stick around here and *serve* you after you’ve healed him!”

He may not have learned much from his mum, but he sure learned how to throw plenty of sarcasm into one word.

“As I expected, you do not listen,” the Witch said, disdain dripping from her every syllable. “I said *if* his healing could be accomplished. *If*. And I tell you truly now that I have healed him as much as I may—it was done at the touch of my hand on his—and that which afflicts him worst is beyond my power to change. I heal the wounds of the body, not those of the heart or soul.”

Peter made a little moaning noise, and Sirius growled between his teeth. James felt the bottom of his stomach drop away.

All this... was for nothing. She can't do it, she can't help, Moony's still going to die...

“James!”

It was Lily’s voice, and it was coming from his pocket. James got what he hoped was a natural-looking smile on his face and pulled out the two-way mirror. “What’s up, Tiger Lily?” he asked, then blinked—Lily’s hair was blowing back from her face, and she wore a traveling cloak. “Where are you?”

“Close to you, I think—can you send a Patronus to guide me in? I’ve got something Remus needs.”

“Sure. See you soon.” James blew a kiss to the mirror and tapped its top right corner, and it went dark. *Something Moony needs? How about to live? To be healed?* He drew his wand dully. *And he can't.*

Though wait, he was talking with Lily before we left—maybe she’s figured out some last piece of the puzzle, something we don’t know about yet—

Clinging to that slender hope, he conjured his stag Patronus and sent it off towards his love, watching it gallop away upwards.

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The Witch of the Westmoreland

Chapter 4

Movement along the lakeshore, in the shade of a willow tree, caught Remus' eye. *That's not any of us, it looks like a woman—she's wearing a gown like the Witch's, I may be about to get my question answered—*

The woman stepped forward hesitantly into the morning light. Her gown differed from the Witch's only in being blue rather than red, and the belt of links about her slender waist was silver instead of gold. Her skin looked naturally fair, but she obviously spent a great deal of time in the sun, and the resultant tan set off the wild brunette curls which cascaded to the middle of her back to perfection. In her hand she held a spray of yellow flowers, still wet from the lake. Her eyes were a warm, rich brown, and fixed on him as though he were her salvation.

So much Remus took in at his first glance. His second moved past 'what does she look like' and focused on 'who is she,' and all matters of looks and dress became utterly unimportant. He had room in his mind for only one thought.

She's real.

"You're real," breathed the voice he'd heard singing to him as he rode towards this place. "You're real—and you've come—"

In an instant she was in his arms, her own around him, her lips against his. The flower in her hand was dripping cold water down his back, but he didn't care.

She's real, and she's even more beautiful than I dreamed her, and she seems so glad to see me—

"I know all about you now," she whispered when they broke off. "From this." She brought the blossom around so that he could see it. "You made it, and I've held it, and my magic lets me know you from that—I so hoped you were the one, the one who heard me singing, the one who watched me dance—"

Remus lowered his head and sought her lips again, and she gave them gladly, but even the wonder of a second kiss couldn't take his mind from its path.

I suppose part of healing has to be knowing what the one you're healing ought to be like normally. If she's a healer of magic, she must be able to feel my magic through the flowers, because I conjured them, and learn who I am from that. But all about me—then she knows—

They broke off again. "I can let you learn about me that same way if you want," she said, looking up at him. "All you have to do is pick one of these same flowers that's grown here, and hold it a certain way with my help. It won't hurt you, I promise, and you'll know me then as I know you. Will you?"

Remus hesitated for a moment. *To learn all about another person, all in the blink of an eye—all their good and their bad, their joys and sorrows, successes and failures and troubles and comforts* —

Then he looked down at the bright face still turned up to him, and felt his soul rising to answer its call.

I've never believed in love at first sight.

But I think it might just be happening to me.

She smiled impishly at him, and rose onto her tiptoes to steal a third kiss.

May as well be informed love at first sight, then.

When their lips parted once more, Remus knelt and plucked a spray of the flower he needed, holding it up to her. She cupped her hands around his and blew into them, and a picture formed amid the tumbling seeds—a baby girl, her eyes wide and brown, reaching up to the toy her dark-skinned sister held above her.

Remus sat back on his heels to watch.

“You’re in with Snape, aren’t you?” Sirius snarled at the Witch. “You and whoever that woman was, back at that tower thing—you set this all up, you’re just playing with us, getting our hopes up and stringing us along until you can hand us over to Voldemort—”

The Witch closed the distance between them and slapped Sirius across the face. “You *dare*,” she hissed at him. “You *dare* suggest I would ally myself to such evil as you name. How am I to know for my part that none of *you* serve him, and that *you* will not bring him down upon *me*, to use my power for his own foul purposes?”

James bristled. “Just a second here!” he snapped. “Are you suggesting one of us could turn? One of *us*?” He waved a hand at Sirius, nursing his reddened cheek, and Peter, who was watching the whole scene in fascination. “I’d trust these men with my life! With Lily’s life!”

“And so you would have done,” said the Witch icily, turning to face him. “And you would have died for it, as would she.”

James took a step back. “Died?” he repeated, feeling very much as if he’d fallen over a cliff he hadn’t even known was there. “I would have—and Lily—”

“I’m here,” Lily said breathlessly, landing her broom beside him and dismounting. “James, you’re pale as a ghost, what’s wrong?”

James pulled her close, as if he could protect her with his own body. “What are you talking

about?” he demanded of the Witch. “What do you mean, we *would have* died?”

“I speak of a world that would have been, had you dodged the curse thrown at you of your own accord, and thus had no need to seek me out for the sake of your friend.” The Witch’s head was high, her eyes remote, as though she could see a vision none of the rest of them could. “A world in which neither you, nor any of those others who have come here, would live to be forty years of age.”

“What?” Lily gasped. “How is that possible?”

The Witch brought her gaze down to meet Lily’s and smiled. “It is finally time,” she said. “Time for you to speak to these two of what you see, what they would never hear before.” Her nod indicated Sirius and James. “Of the other reason, besides their treatment of the friend of your childhood, that you resisted for so long the love of the man you now stand beside.”

“Oh.” Lily laughed a little. “If that’s all—”

“All,” the Witch interrupted with a warning tone in her voice. “All—but this ‘all’ would have ended many lives and blighted countless others, and you are beginning to let yourself be blinded to it as well. Though it is perhaps less your fault than it could have been.” She turned away, to look again at—

Wormtail? James blinked. *What’s he got to do with this?*

“May I guess?” the Witch asked kindly. “You thought that hiding the pain would eventually send it away. That even the semblance of friendship was better than a life alone and unprotected. Am I near the mark?”

Peter sniffed once and nodded, his eyes filling with tears. The Witch crossed to him and laid a hand on his shoulder, turning to nod to Lily.

Lily pulled away from James and faced him and Sirius. “She’s got it right,” she said, indicating the Witch. “There was another reason besides the way you acted to Severus that I didn’t want to be around you for all those years.”

“What, Wormtail?” Sirius scoffed. “What’s wrong, couldn’t you stand the way he smells?”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about!” Lily shouted, startling Sirius into half a step back. “Peter’s supposed to be your *friend*, Sirius, but you spend half your time ignoring him and the other half running him down! And you’re no better!” She hurled the accusation at James. “You’re supposed to help your friends, care about them, give them a hand when they need it! Not just *put up with them!*” The green eyes glistened with tears of their own now. “Are you really surprised I thought long and hard before I decided I wanted to be your friend, when I could see how you treated a person you already called that?”

“But—” Sirius was goggling at her. “I don’t *mean* it! Not like that! It’s all in fun, the stuff I say, I

don't really mean any of it!"

"Tell *him* that," Lily snapped. "Or better yet, don't. Just stop doing it. Because words *hurt*, Sirius. Words hurt worse than the Cruciatus ever could. And apparently, these words had the power to kill every one of us here—which I would tend to assume includes you!"

James felt the pieces fly together in his mind, and the implications staggered him.

She's right. Both of them are right. He glanced at the Witch, who was now holding a shaking Peter. *We don't treat him the same way we do each other, or even Moony. And we wouldn't ever have seen it if not for today.*

But Voldemort would have. He's done it before, used people's own weaknesses against them. He'd have got to Wormtail somehow, threatened him or bribed him or put him under Imperius, and would we ever have realized it? Would we ever have thought of him as a spy? I know I wouldn't..

He looked over at Sirius and saw the same sick realization dawning in the gray eyes that he knew lurked in his own hazel.

We wouldn't. None of us would. We'd have looked at everyone else, but never him, and he'd have got himself in deeper and deeper, because he'd never have dared to tell us what was going on. And the end of it would have been death. Mine and Lily's for sure, maybe Padfoot's too, and even if Moony lived through it, what kind of life would he have afterwards, with all his friends either dead or turned traitor? And Wormtail would have been stuck on the wrong side, so no matter who won, he'd have been miserable as long as he lived—which apparently wouldn't have been all that long —

Just the thought of such endings to his own life and his friends' made James want to scream, and judging by the look on Sirius' face, he wasn't alone.

But that's not even the worst of it. As insane as that sounds for the fact that we'd all have died before we were forty.

No, the worst of it is that if we'd never had this day, if we'd never heard these words, if we'd kept going the way we have been and came to that ending—

"We would have deserved it," he said aloud.

"Always did hate people who let their friends down," Sirius agreed hoarsely.

Together, they crossed the little clearing towards Peter, who was sitting on the ground with the silver sword in his lap, running a finger across its ruby-encrusted hilt. Lily seemed to have vanished, and the Witch had moved a few paces away and was looking into the distance, the fingers of her right hand tapping thoughtfully against her left elbow.

"Been meaning to ask you, Wormtail," said Sirius, dropping down beside his friend. "Where did that come from?"

“I wish I knew.” Peter closed his hand around the hilt, as though recalling what it had felt like to pull it forth from the little bag hanging under his broomstick. “I was just looking for something, anything, to keep her here, not let her get away—oh, while I’m thinking of it, can one of you find my wand?”

James drew his own and Summoned Peter’s, handing it to him. “Thanks,” Peter said, tucking it into his pocket. “And just so you know... I don’t hate you, truly I don’t, but...”

“But we’re not as funny as we think we are,” James finished. “Or maybe it’d be better to say, we’re not as funny to everybody else—including you—as we are to ourselves.”

“I didn’t know,” Sirius said, shaking his head. “I never thought—”

“I could have guessed as much,” the Witch’s voice cut in.

Sirius growled and was about to make a smart reply. James cut him off with a snapped-shut fist, then made a quick series of signs where Peter couldn’t see. *She’s trying to make a point, don’t rise to the bait—but you don’t like it, do you?*

No. Sirius sighed deeply. *But she didn’t have to be mean about it.*

James grinned. *That wasn’t mean. That was truthful.*

“Some best friend you are,” Sirius grumbled.

Peter turned the sword over and gasped audibly. “Look at this!”

Sirius and James both turned to look, and James bit off a curse. Sirius didn’t bother. “It can’t be...” he said, staring at the name engraved on the flat of the blade.

“Apparently it can.” James ran a reverent finger across the first G. “And didn’t the Sorting Hat tell us back in sixth year who it used to belong to way back when?”

“Yeah...” Peter blinked. “Wait. Do you think that’s where—”

Sirius suddenly burst into guffaws. Peter and James both looked at him.

“Hold on,” he managed to choke out. “Let me—breathe—” He got himself calmed down, but kept his eyes carefully on the grass. “Do you remember what Lily told us Muggle magicians usually pull out of hats?”

“Yes,” said Peter. “Why?”

“And do you remember what Moony told us that one girl thought you meant by his ‘furry little problem,’ Prongs?”

“Yeah, he said she thought he had—” James broke off, looking at the sword on Peter’s lap.

“It may not be badly behaved,” Sirius said, in a tone that indicated he was losing his battle with laughter again, “but that’s one dangerous-looking rabbit you got there, Wormtail!”

James fell over backwards laughing. Peter maintained enough self-control to place the sword carefully off to one side before he too surrendered, and Sirius needed no further encouragement to go into a second round. Soon there were three helpless Marauders lying on the grass, panting for breath, avoiding each other’s eyes because every time they looked at one another, they sparked it off again.

And it wasn’t even that good a joke...

James shook his head, watching the leaves sway above him. *We’re sleep-deprived and relieved. Which is a little bit stupid, considering Moony’s still going to die.*

Thinking of which, where’s he got to? And where’s Lily?

He sat up and looked around. Lily’s hair caught the early morning sunlight, making her easy to spot, and Moony was unexpectedly close to her—and he was—

Blinking in surprise, James elbowed Sirius and nudged Peter with his foot. “Tell me I’m not dreaming,” he said.

Peter sat up first. “That was quick,” he remarked.

“Too quick.” Sirius had his suspicious Auror look on. “I don’t like this.”

“Of course you do not like it,” said the Witch, turning to look down her nose at Sirius again. This was rather easier for her because he was still sitting on the grass. “No one likes what he can never understand.”

“Never understand?” Sirius looked past her at Remus, on one knee and holding up something which sparkled in the sun, and the blue-gowned woman accepting it with a bright morning face. “I understand what he’s doing, I just don’t think it’s a good idea—”

“I do not mean what he is doing,” the Witch interrupted. “I mean the force behind it, the reason for it. You see, he is in love. And you shall never understand love.”

“He can’t be in love, love takes longer than—” Sirius broke off and stood up, staring at the Witch. “What do you mean, I’ll never understand love? I understand love just fine, thank you very much!”

“You are quite right, I do apologize.” The Witch had her hands on her hips. “You have the capacity to love precisely one being. Yourself. And that love is so very deep and abiding that you cannot see beyond it to believe that there could be any other kind.”

Sirius spluttered. James held back a snicker by willpower alone. Peter’s lips were suspiciously thin, as though he were biting down on them from inside.

Lily turned away from where Remus was now on his feet, embracing the woman to whom he'd been kneeling, and raced towards James. He got up quickly to meet her, and found himself laughing anyway, but this was in sympathy with the unbounded joy on her pink-cheeked face. "So you had to come and bring Moony a ring for his girl?" he asked.

"Of course." Lily flipped a bit of his hair from one side of his head to the other, then decided it had been better where it was. "Professor Dumbledore and I found the source material Remus mentioned to me, and he was right, there was quite a bit more to the story. The ending of it made me think I'd better go and talk to Remus' dad right away, and once he heard what I had to say, he let me have the ring he gave Remus' mum. Then I followed the directions—they're in another part of that same source—and here I am." She turned, beaming at Remus and the brown-haired woman, who had just arrived beside her, arm in arm. "Your dad says you'd better bring her home before you go anywhere else with her," she said. "In case I didn't mention that yet."

"You didn't. Thank you."

"I do not love myself that much!" Sirius finally managed to articulate, glaring at the Witch. "If I did, don't you think I'd have stayed home? Or dropped out of this crazy little quest halfway through? But here I am, I stuck it out to the end, and it turns out there's not even any help here—"

"There isn't?" Remus said, cocking an eyebrow at Sirius. "News to me."

"That's right, you weren't here. I guess she couldn't stand to tell you to your face that she couldn't help you." Sirius threw the last few words directly at the Witch. "She decided to leave it up to us to tell you you've got to go home and get ready to die, that you wasted nearly a third of the time you've got left on this sodding chase—"

The brown-haired woman giggled, and Sirius turned on her. "And who the hell are you, anyway?"

"This is my sister," said the Witch coldly, "and I will thank you not to swear at her. Especially since she can do what I cannot. Namely, heal your friend of his curse."

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The Witch of the Westmoreland

Chapter 5

Sirius opened his mouth and closed it again. Peter got up and ducked past him. “It’s nice to meet you,” he said, holding out his hand. “What’s your name?”

The woman beside Remus clasped his hand in hers. “I have never truly had one,” she said shyly. “Our mother called us by words I do not think you would recognize as names, and to one another we have always been ‘sister.’ But I suppose I must have a name if I am to go into the world.”

“We can talk about it later,” said Remus, smiling at her. “Among other things.” He looked around at James and Lily. “Will you be the other two witnesses?”

Sirius got his mouth to work again. “Witnesses? *Witnesses?* Moony, don’t you think you’re going just a little fast?”

“Ordinarily, yes. But today...” Remus shook his head. “I’ve seen her heart, Padfoot, and she’s seen mine. She knows me—she knows everything about me—and she ran into my arms when she saw me. What does that tell you?”

Sirius sighed, capitulating. “She’s got good taste. And good sense. She may not actually be human, but she’s got taste and she’s got sense.”

“We are as human as you,” objected the Witch. “Why would you think otherwise?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I assumed that people who can see the future and heal incurable curses and who live in a mystical enchanted valley that you have to reach on foggy paths you can only find when you’re tired would be something a little more exotic than human.”

“No, we only use a different sort of magic than you do,” said the brunette woman, laying her hand across Remus’ again. “One which owes a great deal to this place where we have been born, and our mother before us, and hers before her.” She chuckled. “We may well have an ancestor who was not human, but her blood is thin in us now, for our fathers have been men who came here for healing as far as our stories reach back.”

“That does make sense,” said Lily. “And I’m just as glad. The Witch in the source we found was clearly some sort of faerie.”

The Witch gave her a cool look. “It seems appropriate, considering your research partner.”

Peter succumbed to a fit of coughing.

“If you don’t mind, I think we’d both like to get on with things,” said Remus, his lips twitching suspiciously. “And you three need some sleep. Lily, I’m sorry to run out on you this way...”

“Don’t worry, I think I’ll find something to do.” Lily smiled at the Witch, who inclined her head.

“You can borrow my broom to go to your dad’s place when you’re ready. I’ll find another way home.” She glanced at James. “Maybe I can take a turn having a stag-back ride.”

“Only if you’re willing to use a Featherlight Charm.” James arched his back, stretching. “I’m going to be sore for weeks.”

“Are you saying I’m fat?” Remus asked.

“No, I’m saying I’m not used to carrying even a titch like you for most of two nights without any rest in between. Not that I wasn’t glad to do it—especially since it was because of me you were under the damn curse in the first place—but that doesn’t change my back hurting.”

The Witch sighed deeply. “I will heal you of your pain if you will cease talking about it,” she said. “And if you will take up your place so that these two may be joined and proceed to the healing of your friend.”

“Oh. Right.” James took his place in the half-circle the other Marauders, Lily, and the Witch had formed around Remus and his intended. The two of them clasped hands, each holding a sprig of goldenrod flowers, and smiled into one another’s eyes for a long moment.

Remus broke the silence first. “From this day forth, my lady, I am yours, forsaking all others for you,” he said formally. “My hands shall serve you, my wand defend you, my life hold you at its center, both now and for all time, and so I do swear.”

“I am yours and none other’s, my lord, from this day on,” his love answered him, her hair sparking golden in the sun. “My hands shall aid you, my magic guard you, my life be cloven unto yours, from this moment to the end of the world, and so I do swear.”

“And so I do witness,” said Lily softly, echoed by James and Peter a moment later. Sirius mumbled something which could have been agreement.

Remus blew gently on the flowers he held, as did his love—his wife—and a cloud of golden petals surrounded them, dying down after a moment to reveal that the Lupins were gone.

“Well, that’s one way to make an exit,” said James, brushing a petal off his nose.

Peter yawned. “I don’t know about you,” he said, “but Moony was right about me. I want some sleep. Can we put our tent up someplace?” he asked the Witch.

“Of course.” The Witch waved towards a large tree. “Try the north side of the grandmother oak. You will have shade there, and quiet.”

“Thanks.” Peter scooped up the broom and made for the indicated tree, Sirius following.

“You, come here,” said the Witch as James started after his friends. “Take your other form and stand still.”

Lily giggled. James shot her a look, but she only smiled sweetly at him, and he sighed and changed forms. The Witch stepped to his side and began to stroke his back, and the pain from his overused muscles diminished, then disappeared.

Of course, it might just be that I can ignore it now because there's someone else here too...

Lily had apparently been unable to resist the handsome stag who was her fiancé, as she was rubbing around the base of his antlers. Prongs nibbled on her sleeve in appreciation, and she laughed and flicked his nose. “Stop that.”

James resumed his human form and stretched. “Thanks,” he said to the Witch. “You two be all right?”

“As I have survived most of twenty years without your presence, I think I shall endure one more day,” the Witch said dryly.

Lily chuckled and pulled James close for a kiss. “Go on and sleep,” she said when they were finished. “I’ll be fine.”

James needed no more encouragement. Just the word “sleep” had started him yawning.

And when you add on knowing Moony's not going to die after all—and that he finally found someone, that he got married today—

“How’d Lily know what Moony’d need?” Sirius asked as James arrived at the tent, which his friends had rigged while he was with the Witch.

“Dunno. Maybe that source she was talking about told her he’d have to fall in love for the healing to work.”

“Or maybe he has to do something else,” said Peter, half-turning from the rope he was tightening to give his friends the benefit of his wiggling eyebrows. “And you know Moony. He’d never consider doing that unless they were married, not even if she offered.”

“The more fool, he.” Sirius yawned massively, sitting down on the grass beside the oak tree. “And the more fool, I, if I don’t get in there before I keel over. Coming, you two?”

“No, that’s what Moony’s doing,” James quipped, making Peter snicker.

The three Marauders clambered into their tent, trying to outdo one another in yawn size all the way. Peter crawled into his sleeping bag as he was, and started snoring almost before his head hit the ground. Sirius pulled his shoes off before he collapsed, and James found enough energy to tuck his glasses into one of his own shoes, shut the tent flap with his wand, and set an Imperturbable Charm on it.

There. Now we could sleep through anything.

Though as tired as he was feeling, he might have done so anyway.

The cave beneath the lake was warm and dark, perfect for sleep. Or for other things, but that had been for earlier. This was for now.

“None shall harm you any longer, my love,” the woman whispered, running her hands through the hair of the sleeping man who had braved ridicule and pain to seek her out and make her his own. “We have been as one, and thus I can protect you from all ill.”

She set to work, humming to herself as she did. Her magic had shown her not only the curses under which her love had labored, but those who had set the curses upon him, and she was already devising fitting revenges.

His earliest attacker was only a tool, he can wait until later, but the one who ordered that attack, yes, he should be destroyed as soon as can be... and the one who threw this curse that brought us together, I think we owe him some gratitude, so we shall wait to destroy him... yes, wait...

She giggled aloud. Wait, and strike all the worse when the proper time comes, for such is the way of the prankster, and what my love is, I must learn to be as well...

“Two different men won the right to my mother’s healing power a year apart,” the Witch told Lily as they sat in the sun by the lake. “Thus we were conceived and born, my sister and I.”

“Thank you, I was wondering a bit about that. Are there often pairs of you here?”

“Not terribly often, and usually a second daughter will leave here to marry into the line of those who direct seekers to us and keep us apprised of the way the world proceeds outside our valley.” The Witch leaned back, basking. “That family can use wands, as our direct line cannot, but they have also a little of our innate power of seeing beyond. It has led to their having a reputation for strangeness, but they seem to enjoy it. My sister, though, felt no need to go, and now we see why. I am glad she remained. Your friend is a good man and deserves his life.”

“Yes, Remus is something special. If I had any sense, I’d have fallen for him instead of James, but I suppose emotions don’t have to be sensible.” Lily brushed her hair out of her eyes. “If you don’t mind my asking, what were these things your mother called you, the ones that don’t count as names?”

The Witch laughed. “She used to call me ‘truthful one,’” she said. “Because I could never tell a lie, not even to save myself a scolding. And my sister does not know the meaning of fear, so Mother called her ‘danger-seeker.’”

“Well, that one I think I’ll leave to Remus, but there are names that mean ‘truth.’ You could take one of them.” Lily smiled. “If you’re really interested in what you’ve been hinting at.”

“It seems that it would benefit us both.” The Witch returned her smile. “Us all, I should say. Including those not yet born.”

“And we must think about them,” Lily murmured, looking out over the water. “For if we do not, who will?”

“Indeed.” The Witch plucked a flower from the grass and blew on it, loosing a cloud of gold. “Do you have a preference?”

“I think I’d like to start with a boy. You?”

“A girl first of all, to take up my mantle when I am gone. And my sister cannot make up her mind, so she will take whichever comes to her.”

“Why not twins?” Lily chuckled. “Remus loves children, and that would give us a new foursome to match the old one...”

“I am not incapable of love,” Sirius muttered to himself as he finished his turn in the tent’s tiny bathroom the next morning. “I can love other people. I love lots of other people. Prongs and Moony and Wormtail and Lily and...”

He shook his head. “Point is, I’m not incapable of love just because I like myself. Why shouldn’t I like myself? I’m a pretty good person to be. But that doesn’t mean I can’t love other people. I can even make other people love me back, if I try hard enough.”

Looking up, he met his own eyes in the mirror, and a wicked smile spread over his features. “I bet if I try really, really hard...”

“I’m going to prove to you that I can love,” Sirius announced to the Witch when he met up with her by the lakeshore. “Someone other than myself, I mean.”

“Prove away,” the Witch said in a bored tone.

“Well, if you say so.” Sirius walked up to her, put an arm around her shoulders and one around her waist, pulled her towards him, and kissed her.

A slap across the face sent him staggering backwards. “Good for you,” he mumbled through a swelling lip. “You remembered which side you hit yesterday, and got the other one today.”

“You are an uncouth barbarian,” the Witch said sternly. “Go away.”

“No. I said I was going to prove to you that I could love, and I will.”

“There is no need to prove that you love *me* .”

“But what if I want to love you?” Sirius put on his best hopeful puppy look. “What if I think you’re beautiful and smart and special and I want to love you and have you love me back?”

The Witch folded her arms. “Learn to show kindness to all,” she said. “Especially those you think are lesser than yourself. And I do not mean to patronize them—be truly kind, or do nothing. When you have learned that, then come seeking my love. Without it, do not trouble yourself.”

She turned on her heel and started away.

“I don’t think I know how,” Sirius admitted under his breath.

“You do not know how to be kind?”

She’s got good ears. “Not exactly. I know what’s kind and what’s mean, at least in general terms, but I’m never sure what I should do in any given situation. And half the time, when I try something, it turns out wrong. Actually a lot more than half.”

The Witch turned back, and her expression was softer than Sirius had yet seen. “Now with that, I may be able to give you help. Come—we shall practice together.”

Sirius followed her, grinning to himself when her back was turned.

Who says self-improvement lessons have to be boring?

Remus and the newly-named Peri Lupin (Peri, as she proudly informed everyone, being short for Pericula, a feminization of the Latin word for ‘danger’) left the valley that day at noon aboard Lily’s broom, bound for Remus’ father’s house in Surrey. James, Lily, and Peter left later in the day, walking to the mouth of the valley with Sirius and the Witch, who thought she might follow her sister’s lead and call herself Veri, short for Veritas.

“You realize Moody’s not going to believe me when I tell him why you’re taking a leave of absence,” James said to Sirius, shaking his friend’s hand goodbye.

“Tell him to come have a look for himself. The door’s always open.”

“Because there is no door,” said Veri with a heavy sigh. “Is he always thus?”

“Always,” Peter confirmed. “You’ll get used to it.”

“That is what I fear.” Veri’s lips quirked as she regarded Sirius. “Nevertheless, there would be merit in taming such a one...”

Sirius looked nervously at his friends. Lily and Peter laughed, and James shrugged his shoulders. “Happens to the best of us, Padfoot,” he said. “We’ll send you a wedding invitation when we get the day nailed down.”

“I’ll be there.” Sirius glanced at Veri. “And I might even bring a guest.”

“Only if you have completed your task by that day,” Veri reminded him. “I will leave my home for nothing less than proven and tested love.”

With cheerful goodbyes, they parted, the three who were leaving Apparating out from that spot, the two who remained walking slowly back into the valley.

“So what exactly do you mean by ‘proven and tested?’” Sirius asked halfway down the slope.

“Oh, that is easy.” The smile on Veri’s face should have been setting off every Dark Detector for miles. “I shall simply find what it is you hate most to do, and set you to it endlessly until you give up this foolish quest for my heart.”

Nice try, lady, but I’m not giving up. Sirius squared his shoulders. *You haven’t seen stubborn until you’ve seen Sirius Orion Black going after something he really wants!*

“Show me the work,” he said.

Veri’s smile lost a bit of its edge, but the look she gave him from the corner of her eye bordered on admiring.

Merlin’s bloody pants, I might actually pull this off...

Remus and Peri returned to Headquarters on the sixteenth, and spent most of the day redecorating his room to suit both their tastes, taking frequent breaks to introduce Peri to the rest of the Order. As the afternoon turned to evening, Peri discovered the kitchen, and immediately donned an apron and began chopping onions. Gideon Prewett, emerging from the pantry with a bowl of flour, eyed the interloper in his territory a bit warily, but Remus winked at him and he left her alone.

“Moony, there you are,” said James, coming in from the hall. “I’ve been looking all over for you. Isn’t it getting a bit late?”

“Late for what? Dinner? That isn’t my fault.” Remus didn’t look up from the parchments he was sorting through at the kitchen table. “Blame the cook. Or should I say, the cooks.”

“Those who blame the cooks get nothing to eat,” said Peri, wiping her streaming eyes with the back of her hand and lobbing a root end of onion at Remus. He caught it and threw it back.

“Moony, I’m trying not to be obvious here,” James said out of the corner of his mouth. “But I can’t believe you forgot what tonight is.”

“What tonight is?” Remus glanced at the calendar. “You mean Peri’s first night here?”

“No, I do not mean—” James’ shoulders sagged. “You’re taking the piss, aren’t you?”

“What was your first clue?” Remus chuckled at his friend’s expression. “Prongs, calm down. It’s under control.”

“Under control? You, tonight?”

“Yes. Under control, me, tonight.” Remus looked over his shoulder at Peri. “Did you ever see that source material Lily and Dumbledore found?”

“Yeah, Lily showed it to me. Why?”

“Do you remember the last two lines?”

“Not offhand.”

Remus scribbled a sentence on a scrap of parchment and pushed it over to James. “Read.”

James read. His eyebrows went up. “Does that mean…”

“Peri seems to think it does, and she’s the one planning on sharing my bed tonight.”

“Well, then.” James handed his friend the parchment back. “Congratulations are most definitely in order.”

“Thank you.” Remus made a notation on one of his scrolls.

The tale says that no one can harm the one who wins the Witch’s healing. And a werewolf transformation does plenty of harm.

He smiled at Peri, who was now frying her onions in a small skillet.

Some days you just get more than you deserve.

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The Witch of the Westmoreland

Chapter 6

In October, James and Lily set their wedding date—23 June, 1979—and owed out their invitations, and the Order of the Phoenix turned to the difficult task of fighting a war and planning for a wedding simultaneously. Several people, mostly male, were heard to remark that they'd rather have had two wars.

To the surprise of everyone, except perhaps Remus and Peri, Sirius Black arrived at Headquarters on the morning of that Saturday in June with a laughing, dark-skinned witch beside him. She cried out in joy when she saw Peri and flew into her arms, stopping only to tenderly caress her sister's obviously pregnant belly, and James pounded his best friend's back. "I knew you could do it!" he exulted, as Sirius shook hands heartily with Peter and Remus, adding a knowing wink to the second one. "When're you two going to get married, then?"

"Give it some time, Prongs. She only admitted to caring about me last week."

"Cut it a little fine, didn't you?" said Peter, and grinned at Sirius' mock growl. "I've missed hearing you do that."

"I've missed you in the apprentice rotation," said James. "They keep pairing me with the class wallies."

"And I've missed your habit of having a bad joke for every occasion," said Remus as Lily came into the room and exclaimed over Veri's presence. "So we've all missed different things about you. Now, if you don't mind, you and Wormtail and I have a little job we really can't miss, since it has to be finished in time for tonight."

"Merlin's beard, the speech." Sirius clapped a hand to his forehead melodramatically. "You still want me for best man, Prongs?"

"Who else? Don't answer that," James said quickly to Remus and Peter.

Remus snapped his fingers. Peter pouted.

Despite being rather impromptu, Sirius' speech went off well, and the wedding of James and Lily Potter was voted a general success. Sirius resumed his Auror training and Order duties, and Veri, like Peri, was welcomed by the Order, all the more because of Veri's particular talent with wounds, though Peri was generally acknowledged as the reason half the Order hadn't yet gone insane. Sirius was barred from the betting on when Peri's baby would arrive and whether she would have a boy or a girl, but that didn't stop him from hanging around the board and smirking whenever someone else registered a bet.

And near the end of July, Veri finally persuaded Sirius to do something he'd been half-thinking

about ever since her lessons on kindness had begun to sink in.

Sirius Black, Auror apprentice, member of the Order of the Phoenix, Marauder in good standing, returned home.

This is a bad idea.

Sirius fidgeted nervously on the steps outside the house. He'd been standing here for ten minutes, trying to get up the courage to knock.

I should just leave. They're not going to want to see me—Mother'll scream at me, and Regulus might well hex me, I'm pretty sure he's a Death Eater by now—

No. I came, so I might as well go in. Even if it's just to get screamed at and hexed.

At least then I'll know where I stand.

Other than "on the front stoop."

He knocked.

Barely ten seconds later, the door was flung open. "What do you—" the person on the other side began to snarl, only to stop short as he realized who had come to call.

"Afternoon, Reggie," said Sirius dryly.

"Don't call me that," Regulus Black snapped. "What do you want?"

Sirius shrugged. "Wanted to see how everyone's doing. Mother around?"

"No. She's out." The words came quick and clipped, as though Regulus were thinking hard behind them. "Sirius, you're still—I mean, I'd heard that you'd left the Auror program—"

"Not left, just took a leave of absence for a few months. I'm back now."

"So you're still fighting, then?"

"Fighting Voldemort?"

Regulus jumped. "Don't *do* that." He looked up and down the street, then quickly waved Sirius into the house. "Come upstairs. I need to talk to you."

Well, this is unexpected. "All right."

In Regulus' Slytherin-lined bedroom, Sirius took the chair he was offered and watched as his little brother paced up and down the floor. "I don't even know if you'll understand what I think is going

on,” he said, stopping as he turned to give Sirius a challenging stare. “I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of these things.”

“What things?”

Regulus plucked a book off his bed and tossed it to Sirius. “I marked the passage,” he said. “Read it. Tell me if you think it fits... *him* .”

Sirius opened the book to the dog-eared page and began to read where a section had been outlined in black ink. At the end of it, he looked up. “Yeah,” he said slowly. “Yeah, I think that fits his style just fine. Why?”

“Because I know where it is, and how to get it.” Regulus’ hands were balled into fists. “Or at least I can find out.” He looked into Sirius’ eyes again, but this time the look was oddly desperate. “We don’t agree on a lot. But I think we can agree that it’s no great honor to have your family’s faithful servant tortured and left to die.”

What, Kreacher? Couldn’t happen to a nicer elf. But Sirius recalled how fond his brother had always been of Kreacher, and what he knew of Voldemort’s favorite methods of torture, and surprised himself by nodding with genuine feeling. “I think we can,” he said.

“I don’t want to serve someone who’d do that.” Regulus returned to pacing. “But once you’re in, there’s no way out. No way except one. And I was going to take it. Go after this thing. Let the protections on it kill me.” He turned to Sirius again. “I was going to go tonight. But then you show up on the doorstep. It’s like a sign.” A little, desperate half-laugh. “Maybe it means I’m not supposed to die tonight after all.”

“Not dying is generally a good thing,” said Sirius, making up his mind and standing up. “Come on, Reggie—Regulus,” he corrected himself quickly before his brother could. “Kreacher have a travel basket?”

“Somewhere around,” said Regulus, looking at him suspiciously. “Why?”

“Get him in it. You two are coming with me.” Sirius drew his wand, careful not to point it anywhere near Regulus, and began composing his message in his mind.

“Coming where?”

“I don’t know yet. Give me a minute.” Sirius lifted his wand to his mouth and spoke into it in a hushed tone. “Very important information, need neutral meeting point, please reply soonest.” Pointing his wand at the opposite wall, he concentrated on the moment when Veri had finally admitted that his dogged determination—*pun fully intended*—had won her heart. “*Expecto patronum!*”

Regulus looked askance at the silvery dog, but didn’t comment, vanishing out the door instead and returning shortly thereafter with a traveling cloak on and a large, latched wicker basket in his

arms, from which muttering sounds emerged. He did not offer to open it, and Sirius was just as glad. He had no desire to hear his mother's pureblood cant repeated in house-elf grammar.

About five minutes later, a silver phoenix soared through the wall and fluttered to a halt in front of Sirius. "Room seven of Hog's Head, barman will not question, I will come alone," said the voice of Albus Dumbledore from its beak.

"That good enough for you?" Sirius asked.

Regulus nodded curtly.

Together, they Disapparated, and reappeared on Hogsmeade's main street. The sun was starting to set as they walked into the Hog's Head, Regulus with the hood of his cloak up and Kreacher silent within his basket. The barman gave them a cursory glance as they entered, then jerked his thumb at the stairs. They ascended to the first floor together, Regulus ahead, Sirius behind, and Sirius rapped on the door of room seven when they arrived, four long, four short, two long. The door opened, and he waved his brother inside.

Maybe there's something to this "being nice to people" thing. Without it, I'd be down a brother—I may not care a lot about him, but I still don't want him dead—and we wouldn't know how old Moldy-face has been staying alive. Dumbledore probably knew this already, of course, or at least suspected it, but independent confirmation's always good...

Sirius shut the door behind himself feeling rather cheerful.

We may win this war after all.

"Yes," Peri said, looking with distaste verging on horror at the huge locket which lay on the kitchen table at Headquarters. "Yes, it bears a soul."

Remus stood behind her chair, rubbing her shoulders. Sirius and Veri were upstairs, helping Kreacher tend to Regulus, who'd insisted on drinking the green potion himself, after ordering Kreacher to take both of them back to the Hog's Head as soon as he'd got the locket. James, Lily, and Peter were in the storage room, fetching what Dumbledore thought might be necessary for the next step of his plan.

"Tell me what you can about it," said Dumbledore now, standing at the opposite corner of the table.

"It is evil," Peri stated flatly. "Its only goal is to remain in existence, to remain secret and safe. It will try to use us to that end, especially those who are not as strong as—" She stopped talking abruptly as the missing three returned, their arms full of maps and scrolls.

"Here's what you wanted," said James, laying down his burden partly on top of the locket. "Great Merlin, that thing's huge. Probably give you a backache just from wearing it."

“It’s ancient,” said Lily, adding her own armload. “Made for miniature portraits, not photographs.”

“What’s the design on it?” Peter asked, dropping his scrolls onto the table and leaning over to get a better look.

“A snake,” said Dumbledore. “Not unlike Voldemort’s own mark.”

Peter stood up on the instant. “Would anyone mind if I went somewhere else?” he asked, eyeing the locket nervously.

“Not in the least,” said Dumbledore. “In fact, I think we three should be alone for this. Thank you all, and I shall call if you are needed.”

Lily, who looked a bit ill, quit the kitchen on Peter’s heels, and James followed her out, nodding to Remus and Peri on the way.

Dumbledore waved his wand once, and the largest of the maps spread out, displaying the British Isles. “Headquarters is, of course, Unplottable,” he said. “But point to its general location for me, Peri.”

Peri’s hand came down over the southernmost area of England.

“Very good. Now.” Dumbledore seemed oddly nervous. “You say the soul in this artifact is evil. Is it also distinctive?”

“Quite.” Peri swallowed convulsively. “Must I be so near it?”

“For a few more moments only. May I see your hand?”

Peri extended it. Dumbledore traced his wand along her fingertips, and red dye coated them. “Do you think that you could find, on the map, the places where other pieces of this soul are located?”

“Other...” Peri stared at her hand. “I could,” she said slowly. “I could find them. But they might also find me. And they are hungry. They seek power to keep themselves safe.”

“I won’t let them take you,” Remus murmured to his wife, stroking her hair. “You are mine and I love you, and no bits of soul are allowed to take you away from me.”

“I will not pretend that this is not dangerous, or that I am not making shameless use of your abilities, Peri,” said Dumbledore. “But I believe that the answer to the nature of this war—to the nature of Lord Voldemort—lies in this locket and whatever other artifacts like it may exist. If we can find them, and find them quickly...”

Peri reached behind her with her clean hand and grasped Remus’. “Hold me,” she whispered. “Hold me as myself. Keep me from forgetting who I am and whom I love.”

“With all my heart.” Remus squeezed her fingers tightly.

Peri leaned forward over the map, glanced at the locket, and concentrated. Her hand darted out and marked a spot in the sprawling mass of London. Then another in Yorkshire, and another in Wiltshire. A hesitant moment in the north preceded the smearing of a wide blotch. Finally, she reached for the center of the map—

And screamed.

Dumbledore’s wand stabbed down, the scream cut off, and Peri collapsed against her husband, her eyes half-open and her breathing shallow and ragged.

“What happened?” Remus demanded as Dumbledore whispered something into his wand and shot a Patronus through the ceiling.

“She seems to have located Voldemort himself,” Dumbledore said, coming around the table to kneel before Peri and run his wand over her body. “He does not take kindly to eavesdroppers.”

“Is she going to be all right?” Remus held tightly to his wife’s hand, looking down at her unconscious face.

“I believe she will live. For anything else—”

“Move,” said Veri shortly, coming through the kitchen door with Sirius behind her. “Let me see her.”

Dumbledore rose and stepped back, and Veri caught her sister’s hand in her own, hissing between her teeth as she did. “Little fool,” she whispered, shaking her head. “Brave, thoughtless little fool.” She looked up at Remus. “She escaped the killing blow for herself. But she was not alone. I will do what I can, but I fear it was too late in the moment she cried out.” Her eyes were bleak, her free hand resting on the curve of Peri’s stomach. “Even I cannot raise the dead.”

Remus felt his heart freeze solid.

Our baby. Our little girl. Dead. Dead before she was ever born...

Vaguely, he was aware of Sirius’ arm around him, guiding him from the kitchen and up the stairs, of other voices and movement nearby, but nothing registered until a familiar hand rested on his shoulder and a deep, slow voice called his name.

“Dad?” Remus looked up with surprise into his father’s eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Your friend called me and told me,” John Lupin said, nodding towards the open door of Remus’ bedroom. “I’m sorry, cub. I never wanted you to know what this was like.”

Remus could hear in his father’s voice the grief of a lifetime, for a son turned into a werewolf, for the two children who had died unborn after him, for Katherine herself, and his tears finally came.

His father's arms went around him, and they held each other against the world.

I still have him. I still have Peri. And Dumbledore would never have asked her to do this if it weren't important. It may help win the war.

But none of that mattered now. Tomorrow, next week, next year, it might, but at this moment all Remus knew was sorrow. He had been ready for his own death in the war, or that of any of his friends, but he had never dreamed it might kill his daughter.

And for that, "Lord" Voldemort, I will kill you. I will watch you die and laugh in your face, and I will help to destroy everything you hold most dear, you and your precious Death Eaters as well.

No man should ever have to mourn his own child.

"Please tell me you got something worthwhile out of this, sir," said Sirius quietly to Dumbledore as the latter shut the door of Remus' room, where the two Lupin men were sitting on a conjured couch beside the bed on which Peri lay, Veri sitting beside her and holding her sister's hand.

"More than worthwhile." Dumbledore stroked the map he was carrying rolled up under one arm. "Though if I had known the price... but hindsight is perfect, as they say." The pain in his voice was under tight control, but strongly present for all that. "I can only pray that Remus and Peri will forgive me for what has happened."

"You never intended anyone to get hurt, sir," said James, coming up the stairs with Peter in time to hear this. "Moony and Peri know that."

"I am sure they do, but knowledge is a poor defense against sorrow." Dumbledore looked over James' shoulder. "On that subject, Peter, thank you for having the presence of mind to contact Remus' father immediately."

Peter nodded, glancing curiously at the map. "I probably shouldn't ask, sir, but what..."

"Was Peri doing?" Dumbledore finished. "I cannot tell you everything, but I can say that she was seeking items without which we cannot hope to win this war. And I believe she may have found them."

"Good," James said fervently. "The sooner we get this over with, the better."

"Agreed." Dumbledore's eyes refocused, as though he were looking through the wall into the room beyond. "I think," he said slowly, "that it would be only fair to give your group first refusal of helping to find these items, since it is you who have been most harmed by the search for them today. You are young, that is true, but your magic is strong, and your loyalty to one another unquestionable."

All three Marauders reddened slightly at this, but none of them flinched.

“Will you join me, then?” Dumbledore asked, waving to the bedroom across the hall from Remus and Peri’s. “And James, if you would summon Lily?”

“Maps, we can do,” said Sirius, pulling out his wand as Peter unrolled the scroll. “We made this one of Hogwarts—”

James hissed at him, and he fell silent.

“Dear me, how these old ears do play tricks on me,” said Dumbledore blandly from across the room, where he had a large book open and was pointing something out to Lily. “I believe you were saying that you have some expertise with maps, Sirius?”

“Yeah,” Sirius said, breathing a sigh of relief. “We’ve done some work with them. I think we can probably get this right down to building level, maybe even the room.”

“What’s this up here in the north?” Peter asked, pointing at it. “The others are little dots, but this is all smeared. Was she not sure where this one was?”

“Or maybe she couldn’t point it out exactly,” said Lily, looking over at the boys. “Maybe it’s in a place you can’t point out on a map.”

“But what—” James smacked himself on the forehead. “Stupid me. Unplottable. Wherever this thing is, it’s Unplottable.”

“And gee, I wonder what’s up in the north and Unplottable,” Sirius sing-songed, grinning.

“So that’s one we know right off.” James scribbled a word on the scroll beside him. “Might be a job finding it in there, but we’ve got a general location, that’s all we need for now. Let’s try to get the one in London next, that’ll be the hardest, these other two are out in the country somewhere so even if we can’t bring them down as far it won’t be too hard to find them...”

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The Witch of the Westmoreland

Chapter 7

Severus Snape sat on a park bench, watching brown and gold leaves drift around his feet, recalling the last time he had come to this place.

I took a chance that day. But I could not bear to see her in pain. Not even to humiliate Potter and Black, and know that Lupin was dead. The Dark Lord would hardly have believed that a portion of my mother's bedtime story could lead to a witch with the power to heal all wounds, and I doubt that he or any of the Death Eaters could have mustered the necessary group to find her, so none can argue that I should have presented him with the knowledge instead. Besides, none but Lily and I, and whomever she may have told, ever knew of it, so on the whole it has done no harm...

Nearby, someone coughed slightly. He looked up.

Lily Evans—Lily Potter now, but he refused to use that name to himself—stood before him, her hands folded in front of her. Remus Lupin, looking drawn, was a pace behind her, his wand in his hand but not pointed at Severus. Both of them nodded to him politely, and after a moment, he returned the gesture.

“We owe you, Severus,” said Lily, gesturing to herself and Lupin. “Without your help, Remus would have died last year. We’re here to pay you back.”

“In what coin?”

“Information,” said Lupin, his voice hoarse. “And an offer.”

Severus sat back against the corner of the bench. “I am listening.”

“Voldemort—” Lily’s lips twitched at Severus’ barely-controlled start. “You never did like when I used to say that. But I’m not afraid of the name. Voldemort is on his way out, Severus. We’ve found a way to destroy him. And when he falls, he’s going to take the Death Eaters down with him. Anyone who’s been sighted, anyone whose involvement can be proven, unless they’re rich enough to get away with claiming they were under Imperius, they’re going to go to Azkaban.”

The Dark Lord? Destroyed?

If someone else, anyone else had spoken those words to him, Severus would have called them a liar, but he knew Lily would never lie, and doubly never about such an important subject.

She must truly think this plan, whatever it may be, has a chance of working. More than a chance—she sounds certain of it.

So unless Dumbledore has lied to her, or is mistaken, the Dark Lord is soon to fall.

He followed an eddy of leaves with his eyes, thinking furiously.

They feel indebted to me, so they have come to warn me. But they would not have come themselves were it merely to serve notice that I should flee the country or go into hiding. No, they, or Dumbledore through them, have a task they wish me to perform, in recompense for this information.

And perhaps, in recompense for the task...

“What price on my freedom?” he asked, looking back at them.

Lupin chuckled slightly, though the smile did not reach his eyes. “Straight to the point as always, Severus. Here.” He tossed a small glass ball with his left hand. Severus caught it and inspected it. A golden mist swirled within.

“An Audio Recording Spell,” said Lily. “It activates wandlessly, there are indentations on the glass so you know where to press. Once to prime it—it’ll turn silver to let you know it’s ready—a second time to start recording, and a third time to stop.”

“And what shall I record with it?”

“Voldemort’s a Parselmouth, isn’t he? He speaks to snakes?”

Severus nodded. “There are always a few near him.”

“We need a recording of the word ‘Open’ in Parseltongue,” said Lupin. “And we need it without Voldemort knowing we have it. How you get it is up to you, though I would personally prefer a method that left you alive to deliver it.”

Severus snorted. “I would prefer that myself.”

“Somehow I thought you might.” Lupin spread his hands. “So there you have it. Get that word recorded and get it to us, give us any other information you might have that we can use, and we’ll do what we can for you. Hide you from Death Eaters out for revenge, vouch for you to the Ministry, that sort of thing.”

Severus ran a finger along the surface of the glass ball, finding the indentations Lily had mentioned, conveniently placed for pressing when the ball was hidden in one’s palm. *Such a small thing. And yet on such small things has history always turned.*

“I will do it,” he said, standing up.

Lily and Lupin nodded, as if it were nothing more than they’d expected.

“Best of luck,” Lupin said.

“I hope to see you soon,” Lily added.

“And I, you.” Severus weighed the moment and decided to speak. “I have always regretted the way

in which we parted in school.”

“So have I,” said Lily softly. “Perhaps, when everything is over...” She left the ending unspoken.

If there is an ending to that sentence. What can James Potter’s wife ever be to me?

“Please be careful, Severus,” Lily finished. “Come back safely.”

“I will do my best.” Severus tucked the glass ball into a pocket of his robes.

“I could ask for nothing better than that.”

Severus nodded to her, and to Lupin, and Disapparated.

“Tell me again why you don’t think he’ll just run off and sell us out?” said James, pulling off his Invisibility Cloak behind Lily.

“Because he knows I wouldn’t lie to him.” Lily sat down where Snape had been. “If I say Voldemort is going to fall, then Voldemort is going to fall. And he’s more interested in staying alive than anything else.”

“And staying out of Azkaban,” added Sirius, standing up from his position among the bushes nearby.

Wormtail the rat scurried out of the undergrowth behind the bench and turned back into Peter. “I think anyone would want to stay out of Azkaban,” he said, shaking his head. “Anyone sane, that is.”

“Which leads to my pet theory,” said Remus, putting his wand away. “Death Eaters are all insane. Some more than others.”

“Thinking of my dear cousin Bella, are you?” Sirius shuddered. “She makes my skin crawl. How she and Cissy could be ‘Dromeda’s sisters I’ve never figured out...”

She huddled in a corner of the small cellar room, hands over her ears, half of her praying the screaming would stop and the other half hoping it went on. It hurt her to hear the screaming and to think about what caused it, but when it stopped, that meant it was her turn. *He* would come down the stairs and open the door, and look at her and laugh, and point his stick at her and say that strange-sounding word, and then the pain, the pain, the *pain* —it was worse than falling out of a tree, worse than getting kicked by a horse, worse even than the time she’d slammed her hand in the door—

But it isn’t worse than remembering.

The memory flooded back over her. She was standing on the train platform with her mum, scuffing at the floor with her foot, hoping the girl of her own age who was the only other passenger waiting at this station didn't notice that the middle-aged woman in the blue dress smelled like stale beer and walked a bit off-kilter—she'd managed to make back half the grocery money from a man with four pints in him who couldn't believe a mousy little thing like her could possibly have a better eye than he did, so they might not eat very well this week but at least they wouldn't starve—just another Friday night, as normal as her life ever got—

And then it all went wrong.

A crack like a whip behind them, and *he* was there, small and dark and bearded and wearing what looked like a dress, and her mum turned around and started to say something rude—he pointed the stick in his hand at her and said two words, and a great green light flashed with a noise like the train coming in, and her mum fell to the floor all limp and boneless—she dropped down and grabbed her mum's wrist and felt for a pulse but there was nothing there, and then he had her arm and was pulling her back up, and the girl down the platform was screaming but it didn't make any difference—

Nothing made any difference. Not to him. He killed my mum, he's killing that other girl, he's going to kill me, and there's nothing I can do to stop him.

Because he has magic.

It was the only answer that made sense, the only way to put together everything she'd seen. The way *he* had appeared on the platform out of thin air, his stick that could hurt or kill people with just a word or two, the funny-smelling liquids he sometimes made her drink—she hadn't had any real food in as long as she'd been here, just the stuff in the bottles—

Potions. And his stick is a wand, and the things he does with it are spells, and he must be a wizard. Or maybe his people call it something else, like warlock or mage.

As a child, she'd read every book she could find that had magic in it. Whether it was set in a street so much like her own that she could smell the exhaust fumes or on a planet beyond the farthest star she could see in the nighttime sky, she devoured the stories eagerly, hoping, praying, wishing that someday she might find out they were true.

I should have been more careful what I wished for.

But proverbs and platitudes wouldn't help her now. The screaming had stopped. *He* would take a few minutes to rest and recover, and then he would be down the stairs to have his fun with her. He'd said something yesterday about another spell he wanted to try on her, one that would make her do whatever he wanted, and he'd hinted very strongly that he'd want her to start by taking her clothes off.

Maybe that's why the screaming sounded different today. Because he wasn't just hurting her, he was...

Her mind shied away from the idea, but she wouldn't be able to hide from it for long. Soon it would be happening to her.

This isn't what I thought a world with magic would be like. I thought it would be used for good. I thought magic people would have more fun, laugh more, understand each other better.

She sniffled once, then squeezed her eyes shut.

I should have known. Nothing's ever as good as you imagine it.

Unbidden, one of her favorite imaginings came to her mind. She was flying, high above the clouds, looking down at the houses and the trees, and behind her, flying with her, holding her up, was a boy. He wasn't tall or handsome like the musicians and movie stars the other girls at school sighed over, but his eyes were kind and his smile made his whole face look happy and she knew he'd never hurt her and he'd never let anyone else hurt her either.

Besides, it's not like I'm ever going to get any boy to look at me twice, much less a musician or a movie star. Or a wizard. So I might as well dream of one while I still can.

While I'm still alive.

A little noise from across the room sent her eyes flying open.

He's here—he sneaked in while I was blubbing—

She gasped, barely managing to keep herself from screaming. *Rat, that's a rat, oh God there's a rat in here, it must have got in the window, it'll bite me or run up my leg or try to chew my face off while I'm sleeping—*

But the plump gray rat was doing none of this. It was, in fact, sitting very still on its hind legs and watching her closely. One paw scratched behind its ear for a moment.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down. *Rats aren't always bad. Some people keep them as pets. Maybe this one is somebody's pet who got loose.*

Or maybe it's just waiting to see what the giant human girl does.

The thought made her smile, shakily, but it was a real smile, her first in what felt like months. Slowly, she held out her hand.

"I won't hurt you," she whispered. "You can come here."

The rat's nose twitched. Then it dropped to all fours and scampered across the room to sniff at her fingertips. She laughed under her breath—its whiskers tickled.

And it's been even longer since I had anything to laugh about...

Hesitantly, she brought her other hand around and stroked the top of the rat's head, between its ears. It quivered all over, but did not run away.

"I wish I had something to feed you," she murmured. "Maybe then you'd stay. You could be my friend." The thought of the man upstairs made her swallow nervously. "But you shouldn't stay too long. I wouldn't want you to get hurt. *He* likes hurting me, he'd like hurting you too, so when he comes you'll need to run and hide—"

The door at the top of the stairs banged. Her mouth dried up, her heart switched into double-time, her hands went damp and cold. The rat pulled away from her and darted across the cellar, into the shadows of the opposite corner from her own.

Good. Smart rat. Stay hidden. He can't hurt you then. He'll hurt me, but not you—

Loud footsteps on the stairs, the rattle of the lock on the outside of the door, and then *he* was there, smirking at her, shutting the door behind himself, his stick—*wand*—never moving from her chest. "I hope you're a bit more durable than the other one," he said, starting towards her. "She barely lasted an hour. I've got a few games left to play still—"

"*Stupefy!*" shouted a new voice, and red light flashed all around her tormentor, sending him keeling over onto his face. She stared at his fallen figure for an instant, then looked up.

The young man across the room was about her own age, maybe a few years older. He had brown hair and close-set blue eyes, and he too was holding a wand in his hand, but it was pointing at the fallen man, not at her, and the expression on his face was one of disgust.

"Dirtbag," said the voice which had shouted a moment before. "*Incarcerous* ." Ropes flew from the end of the wand, ropes that wrapped themselves around the man and tied themselves off behind him, and a silent wave of the wand sent the bound figure skidding into the corner of the room nearest the door.

Is this—it can't be—

She was reeling from the suddenness of it all, her thoughts tumbling over each other, only fragments coming to the surface of her mind. With some fraction of her attention, she registered that the young man was kneeling beside her, looking down at her in concern. "Miss?" he said, touching her arm lightly. "Are you all right?"

"Who are you?" The words came out without her conscious intention.

"My name's Peter. I've come to help you. I was looking for him, to start with." A jab of the wand towards the figure in the corner. "His name is Rabastan Lestrangle, and he can get at something my friends need, something that will help us stop people like him. But then I saw you, and I couldn't leave you here. I'm sorry he hurt you. Can I take you home? Will your parents want to know you're all right?"

“No parents.” She found her breath coming more easily as she spoke. “My dad’s been gone for years, and my mum’s dead. He killed her the day he took me.”

“I’m sorry.” The words were simple, but she could hear in their very awkwardness that he meant it, that he really wished her mum hadn’t been killed, and suddenly everything fell in on top of her and she burst out crying—her mum was *dead* and she had nowhere to go now, magic was *real* but bad people used it—

But so do good people. Peter has magic, and he’s good. He’s helping me.

And he was holding her now, holding her as awkwardly as he’d spoken to her, but holding her.

He doesn’t look like the kind of boy who’s used to holding girls.

The thought made her laugh again, laugh in the middle of her crying, and then she was doing both and she couldn’t stop either—Peter was standing up, pulling her upright with him, gripping her arms tightly and turning around—

Everything was black and tight, she couldn’t move, she couldn’t breathe—

I’ve done this before— he did it with us, when he brought us here—

Except that “here” was no longer “here,” but “there,” because “here” had just become a well-lit hallway, and Peter was talking quickly and urgently to someone, and then there were other hands on her arms, pulling her loose from him, starting to lead her away—

“No!” She yanked free and clutched at Peter. “Don’t let them—”

“It’s all right,” he told her, pressing her hand. “You’re safe now. These are my friends. They’ll help you. I have to go, to show them where that man is, the one who hurt you. To make sure he doesn’t do it again.”

“Will you come back?”

By the look on his face, the question surprised him. “If you want me to.”

She nodded hard.

“All right. I will. But I do have to go now. Will you go with Veri? She’s a Healer, she can help you feel better.”

She turned to see that “Veri” was a tall girl of Peter’s age with dark skin and a kind smile, and nodded again. Veri took her hand and guided her down the hall, into a quiet room with a soft couch, and sat down on it with her. “You are safe now,” she said as Peter had, “and I am terribly sorry for what has happened to you. May I know your name?”

Name. Do I have a name?

Don't be stupid, everybody has a name...

She made herself calm down and remember. Of course she had a name. Her mum had given it to her, her teachers at school had called her by it, and she would need to know it to tell it to Peter when he came back—

“Evanie,” she said. “My name is Evanie.”

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The Witch of the Westmoreland

Chapter 8

“WORMTAAAAAIL!”

Peter looked up from his quiet conversation with Remus and Snape as James burst into the kitchen. “Yes?” he said politely.

“Your bloody girlfriend just kicked all our arses at darts!” James pointed towards the kitchen door, which Sirius was holding open for Regulus and the Prewetts.

“He did try to warn you, Prongs,” Remus said, chuckling. “You get very good, very fast, at things your meals depend on.”

“Yes, but...” James broke off incoherently as Evanie slipped between the boys and came into the kitchen, smiling shyly at Peter, who returned the expression wholeheartedly. “I get no respect,” he grumbled instead.

“Perhaps you should try earning it, Potter,” said Snape acridly.

“You stay out of this.”

Two sets of brothers sniggered.

In the cellar directly below, three young women restrained giggles.

“Poor James,” said Lily, carefully stirring the oversized cauldron hanging over the fire in one corner. “He thought he’d never have to deal with Severus again, and ever since the middle of October they’ve been stuck in the same house. Though maybe not for too much longer, if we can get that little cottage out in Godric’s Hollow we were looking at...” She glanced at Peri.

Peri smiled. “I do not begrudge you your good fortune,” she said. “Far from it. I am glad for you.” Her hand hovered for a moment near her stomach, now flat once more, before returning to her side. “But I do wonder why you have not yet told your husband the news.”

“Because I don’t want him distracted.” Lily drew her wand and cast a spell on the cauldron, nodding to herself at the colors the metal glowed. “Distracted Aurors make mistakes, and James can’t afford a mistake right now, not with the people he goes out to fight. My news will keep for another month, until Severus and I have finished brewing this and we’ve used it to get rid of *those*.” She nodded to the safe in the corner of the room, in which all three women knew rested a jeweled locket, a tarnished diadem, a heavy ring, and a delicate cup. “And whatever the last one is, at Malfoy Manor.”

Veri chuckled. “I do hope to see another example of Headmaster Dumbledore’s cleverness in

dealing with that family,” she said. “Like that which we saw in the treatment of Rabastan Lestrangle.”

“Yes, that was rather neat, wasn’t it?” Lily grinned, coming to sit with her friends. “Dumbledore promised that if Rabastan would only fetch him out whatever Voldemort had given Bella to keep in the family vault, that we wouldn’t turn him in for being a Death Eater or for using Unforgivables. So off he went and brought us back the cup... and Alice arrests him on the spot for breaking the Code of Secrecy, because Evanie and that poor girl he killed were Muggles!”

“And Professor Dumbledore, in his role as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, decided that every day M’sieur Lestrangle used magic on the girls should be treated as a separate infraction and a separate charge.” Peri was almost purring. “And since Evanie was kidnapped near the middle of the summer and not rescued until the beginning of November when Peter went to investigate the information Severus brought, and breaking the Code of Secrecy without intent to Obliviate carries a five-year minimum penalty for *every* offense...”

“The overall effect, when he is brought to trial, shall be the same as though he had been convicted of what he has truly done,” Veri finished with great satisfaction. “He shall never see the light of day again, and we have another piece of this puzzle in our hands.”

“And Peter finally has someone who looks up to him, instead of the other way around.” Lily stretched luxuriously. “He’s already brought her home once or twice to meet his mother, and they seem to have hit it off—I know I heard them talking the other day about her going to live there after the war’s over, she’s going to start as Mrs. Pettigrew’s ‘companion’ but I don’t think she’ll stay that for long...”

“If Miss Evanie Mead is not a Mrs. Pettigrew herself within two years, I know nothing of humankind,” said Peri firmly. “And that reminds me, sister mine. When does your swain plan to horrify his mother still further?”

“Is it possible he can do so, after taking up with an ‘inhuman monster’ such as myself and ‘corrupting the last hope of this House’?” Veri’s eyebrows said what her perfectly polite tone could not as she quoted from Walburga Black’s Howler in response to Sirius’ letter telling his mother what, in general terms, had happened to her sons. “But to answer the question you meant, I do not know. He keeps his own counsel on such matters. Perhaps I should hint to him that it would not go amiss, were he to ask.”

“Perhaps you should tell him he’s not allowed in your bed until he asks,” Lily suggested.

Veri smiled. “Ah, but why punish myself for his failing?”

This time none of them bothered to keep the giggles under wraps.

Lucius Malfoy stood surveying the interior of the small Muggle cottage where he and a few of his colleagues had enjoyed an evening’s recreation with satisfaction.

I shall have to speak to Narcissa about remaining behind from now on. His eye lingered on his wife's form, shapely even in her swathing robes, as she rearranged one of the limp bodies which made such a contrast with the cheery Christmas decorations hung about the room. *It would never do to have my heir harmed by a stray curse, or by his mother's overexertion.*

A quiet pop outside the house alerted him. "Aurors," he hissed, waving at the others. "Quickly, to your homes!"

Avery and Nott Disapparated first with barely any sound at all, followed by Crabbe and Goyle with two loud cracks. Lucius winced. *If they did not already know we are here, they know it now. But in another moment it will not matter.*

Narcissa spun on the spot and vanished. Lucius raised his wand and pointed it towards the ceiling. "Morsmordre," he intoned, and the Dark Mark shot upwards and into the night.

Our calling card. In case anyone doubted.

Smiling under his mask, he leaned his weight on one foot, preparing to turn—

Narcissa exploded back out of thin air. "Not home!" she hissed. "The house is full of Aurors, I barely escaped!"

Aurors ? How—why—no. No time. "Hogsmeade," Lucius said. "Behind the Hog's Head."

Narcissa nodded and was gone. Lucius turned quickly to follow her, spying as he did an astonished young face at the window. An apprentice, or a barely qualified Auror, it made no real difference—

Except that once, they would never have sent anyone with less than five years' experience out on a case where we were involved. Have we overburdened them to such an extent that they must now send children after us?

Or have we simply become less menacing?

Reality settled into place around him again, the back of a pub to his left, the snowy woods to his right, the moon overhead, and his coughing wife directly in front of him. He caught her shoulder and held her upright until the spasm had passed, plucking off her mask and his own with his free hand. In the darkness, their robes would look ordinary enough.

"Somehow we have come under suspicion," she said when she had enough breath to speak again. "The Dark Lord may help us, but I would not assume that he will."

"Agreed." Assumptions around the Dark Lord could be fatal, if they proved to be wrong. "I will find him and sound him out. Cautiously, of course. You..." Lucius looked at Narcissa musingly. "I think it would be best if I did not know where you were. An owl will still find you even if I am unaware of your exact direction, and what I do not know I cannot tell." *To either the Aurors or the Dark Lord. If he decides I merit punishment rather than reward, for erecting such shabby wards that my house could be invaded...*

“I understand.” She embraced him briefly. “I have a destination in mind already. Travel carefully, Lucius.”

“And you, Narcissa.” *And may we meet again, soon and safely. All three of us.*

Narcissa Disapparated again, and Lucius spent a moment looking at the place where she had been before he shook himself and brought to mind the last place he had seen the Dark Lord.

It is unlikely he will still be there, but others of our fraternity will, and they may be able to direct me further.

With a sound like a breaking branch, he was gone.

Narcissa paused between an iced-over pond and a snow-covered garden bed, trying to regain her composure, but it eluded her. Whom she was about to ask a favor of, and what that favor would be, would have been starkly unthinkable to her even ten minutes ago.

So quickly does life change around us.

She strode forward to the front door of the modest house and rapped her knuckles against it.

The man who opened it was fair-haired and cheerful-looking, going to fat in a way Narcissa would ordinarily have considered extremely common.

But I have need tonight. I must mind my manners.

“Good evening,” she said. “I am sorry to trouble you so late, but I must speak with my sister. It is very urgent.”

Dora crept down the hall, her ears sharpened for listening. Mum thought she was in bed, and so she had been, but the exclamation of “Cissy!” that had come up the stairs a few minutes before had made sleep impossible.

I thought Mum’s sisters didn’t admit we existed. What is one of them doing here?

“Absolutely not,” Mum said crisply. “You’re overreacting, Cissy. You can’t be sure—”

“They would not dare invade our home unless they had proof that could not be denied,” the unknown woman, obviously her Aunt Narcissa, retorted. “Not with the influence Lucius holds at the Ministry. And our people are beginning to disappear. Regulus Black during the summer, Severus Snape two months ago, Rabastan Lestrange last month... the tide is turning, Andromeda, and I have no desire to watch my child drown.” A little, humorless laugh. “If you will pardon a painfully mixed metaphor.”

“I understand completely, but don’t you think what you’re asking is a bit extreme? There must be another way—”

“There is not,” Aunt Narcissa interrupted. “None that is sure, in any case. Even should I be able to hide from all those who will seek me for the time required, what would become of my baby? What sort of life would he have, orphaned almost before he was born, despised by those of my circle for his father’s incompetence and by those of yours for his parents’ loyalties? And do not lie to me!” This rose almost to a shout. “I can see it in your face, you are about to tell me it would not be so, but we both know that it would, Andromeda. I will not condemn my son to that fate any more than I will allow him to die in the presence of dementors.”

Dementors . Brr. Dora shivered with mingled fear and perverse delight in it. *I’ll have to get used to them someday, if I want to be an Auror, but that’s a long, long time away—I don’t even start Hogwarts for five more years, and then seven years there, and three years as an apprentice—*

“Cissy, you’re borrowing trouble,” Mum’s voice cut into Dora’s mathematical musings. “Stay here tonight, get some sleep, and we’ll talk about this again in the morning.”

“You do not understand, Andromeda. There are Aurors in my home at this very moment. They saw me Apparate in, and it was only by luck that I escaped them. They will even now be investigating all the places it is most likely I would be, eliminating them from consideration, and moving on to the less likely. Soon or late, your home will be visited, and I must believe it will be soon.” The sound of a chair scraping across the floor. “If you will not help me, I will do this myself.”

“Sit down, Narcissa,” Mum said wearily. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t help you. But I want to be absolutely sure you understand what you’re asking of me. It goes against all my oaths—”

“You are a Healer,” Aunt Narcissa interrupted. “You are sworn to prevent harm. And you know well that dementors destroy human souls, and tax human bodies to the point where any pregnant woman who is near them for more than a few minutes, an hour at the most, invariably loses her child from the shock. If that should happen to me—if my son dies in Azkaban—his soul will never reach whatever is beyond this world, Andromeda, for he will never have the strength to escape the dementors’ pull. They will capture him and devour him, and he will be lost forever.” A shuddering sob. “I would rather he die here and now, at your hands or my own, than that.”

Dora leaned forward, fascinated—

And lost her balance and fell into the kitchen with a crash.

The blonde and aristocratic woman standing beside the kitchen table spun around, apparently not unbalanced at all by her four months’ pregnancy, to look down her nose, and her wand, at Dora. Mum, still sitting in her usual chair, sighed deeply. “Cissy, I don’t believe you’ve met my daughter,” she said. “Nymphadora, this is your Aunt Narcissa.”

“Good evening, Nymphadora,” Aunt Narcissa said stiffly.

Dora considered saying hello, but settled for a little wave from her current position.

“Now, young lady, you are going back to bed,” Mum said, standing up and drawing her own wand. “And if you do not, I will make you, so do not push me—”

“But Mum, I have an idea!” Dora burst out.

Both women stared at her. “An idea?” Mum said finally. “An idea about what, exactly?”

“About Aunt Narcissa’s problem.” Dora sat up and scooted back until she was sitting tailor-fashion with her back against the wall. “There might be somebody who could help.”

“Help,” repeated Aunt Narcissa, as though she were tasting the word. “In what way?”

“I don’t know, but she might. They might.” Dora looked at her mum. “Veri and Peri, Mum, who came to visit just last week. You remember.” *You told me the story about them after they’d gone home, about how Cousin Sirius and his friends went to find them because his friend Moony would have died otherwise. She smiled, thinking of Moony. He’s handsome, and really nice too. Peri’s lucky she got there first, or I would have married him when I grew up...*

“That is true,” Mum said slowly. “They are something out of the common way.” She looked over at her sister. “Narcissa, are you willing to wait a little while before you do anything irreversible? A few minutes, no more. Long enough for a firecall.”

Aunt Narcissa nodded, sitting down. “Perhaps I can use the time to become acquainted with my niece,” she said with a faint smile. “Since I am unlikely to have another opportunity.”

Mum shook her head in the same way she did when Dora came home covered in scratches and bee stings, and went into the living room where the Floo was.

Dora looked at her aunt. Her aunt looked back, and frowned.

“What’s wrong?” Dora asked.

“Your hair was brown when you came in,” Aunt Narcissa said. “Now it is blonde.”

Dora grinned and willed it pink. Her aunt jumped, then sighed in what sounded like exasperation. “Of all the children to inherit our great-grandfather’s Metamorphmagic, it would have to be you.”

“Why shouldn’t it be me?” Dora asked, deciding this might be a good time to get answers to a few of the questions Mum didn’t like her to ask. “Why do you think I’m bad?”

“I do not think you are bad.”

“My dad, then. Why don’t you like him?”

“It has nothing to do with liking and not liking. I simply do not believe that wizards who appear

without warning from a Muggle line of descent can possibly have the same degree of magic as those whose ancestors have been magical through history.”

Dora sorted through the big words and came up with a puzzling conclusion. “So you think because my gran and granddad are Muggles, that Dad isn’t as good a wizard?”

“In essence, yes.”

Dora folded her arms and glared. “You don’t even *know* my dad. How do you know how good a wizard he is?”

Aunt Narcissa matched the glare. “Do not speak of subjects you do not understand.”

“I bet you’d lose a duel with my dad,” Dora muttered.

“Let us not test that theory.”

Mum reentered the kitchen in the midst of the uneasy silence that followed. “I caught Sirius on his way out, and he said he’d send their resident Witches right over,” she said. “And Cissy, please, for heaven’s sake be polite to them.”

Aunt Narcissa’s eyebrows had gone up at the mention of Cousin Sirius’ name. “I will, if you will tell me why you think I would allow creatures which are not even *human* to come near me—if, as I assume, these ‘Witches’ you have summoned are the same ones over whom our Aunt Walburga has been so incensed lately…”

“Because, as usual, she has the wrong end of the wand,” said Mum irritably. “They’re as human as we are, Narcissa, I examined them myself. They just express their magic differently than we do, and that’s more by training than by any difference in blood. More than that, their ancestors as far back as they can trace them have all been magical. What does that make them, pray tell?”

Aunt Narcissa didn’t seem to have an answer ready, but she didn’t need one, as Veri came through the door at this moment, Peri just behind her. “Good evening, Andromeda,” said the tall, dark Witch, nodding to Mum. “Dora.” A smile, which Dora returned—Veri’d remembered about her horrible name. “And you, I believe, are Narcissa Malfoy.”

“You have the advantage of me,” said Aunt Narcissa in a brittle tone, standing up with her hand on her wand.

“I am called Veritas, and my sister is Pericula.” Peri dropped a brief curtsey, then came around the table to stand near Dora as Veri approached Aunt Narcissa, stopping a pace or two away. “You have no need to fear me,” the Witch said softly. “I wish only to help you, though I will ask payment for my services.”

“And what sort of payment would that be?”

“Information.” Veri’s eyes were steady, her hands hanging calmly at her sides. “Your husband

seeks his Master this night, to beg his help. When he has found him, he will inform you of their location, that you may join them there. Is this so?"

Aunt Narcissa gave a small, jerky nod.

"If you will share this information with us, we will give you what you desire most." Veri directed her gaze over Aunt Narcissa's shoulder to Peri, who smiled as Aunt Narcissa turned to see her. "We have the power to save your son, and to ensure he suffers no harm from your choices. If he does not grow to manhood and live out his full term of years, it shall not be for lack of help from us."

"What is the catch?" Aunt Narcissa asked in a rough whisper.

"No catch," said Peri, drawing Aunt Narcissa's eyes back to her. "It is a true offer. I will raise him myself, and love him most dearly, and none will blame him for what you have done."

"You will raise him." Aunt Narcissa's voice turned cool. "And train him up in your own philosophies, no doubt."

"If you choose to see that as a catch, I cannot stop you." Peri's brown eyes met Aunt Narcissa's blue evenly. "He will still live, where otherwise he would die. The choice is yours."

The silence seemed to stretch into years.

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The Witch of the Westmoreland

Chapter 9

“Everyone to me!”

The trained feminine bellow brought Snape and Lily from the cellar, Remus and Peter and Evanie from upstairs, and James and Sirius and Regulus from the kitchen. Peri and Veri stood in the hallway, Veri with a look of careful calm on her face, Peri suppressing a fit of nervous giggles with the help of one hand.

“Where’ve you two been?” James asked before either of the Witches could speak, waving a small black book. “Have a look, Peri, Dumbledore thought this was most likely it but he wanted us to check it with you—this what we were after from the Malfoys?”

Peri looked and nodded, the laughter disappearing from her face. Remus descended the stairs to hold her against him, and she turned and buried her face in his robes. “It’s all right,” he whispered, stroking her hair. “I’m here. I won’t let him touch you again.”

I will personally break his snakey neck if he so much as tries.

“So that’s the last of them,” said Sirius, grinning hugely. “And we found loads of other fun things in Malfoy’s hidey-hole, so whenever he turns up we’ve got him nailed, and I’m positive we spotted Narcissa in Death Eater rig but she got away before we could grab her—”

“She has already been arrested,” said Veri. “But before she was, she told us something of great importance.”

“More important than our potion being done?” Lily asked with a sly smile, causing a wave of gasps around the hallway.

“But I thought it wouldn’t be finished for another week!” Peter objected.

“We can wait until then to use it if you wish,” said Snape dryly. “But I somehow suspect you would prefer the Dark Lord mortal as soon as possible.”

“We do,” said Veri, “and will all the more when you have heard what I have to say.”

“Grace us with your speech, then, o sister,” said Regulus sarcastically.

He still isn’t sure he approves of her. Remus smiled, masking the expression behind Peri’s hair. *But then, she isn’t sure she approves of him either.*

“Four words are scarcely a speech,” Veri said coolly. “But these four might count. *Voldemort strikes here tonight.*”

Silence blanketed the hallway.

“It is us whom he wants,” Peri said, her words falling like pebbles into still water. “The youngest, and the strangest, and the guests of the Order, those who might betray others to save themselves. Death Eaters were in place around this house hours ago, they awaited only my sister’s and my arrival to ward us in, no one can come or go except themselves and their master—but he has forbidden them to enter save in his company, and he is not here yet.” A smile lit her face as her eyes rested on the little book in James’ hand. “And I gravely doubt he knows what we have collected.”

“We can kill him,” Evanie whispered. “Or at least we can make it so he can be killed. And he won’t know—he’ll come storming in here thinking nothing we do can hurt him—”

“So what are we waiting for?” James asked, waving his free hand over his head. “Let’s go! Everyone to the cellar!”

The cellar workroom was spacious, if low-ceilinged. The ten current inhabitants of Headquarters fit around the cauldron with room to spare.

“Be ready with Shield Charms,” Snape said as Peter dialed the combination on the safe and pulled it open. “If a drop of Animattero should touch the fire, the Dark Lord will no longer need to bother with killing us. Or anyone else within a sixty-foot radius of this point.”

“Sounds like a good reason to be careful,” Sirius muttered.

Peter set the golden cup at his feet, then passed the locket to Regulus and the glass ball filled with mist to Snape. The ring and diadem went the other way around the circle, the diadem to Veri and the ring to Remus, and James handed the diary to Lily and drew his wand.

Evanie bent and lifted the cup by one handle, Peter grasping the other with his left hand, his wand ready in his right. “This is for my mum,” the young woman said in a shaking voice. “And for everybody else like her they ever killed.”

She and Peter held the cup over the cauldron half-full of bubbling Animattero for the space of one breath, then released it at the same moment, Peter swiftly Shielding the cauldron as soon as their hands were clear. The cup sank beneath the potion’s surface and disappeared, and a long and ghostly wail emerged from the potion’s depths.

“For the abuse of power,” said Severus, throwing the ball of mist he held onto the stone floor. It shattered beside the locket Regulus was holding pinned down, and a hissing snarl emerged. The locket popped open, revealing that it held not a picture or a photograph but a set of eyes, dark and human and seemingly furious.

Regulus picked it up and stared into the eyes. “For the misuse of gifts,” he said in his coldest tones, “and the torture of innocents.”

Without another look, he flung the locket into the cauldron. It screamed as though it had been

alive, and Sirius cast a hasty Shield Spell just in time as several splatters flew high.

Remus stepped up, holding the ring with its flat stone on his open palm over the steaming cauldron. “For parents left without children, and children without parents,” Peri said clearly.

For my mum, and for our little girl. Remus tipped his hand. The ring fell into the potion without splashing, the stone set in its top cracked across with a sound like a whip, and then it was gone.

Peri shivered once and pressed herself against Remus’ side. “I will have good news for you, if we live through tonight,” she whispered.

“That sounds to me like a reason to do just that.” Remus kissed the top of her head. “As if you weren’t reason enough yourself.”

Veri and Sirius each had hold of one side of the diadem. “For knowledge and wisdom, turned to evil purposes,” she said as they raised it high. James had his wand ready, but the diadem too disappeared beneath the roiling surface of the Animattero with nothing more than a shriek of fury.

Lily stared down at the innocent little book between her hands. “For every life ever touched by this war, or by any war,” she said softly. “That they might all be won so easily as this.”

She hurled it into the depths of the potion, then dropped to the floor, as did everyone else but James, who went to one knee with his wand aimed at the cauldron. “*Protego!*” he shouted at the top of his lungs, and a translucent shield appeared—

Just in time, Remus realized, as the Animattero shattered its cauldron as though the diary had contained a lit firework. A dim idea flickered in his mind, and he groped for his own wand, only to find Peri offering it to him. Quickly, he waved it under the bubble of magic which was now all that intervened between them and death. “*Deficio maxima!*”

The fire which had been burning under the cauldron flickered once and went out completely. James sagged in place, but held the Shield long enough for Sirius to conjure a basin underneath it into which the potion could fall. “Let’s not do that again,” he said weakly as he released the spell.

“How many more immortal Dark Lords do you plan to battle, Potter?” Regulus inquired.

“If I get what I want? None.” James dropped onto his rear end gracelessly, leaning back against Lily. “And we haven’t really battled this one yet, have we?”

“No, but now we can,” said Peter, who seemed unable to take his eyes off the Animattero, rippling slowly in its basin. “Now we have a chance.”

“Not much of one,” Snape said under his breath.

“Better than none at all,” said Veri, favoring Snape with a glare. “And should not someone Vanish this concoction, so that Voldemort does not suspect what we have done?”

Lily's quick "*Evanesco*" removed potion and basin alike just as a door slammed upstairs.

"And we are out of time," said James, taking charge with his tone and his brisk movements as he got to his feet. "Non-combatants—that's Evanie, Veri, and Peri—over there, please." He pointed to the far corner of the room, behind a marble-topped workbench which made a triangle with the two walls, and on which sat a stone mortar and pestle, a silver dagger, and three or four empty vials. "Wormtail, Lily, I want you two on either wall—Moony, Padfoot, here beside me—" His eyes fell on Snape and Regulus. "You two split the difference between the wall-huggers and these two," he said, jerking a thumb at Sirius and Remus. "That'll give us a good line of battle."

"And if the Dark Lord can incapacitate us through our Marks, or even take control of us?" Snape asked sardonically. "What then?"

"Then we turn around and Stun you with our friends to guard our backs," James shot back. "And if you're really nice, we might even wake you up again."

"No," Regulus said with the same quiet intensity that made Sirius' voice so captivating when he felt strongly about something. "If there's even a chance we might be controlled, which there is, we have to be in front."

"In front?" Sirius snapped. "Facing *Voldemort*? You're barely seventeen, Reggie, you'll get killed for sure—"

"Better that than being forced to kill you!" Regulus shot back. "I can fight my own battles, Sirius —"

Peter snapped his fingers and pointed to the stairs, and everyone fell silent, Snape advancing a few paces to match Regulus' forward stance on the other side of James, who looked at Sirius with a shrug. Remus tightened his grip on his wand and glanced back at Peri, who had Veri's hand in hers and seemed to be concentrating hard on something.

Don't do anything stupid, he willed her silently. Please. There's no shame in keeping your head down. I want us both to be alive after tonight.

As do I, he could have sworn he heard her answer. So hold the same stricture in mind for yourself.

Thunder sounded around three sides of the cellar as Death Eater after Death Eater Apparated in, masked faces turned towards the Order fighters, wands at the ready.

Of course, it's always possible neither of us will survive...

Sirius was muttering curses under his breath. Regulus didn't seem to be breathing at all. Peter was backing away from the Death Eaters, towards the counter behind which the two Witches and Evanie knelt. James and Snape were both flicking glances at Lily, who had her chin high as their final adversary silently Apparated into the cellar.

Merlin, he's good.

In a manner of speaking.

“So,” said Lord Voldemort, letting his red eyes rove over the group. “Two traitors, two animals, three freaks, and three foolish young wizards who resist the obvious. And for this, I bring twenty Death Eaters... overkill, perhaps, but better safe than sorry. Your kind have surprised me before, and I can afford no surprises tonight, unless they are pleasant ones.”

The crimson gaze roved from James to Sirius before fixing on Peter, who was now backed against the wide angle the counter made with the wall. “Should one of you care to join me, perhaps, speak now. It is the only chance you will have to save your lives. I might even be persuaded to spare one other, if a new recruit should ask it.” A sidelong look at Snape. “Or a Death Eater who renews his vow to me.” Slit pupils centered on Remus. “Or a creature who agrees to learn his proper place at last.”

Your Pericula will die if you do not yield, a voice whispered within Remus’ mind, showing him images of Peri twisted, bleeding, broken on the floor, Veri weeping over her. *Or suffer worse than death—her magic could be useful, if she were properly trained...* Peri limp and vacant-eyed, wearing nothing more than a set of chains, her body covered in purple-green bruises. *Only kneel to me, take my Mark, and she will be safe, safe forevermore...*

Unbidden, the image of Peri’s smiling face, seen from below over a whirl of goldenrod petals, filled Remus’ mind. Voldemort pulled away with a hiss, and Remus brought his wand up to bear.

“I kneel to only one,” he said, his voice quiet but filling every corner of the cellar nonetheless. “You are not she.”

Voldemort smiled. “On your own head be it.” His own wand snapped up to point directly at Remus. “*Avada Kedavra!*”

Remus dropped and rolled to one side, hearing his friends and the Death Eaters shouting curses at one another as he did.

Battle was joined.

Eyes shut, back pushed into the corner of the two walls, Veri hummed quietly to herself, focusing her magic on those she loved, and those who were loved by them.

Hurt them not, she directed the curses of their enemies silently, using as the mainstay of her magic the song without which she would never have lived, feeling her sister’s hand in hers and her sister’s magic weaving about hers, reinforcing and adding to it. *Be as a drop of rain, a flake of snow, a flower petal on the wind. Be nothing at all.*

Hurt them not.

Sirius and Regulus fought back to back, alternately shielding and throwing hexes, holding off three times their number with the sheer savage speed of their casting. James and Snape battled side by side, Lily behind them, holding a shield over them both and letting it fall only for the fraction of a second either wizard needed to throw a spell. Remus had dropped back to the opening of the counter, and Peter still defended its corner against the wall, his teeth bared as he scabbled his way up onto the countertop itself.

Evania leapt up from cover, snatched one of the empty vials, and hurled it across the room. A Death Eater shrieked and fell, clawing at a lacerated face, and Remus fired a spell through the gap thus created, dropping a masked figure who had been about to curse Peter. Another vial, this one seeming to miss, until two Death Eaters screamed, arching their backs with the pain of broken and embedded glass. Sirius Stunned one and Snape the other, and the two traded nods of grim satisfaction before returning to the fray.

Remus shielded himself from three simultaneous curses and returned fire, taking a quick glance around the room. Eight bodies decorated the floor already, and all wore masks and swathing robes.

Are we—I think we are! We're winning!

In that instant of jubilation, a hex tore through his shield and dropped him to his side, gasping for breath. Two Death Eaters broke from the fray and started towards him, one laughing in a piercing, feminine voice. “Anyone for a wolf hunt?” she called shrilly. “Share a piece of the kill?”

A snarl erupted beside Remus, and he got his head around in time to see Peri rising from her crouch, hands hooked into claws and eyes glowing with battle-light. “Not my husband, you bitch!” she shrieked, and shot both her hands forward as though throwing invisible spells.

The female Death Eater and her companion both froze in place, shuddering. The wizard started to hyperventilate. The witch emitted tiny, piteous whimpers. Remus dragged half a breath into his lungs, brought his wand around, and conjured a net around them both, knocking their heads together in the process and rendering them unconscious.

A mercy blow, really, if she did what I think she did...

And what do you think I did?

Later. Remus pushed himself to his feet with one hand on the counter, motioning Peri back down with his head. **When we're not in active danger of death.**

Voldemort now dueled James, Snape, and Lily all at once, shielding from their curses and firing back at them as they dodged. Sirius and Regulus had got separated, and Remus tripped one of the three who were trying to back Sirius into a corner, as Evania smashed her last vial into the face of one of the pair chasing Regulus and Regulus himself hexed the other over his shoulder—

A spell of Voldemort's knocked James and Snape flying into opposite walls and Lily backwards into the corner, where she sank to the floor, senseless. The Dark wizard whirled and lunged

forward, wand pointed straight at Regulus. “The traitor’s wage,” he hissed, his left hand closed into a fist. “*Avada Kedavra!*”

“NO!”

Sirius’ bellow filled everyone’s ears as Regulus froze in place, his face a mask of pain, his terrified eyes fixed on the green death rushing towards him—Evanie was screaming, Veri’s hands were locked white-knuckled in her robe, Remus tried to get his wand into position but knew he was already too late—

Padfoot the dog slammed into Regulus from the side just as the Killing Curse struck him from the front.

Both figures were outlined in green as they fell.

Still screaming, Evanie snatched up something small and furry from the counter and hurled it—no, hurled *him* across the room. Peter retransformed in midair and bowled over the last two Death Eaters standing, and Remus conjured ropes around them both as Wormtail the rat scurried free.

James dragged himself upright, breath rasping in his throat, as Snape, dropping his broken wand, did the same on the adjoining wall. “You,” James said hoarsely to Voldemort, who was surveying the wreckage of the cellar with narrowed eyes, “just killed my best friend.”

“You sound surprised.” Voldemort held up his left hand behind him negligently, and the dagger Evanie had thrown at him bounced off it and clattered to the floor. “Did you truly think I would let any of you leave here alive?”

He isn’t looking our way, is he? murmured a voice at the back of Remus’ mind.

No. He isn’t. Silently, Remus performed a Summoning Spell.

“You’re the one not leaving alive,” James said, his wand held out steadily in front of him, tracking Voldemort as the Dark wizard moved closer. “If this is the caliber of wizards you’re attracting, I’m surprised you got as far as you did—it was two-to-one against us, and look who’s still standing.”

“I must admit I am rather surprised at your success.” Voldemort began to circle to James’ left, James countering him step for step. “The Killing Curse, of course, has taken its toll on your ranks, but my Death Eaters tried several times to use the Imperius and the Cruciatus on your fighters, and neither seemed to strike as deeply as they usually do...”

Remus padded across the cellar floor behind Voldemort, trading grins with Peter as he came. *That would be our “freaks” at work, doing their part even though they can’t use wands. Well done, Veri, nice work, my love...*

“But it no longer matters.” Voldemort spun, gesturing with his left hand, and a shield sprang up around him—a shield surrounding himself and not James, but *Lily* —

And Snape.

Voldemort stopped, seemingly nonplussed. “Severus,” he said, looking down at the dark-haired young man who knelt with his arms outstretched, veiling Lily from sight. “What is this?”

“Not her.” Snape’s voice was still tight with pain, multiplied by the effort he must have put out to thrust himself inside the shield before it closed, but his face showed no trace of fear, only determination. “Kill me. I deserve it. Not her.”

“That I would live to see the day,” Voldemort murmured, as if to himself. “One of my own Marked ones, shielding a Mudblood. Save your effort,” he called over his shoulder to James, who had his wand against the shield and was tracing out patterns on it. “Only I and my own spells can pass this barrier.” He turned back to Snape. “Yes, Severus, you do indeed deserve to die, but you cannot think it will stave off her death in turn for more than a few moments...”

Remus finished his crossing at a run and handed James what he was carrying.

“*Not her,*” Snape repeated, his black eyes locked on Voldemort’s red.

“Not her.” Voldemort raised his wand. “As you wish.”

Peter was beside James and Remus now, wandless but with his hands curled into fists.

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

A small white hand threw Snape aside from behind, its owner using that same force to shove herself to safety in the opposite direction. “*Expelliarmus!*” Lily cried, bringing her wand to bear on Voldemort.

The Dark Lord stared in shock for only a second, but it was one second too long—his wand went spinning away, his curse splashed harmlessly against the wall, he himself staggered back through his shield—

Peter dropped to his hands and knees, and Voldemort tripped over him, falling heavily onto the stone floor—

And James stabbed the dagger in his hand down into Voldemort’s chest with all the force he could muster.

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The Witch of the Westmoreland

Chapter 10

Remus put a hand out to the wall to steady himself as the reality of the past few minutes began to sink in.

We just battled twenty Death Eaters. Plus Voldemort himself.

And we won. We're alive.

A flash of pain as he looked over at the two limp, black-haired bodies near the center of the cellar.

Mostly alive.

He somehow doubted Walburga Black would take kindly to this news, even—or especially—when she learned Sirius had died in a failed attempt to save Regulus.

But when you think about the odds we were up against, it's a miracle we made it out with as few people dead as we did...

Sounds from behind him made him turn in time to see James offering Snape his hand. "I owe you," the blood-splattered Auror apprentice said. "You saved her life."

"I did not do it for you, Potter," Snape said sourly, pushing himself into a sitting position.

"I didn't say you did."

Snape looked narrowly at James, then nodded and accepted the proffered hand.

Lily caught Remus' eye and mouthed, *Well, finally*, wiping her brow exaggeratedly and drawing a smile from him.

There were certainly times it seemed they could have pursued that little rivalry even beyond the grave.

Movement from the far corner of the room caught his eye.

Perhaps not the best of metaphors at the moment.

Veri was standing up, her eyes on Sirius and Regulus, her face impassive. Evanie and Peri stood behind her, the Muggle girl blinking hard, Remus' wife with her head bowed. She lifted it as Remus watched, and her brown eyes met Remus' blue.

Can you still hear me? said her voice silently.

Remus blinked. **That was you, then. During the fight.**

Yes, I believe so. I have no idea if it will continue when we no longer have such intense need of it...

I can't say I'd mind. Remus closed his eyes for a moment, trying to get used to the feel of Peri's mind against his own. **I like knowing where you are, being able to find you quickly. This is just a little more of that.**

Indeed. Peri slid a mental caress along the link.

Remus reopened his eyes. Peter had crossed the room while he wasn't looking, and was standing with Evanie now and holding her, her head resting on his shoulder as tears slid unacknowledged down his face. A little sniff came from Lily's direction behind Remus, and he could feel Peri's worry, both on her own part and for her sister.

But wait—it's only worry. She's not grieving. I know she cared about Sirius, they were always telling bad jokes back and forth, and she liked Regulus, she's been teasing me about being sorry she chose too soon...

What's going on here?

Veri glided across the floor to the two scions of the House of Black and knelt beside them. Gently, she pulled Regulus free of Sirius' embrace.

Regulus gasped in a breath and started coughing.

My God, Sirius made it in time, he must have taken the curse on himself—

“Veri?” The younger Black blinked up at the Witch, his voice thick and uncertain. “Did we win?”

“We did.” Veri rested her hand on his cheek for a moment. “And you will live. You were struck by only a small portion of the curse.”

“But—but I thought—” Regulus half-turned to look over his shoulder, and his face went from confusion to horror. “No,” he breathed, stretching out a hand towards his brother's crumpled body, then letting it fall. “No—not for me—please, not for me—”

“You have nothing to fear,” Veri said. “He made his choice freely and with full knowledge of what he did.”

“But that doesn't change what's happened!” Regulus was shaking now, and Remus was sure the tremors in his voice were at least partly suppressed tears. “Going to it freely doesn't make you any less dead!”

“Perhaps not.” Veri pressed Regulus' shoulder, then rose gracefully to her feet. “But other things may.”

Behind Remus, Lily drew a long breath of understanding. Evanie stifled a gasp and whispered

something to Peter, whose eyes brightened as he listened. Snape's mutter might or might not have been, "Typical Black." James was staring at the three people in the center of the room as though the intensity of his gaze could bring about the outcome he desired.

Do you understand yet? Peri's voice asked faintly in the back of Remus' mind.

I think I might. Remus touched the appropriate memory, setting it going for them both to see. **I think I just might.**

Veri stepped deliberately around Sirius, singing softly in time with her footsteps.

"She said, ride with your brindled hound at heel, and your good grey hawk in hand..."

She knelt beside him and rolled him onto his back, caressing his cheek with her free hand and matching her song to the strokes. *"There's none... can harm... the knight... what's lain..."*

Color rose in Regulus' cheeks, but his eyes were bright with disbelieving hope.

"...with the Witch... of the Westmoreland..."

"Thass right," mumbled a slurred voice. "Public shervice 'nouncement." A hand rose, holding up a wobbly finger. "Shag y'girlfriend t'night..." The finger came down to point at Veri. "Life y'save might be yer own." Sirius giggled weakly. "D'we win?"

"We did indeed," Veri said, catching Sirius' hand in hers and smiling at him tenderly. "And you, my marvelously foolish young knight, took enough of that Killing Curse on yourself that its effects were dissipated, and it killed neither you nor your brother."

Which makes an excellent story to tell the world—but I'd tend to think the same magic which can keep a werewolf human on the night of the full moon can easily make a wizard, if not proof against the Killing Curse, at least resistant to it...

Remus glanced at Peri, but she was showing no signs of having heard his thoughts.

She's busy with watching them. Regulus, in a highly unusual show of emotion, was hugging Sirius and Veri both at once. *Or maybe whatever link we have between us works only at times of great stress. Or when we're not thinking about it consciously. Or between certain times on the clock—*

And why am I still thinking about this? What does it matter? We're all alive and the war is over and it's time to celebrate!

Judging by the noises now coming from the rest of his friends, they had reached this conclusion as well. James nearly bowled over the knot of Blacks at the center of the cellar, Peter wasn't far behind, and Lily threw her arms around all of them, laughing and crying all at once. Evanie slipped behind Remus, giving him a quick hug, which he returned wholeheartedly.

Who says Muggles can't help wizards fight? That was incredible.

Evanie released him and smiled, then started towards Snape, who was leaning against the wall with his brow furrowed. Someone twitched the robes over Remus' elbow at this point, though, and he turned and scooped Peri into the biggest hug he'd ever given her, including the one after she'd agreed to marry him.

We're alive—we're both alive—we made it through a war together, and we're going to start a family and watch them grow and make our world a better place—

A scrap of memory returned to him. "What is this good news you said you had for me?" he asked when his lips were free.

"Related to that which Lily is about to tell James." Peri gave him the mischief-maker's smile he so loved on her. "Listen."

"James, I'm sorry I haven't told you this already," Lily was saying, her bright head resting against James' shoulder with no regard for the blood staining his robes. "It was just, with the war coming to a head and you out fighting every day and what happened to Peri... I'm sorry. But I'm ready to tell you now."

"Peri? What?" James glanced around at his friends, most of whom seemed as bewildered as he was, though Veri had a secret smile on her face and Evanie was covering a giggle. "What's going on here, Lily?"

Lily caught James' hand in hers and laid it on her lower stomach. "I'm pregnant," she said. "Due near the end of July."

"You—I—we—" James stuttered.

"You have correctly identified the three necessities for creating a child," said Veri dryly. "Well done."

"Veri, be nice," Lily scolded. "He's startled."

"I am not bloody startled! I'm just..." James looked down at his hand and what it was covering. "You're sure?" he asked plaintively. "I mean, no mistakes or anything?"

"There is no mistake," Veri said, smiling warmly at him. "Congratulations, James. I think you will make a fine father."

Sirius laughed aloud. "Prongs gets to be a dad!" he caroled, grinning around at the group. "Can I be godfather, Prongs, can I, huh?"

"Of course you..." James trailed off, frowning in thought. "Can a kid have two godfathers?" he asked.

"I don't see why not," said Lily. "But who..."

The obvious answer occurred to her and to Sirius at precisely the same instant, judging by their respective expressions of awed delight and horrified disgust. Peter pulled Evanie into a kiss, probably so he wouldn't laugh in their faces, Remus thought. Regulus was leaning back against his hands, watching the scene unfold in front of him with a look of tolerant wonder, as though he had never imagined joining the other side of the war would be so very entertaining. Veri wore a similar smile, though hers was tinged with a warning for Sirius.

Here's hoping he pays attention.

James looked over his shoulder. "You saved them both," he said to Snape, who seemed less than sure this was really happening to him. "Not that either of us knew it at the time, but you did. I think you deserve it."

Snape's shoulders went back as he opened his mouth to reply. Evanie pulled free from her clinch with Peter and looked sharply at him, and he stopped before saying a word.

Interesting. Wonder what they could have talked about?

She is right. Severus inclined his head to Evanie, using the small motion to bring himself some measure of calm. I am no proud princess, to strike at Lily for the sake of hurting Potter. Ironic that he should call her 'Tiger Lily' when I made that same choice, the lady or the tiger, long since—I would far rather see her alive and with another than dead or hurt because of me.

And Potter is thoughtless but not, in this instance, cruel. He is truly grateful to me for saving Lily's life, and that of their child. This offer is an attempt to honor me, not to mock me for what I will never have.

Let me see if I cannot find a way to satisfy all parties.

"Thank you," he said, mustering a sincere tone for the words. "But I doubt I would be able to provide your child with a good home should something happen to his parents, and that is a godfather's first duty. I think..."

Lily was beaming at him, her eyes shining with the overflowing joy which had first drawn him to her as a child. He had to swallow against a tight throat before he could go on. "I think it would serve better if I were simply a friend of the family. Which I do hope to be."

"Sounds like a plan," said Potter, grinning. "Maybe we'll name him after you instead, what say?"

Severus raised an eyebrow. "I say it might well merit you a citation for child abuse. Especially given the disrespectful nicknames so easily derived from it. As you well know."

Potter and Black both winced. "Point taken," Potter said. "We'll work something out."

So we will. Severus returned the smile Lily directed at him before she turned to mediate Potter and

Black's loud discussion of what Potter's son should actually be named. *So we will indeed.*

He made his way to the cellar steps to sit down, musing on the odd twists and turns of a world in which he could think of himself, James Potter, and Sirius Black as "we".

A better world, perhaps, than others I could imagine.

I look forward to seeing what it can become.

"Merlin's beard," Remus muttered. "Snape can smile. Who'd have thought."

"Stop that." Peri swatted at his ear. "I thought you wanted to hear my news."

"I do." Remus lifted his wife from the ground and carried her to the marble-topped counter, setting her on its top and leaning against the angle where Peter had fought. "You said it was related to Lily's..." A sudden thought occurred to him. "You mean you're—"

Peri silenced him with two fingers over his mouth. "You recall our daughter's death," she murmured.

Remus nodded, biting back his tears. *She wouldn't bring it up unless there was a reason.*

"What I could not find a way to tell you at the time was that although her body died, her soul did not depart this world."

"What?" Remus blinked. "You mean she's a ghost?"

"No, not a ghost." Peri took his hand in hers, tracing a design on his skin with her forefinger. "Though most of her magic is directed towards that of wanded spells, she shares some small portion of my talent for healing the soul. With that and my own magic, as well as our close blood relation, she was able to find refuge within me. She has been with me these past months, seeing through my eyes and hearing through my ears, both of us postponing the inevitable."

"The inevitable," Remus repeated, not sure he liked what he was hearing.

"Such an arrangement, by its nature, could not last." Peri's eyes were still downcast. "If she had been a grown woman, even a girl of six or seven, her soul would have had enough integrity to retain its identity within mine for a longer period, but she was unborn when she died and her soul was not yet strong. If I could find her no body of her own, my soul would eventually overwhelm and destroy hers, unless I sent her on to whatever waits beyond this world."

"We could have found her a body," Remus said, unable to keep quiet. "We could have transfigured—or Veri could have made her one, couldn't she? Used the proper raw materials, which I *know* are available, to create one in the usual way? And then you could have transplanted her soul into that!"

Peri met his eyes. “We are forbidden from any great use of our powers, Veritas and I, to benefit only ourselves or our own people, save in the ways of our ancestors. My sister has the power you name, as do I, but we could not use it unless we had some other who would benefit from it.” Her smile suddenly flashed out. “And we found that one tonight. Or, should I say, those two.”

“Two?” Remus glanced down at Peri’s midriff, but it was as delicately curved as ever. “What do you mean, two?”

“A woman of the Death Eaters and her unborn child.” Peri stroked a hand along her belly musingly, as though remembering what it had felt like to cradle a life within. “She feared for his life should she be exposed to dementors. For his salvation, she gave us the information we returned with, the knowledge that Voldemort would attack us here tonight.” She looked up at Remus, her smile broadening. “Thus my sister and I have a debt owing to her, that we must shortly go forth and pay. And when we return, I too shall be with child. Or perhaps I should say with children.”

“Twins,” Remus breathed, finding a smile on his own face without conscious effort.

“Indeed.” Peri leaned forward and joined her smile to his.

I’m going to be a father after all—our little girl is alive, and she’ll have a brother—a rescue child, who would have died otherwise—

“Wait,” he said, pulling back. “There aren’t many women among the Death Eaters. And not a lot of those have children...”

Peri chuckled. “I saw in your mind at our joining the face of the one who cast the curse on you,” she said. “I assume he lost his mask in the fight. He will very shortly have lost his child as well.” She batted her eyelashes. “Poor him.”

Remus burst out laughing.

Now that will be a story to tell the little ones in years to come.

How Lucius Malfoy, by being too impatient to throw a curse, accidentally saved the world.

She fled over broken and rocky ground, clutching her child to her chest, not daring to look behind for fear she would see her enemies gaining. Faceless, voiceless, silently they glided behind her, their darkness and chill reaching out to envelop her, and her son wailed with fear in her arms as she ran.

They will have us soon enough. I will not let it be one second sooner than it must.

Anger rose in her heart, shoving back the cold for a few precious seconds, anger at those who had led her to betray her husband and her Master, then broken their promise to her.

But no, not to me—they never made a promise for me—

She glanced down. Terrified yet trusting gray eyes met hers, as her son lifted his face from her robes for a moment to look at her. Her mind had made him a baby of a year's age, for no reason she could fathom, but dreams had never been notable for their logic.

It was for his sake I handed over Lucius' letter, the letter that told me the Dark Lord was so far from angry with us that he planned to allow us to help him strike his enemies in their own stronghold. And no sooner had I done so than Aurors broke down my sister's door, and those who had promised me help fled before them, abandoning my child to his fate...

She tripped on a projecting rock and fell, flinging out an arm to catch herself and save her son the shock. He cried out in any case, clinging to her all the tighter.

I can run no more. My strength is gone.

Awkwardly, she shoved herself halfway upright, then bent her head and arms around her child, shielding him as best she could with her own body. Dream though this might be, as easily as she knew they could overpower her, she would still fight to the last second for his life—

“Begone!” cried a woman's strong voice, and silver light flashed, driving back the darkness. “Leave this place while still you can!”

“Your power avails you nothing against us,” added a second voice, also feminine. “Depart and do not dare to return!”

I know those voices.

Though I heard them only once, still I know those voices.

Could it be—

Footsteps beside her, and the rustling of robes. “I am so sorry we have come later than we thought,” said the second voice, as a hand reached out to touch her arm. “Are you hurt? The boy?”

“We are both well, thank you.” Narcissa raised her head to see the lighter-skinned of the Witches—Pericula, she thought—kneeling beside her, smiling at her. She held a child in her arms as Narcissa did herself, a curly-haired girl who seemed curious about the boy now peering over Narcissa's arm at her. “Why have you come here?”

“To pay our debt,” said Veritas, appearing behind her sister. “Your information was quite correct, and the war is now ended. We would be beyond ungracious if we did not fulfill what we had promised, with such an outcome.”

Narcissa shut her eyes against tears of shame and relief. *They have come after all. You will live, my son, and grow strong and happy, far away from darkness and fear and the horrors of war.*

She kissed him on the forehead. “Go well, my child,” she said softly. “I love you.”

“Mama,” the boy proclaimed, hugging her around the neck.

A warmth rose in Narcissa’s heart that seemed untouchable. Not even handing her son to Pericula and watching his face change, take on lines very like the little girl’s and Pericula’s own, could hurt her now.

But the dementors will, when I return to reality...

“They need not,” said Veritas very softly behind her. “My power is with the body, and yours is already taxed to its limit fighting for your child’s life. You could battle to save yourself, or you could decide to fight no more. The choice is yours.”

“I think there is little enough chance of any life worth living for me after this,” Narcissa said dryly. “I shall take my chances in the next.”

“Then your way lies there,” said Pericula, nodding towards a range of hills in the distance, which Narcissa could now make out by the light of what appeared to be dawn. The dementors who had pursued her this far were nowhere to be seen. “And we wish you all the best.”

“As I do to you.” Narcissa smiled one last time at her son and his twin sister. “All of you.”

Rising, she began to walk towards the hills, her feet growing lighter with every step.

She did not look back.

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The Witch of the Westmoreland

Epilogue

Veri stood at the door of James and Lily's cottage in Godric's Hollow, looking towards the center of the village, where a few last children in their costumes were being called home by anxious parents. One arm cradled the bundle around which a good deal of her life had come to revolve in the last five months. Absently, she heard the squeals of happiness from within.

Wormtail must be letting them chase him again. They do love trying to catch the rat.

Footsteps behind her warned her of an approach. "Knut for your thoughts," said the voice she loved the best.

"I thought the best things in life were free," she teased, leaning back against Sirius.

"They are, so what does that tell you?" Laughing, he dodged her slap, and bent to kiss her. "But honestly, what's got you so pensive tonight? I've barely seen you smile at all."

"Do you recall the world of which I once told you?"

"The one where we'd all die before we were forty? Yeah."

"Tonight would have been most important in that world." Her imagination painted her a vivid picture of the red-eyed wizard whom they had defeated nearly two years before, alive and stalking down this street, sure that he was about to destroy the only possible threat to his continued life and power...

"Tell me more."

"What?" Veri turned to look at her husband. "Why?"

"Well, I could say I'm getting a headache from listening to five toddlers all try to outscreech each other and two babies helping them out." Sirius rubbed his forehead. "Which is true. It was a cute idea to introduce our lot to Gideon and Fabian's nephew and Frank and Alice's boy, especially because with Hermione and Reynard being born early they'll be in the same year as Harry and Ron and Neville, but Merlin's pants, don't they make a lot of noise. And with your cousin's baby, or whatever she is, the one who gave Moony those directions, and Ron's little sister..." He shook his head. "I'm just glad Pearl doesn't shriek like that."

"She does. You are simply never awake to hear it." Veri handed over their daughter, allowing Sirius to smile down into Meghan's sleeping face. "Are you sure that you wish to hear more of the world that would have been? It is a very dark story in parts, and holds a great deal of pain."

"If you're willing to tell me." Sirius hooked his free arm around Veri's waist. "See, I always used to love telling stories at parties or whenever we'd all be hanging around getting drunk, and now that there's not so much need for Aurors, I've been thinking that it might be fun to try that out

again. But if I'm going to do it, I want to get lots of people to enjoy it, and you can't do that with just a story you tell. It takes writing."

"You wish to become an author?"

"Basically, yeah. I thought I'd take a pen name, at least to start with. That way, if I flop, nobody knows it's me. But I couldn't decide what to write about." Sirius swayed on his feet as Meghan began to stir. "This world of yours sounds like a good choice. It lets me stick with people and places I know, but nobody can get too mad because I wrote them wrong, because it isn't really them at all. And it'll give the kids an idea what they missed out on, with the war ending before they were born and all."

"I can tell you only the most important events," Veri warned. "You will have large stretches of time to fill with your own imagination."

Sirius grinned. "That'll be the best part. Feasts, Quidditch, and trouble in the halls, as only the Junior Marauders can do it."

"Very well, then." Veri nudged Sirius towards the stairs. "As I said, the story begins on this very night, in this very cottage, with the arrival of Lord Voldemort, guided here by a prophecy and a forsworn Secret-Keeper..."

"Read more about the other me, Mummy," Harry Potter begged his mother, holding up the brightly covered hardback book. "More about the Chamber of Secrets and the shiny sword I pulled out of the Sorting Hat like Uncle Peter and Fawkes and the basilisk and Tom Riddle and saving Ginny."

"Well, maybe just one more chapter." Lily patted the couch beside her, and her pajama-clad five-year-old scrambled up and cuddled against her side, as her lap was rather smaller than it had been. "We won't be able to do this as much anymore when the new baby comes."

"That's okay," said Harry. "I can read to myself soon. Neenie and Ray just have to show me how to do really long words, and then I'll be good enough even for these." He touched the cover of his favorite book reverently.

"I hope you will." Lily dropped a kiss on her son's messy head. "Padfoot's almost done with the next one, you know. All about how you're afraid of him."

Harry laughed. "I'm not afraid of Padfoot!"

"No, but the other you is." Lily opened the book to her bookmark. "He thinks Padfoot gave us away to Voldemort, and that's why your dad and I died."

"But that's silly. Padfoot wouldn't do that."

“You know that, and I know that,” said James, coming in. “But the other Harry doesn’t know that. Not until the very end of the book.”

“And he doesn’t know anything about Moony or Wormy, either,” Lily added. “But he finds out.”

“Good,” Harry said, nodding solemnly. “Read now, Mummy?”

“What do you say?”

“Please?”

“That’s better.” Lily cleared her throat. “Chapter Seventeen. The Heir of Slytherin.”

Reynard Lupin closed the thick book in front of him with a sigh. “Do you think they’ll ever really have the Triwizard Tournament again?” he asked his sister.

“If they do, you’re not entering,” Hermione said without looking up from her homework.

“You’re not the boss of me!”

“No, but I am the person who knows whenever you’re hurt, and who shares all your bad dreams. Especially the ones about the black monsters.”

Ray shuddered. “Do you have to remind me?”

“Sorry.” Hermione got up and came across the room, hugging her brother as she knew she wouldn’t be able to do much longer. Even at nine, he was starting to get touchy about public displays of affection. Their bedroom, though, was scarcely public. “But we are connected, you know. If you did enter the Tournament, and got hurt, or even killed…”

“I wouldn’t get killed. And I’d block off our bond, so you wouldn’t feel it if I got hurt.” Ray sighed and hugged Hermione back. “I’d ask you first, how’s that?”

Hermione laughed. “That sounds great. As long as you ask me first, you can enter any Tournament you want.”

“I’d win, too,” said Ray, flopping down on his bed as Hermione let him go. “Like Harry did in the book. Except Harry had the fake Moody helping him along. I’d want to win it fair and square.” He made a face. “Not that my character ever does anything fair. Or nice.”

“You wanted to know why you weren’t in the books,” Hermione reminded him, dipping her quill. “It isn’t Padfoot’s fault that’s who you started out as.”

Ray rolled his eyes at his twin’s back.

Ron waited outside Ginny's door, counting silently to himself. *Five... four... three... two... one...*

A shriek emerged from within, and his sister threw the door open, clutching her recently purchased wand in one hand and the enormous hardcover book in the other. "I'm going to find him," she said, her eyes blazing. "I'm going to find him, and I'm going to kill him."

"No, you're not." Ron drew his own wand with all the assurance of having completed a full year of Hogwarts where Ginny had none. "They're his stories, Gin. He's allowed to do that."

"I don't care!" Ginny flung the book furiously onto the bed. "It's horrible!"

"He said it had to happen for the story to work right."

"But—but—" Ginny gripped her wand still tighter. "How could he *do* that?"

"Better in a story than in real life," Ron said. "If it was in real life, we'd never find out how the other two books were going to come out."

Ginny snarled into his face and slammed her door.

She says she's going to kill him, but the thing she's objecting to is him killing off his own character. Ron shrugged, putting his wand away. *I don't think I'll ever understand girls.*

"Veritas!"

Veri, coming into the kitchen, smiled. "Good morning, Severus," she said to the head in the fireplace. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yes," Severus said shortly. "I wish to speak with your husband. Immediately."

"Ah, you've seen the manuscript for the sixth one, haven't you?"

"I have." Severus bit the words off short. "Regulus was kind enough to lend me his copy last night. And I want an explanation. Now, not in two more years when he finishes the last of these... *things*."

"Be fair, he is writing as quickly as he can." Veri intercepted her youngest daughter as Susanna ran through the kitchen and sent her upstairs to find Sirius. "And I believe he intends to tell your true story at the end of the seventh book. It is only that you are so very easy for his younger readers to hate, as he once did, and he hopes to teach them to look beyond the obvious..."

"So," said Neville, shutting up his copy of the seventh book. "Do you really think that's how this year is going to go?"

Ron snorted. "What, you *want* to get used as a knife-sharpener?"

"No. I'm just wondering."

"I don't think it can," said Hermione. "We're missing a couple important people for it to happen that way. Like Voldemort, for one. And this little git for another." She ruffled Ray's hair until he swatted her hand away. "Uncle Peter has Aunt Evanie and isn't Dark, Master Snape stayed at Flamel College after he got his Mastery instead of going back to Hogwarts so he can't be Headmaster, and I don't think Dad is going to leave Mum and go marry Tonks."

"He'd better not," said Ginny. "Charlie's picked up a few things from the dragons over the years. Like breathing fire if anyone gets near his mate."

"I thought you were going to say dragon pox," Ray quipped. Ginny made a face at him.

"And there's me," said Meghan, stretching languidly. "I don't exist in the books. Dad said he made Cho Chang a bit like me, but she was only really important in four and five, and she wasn't right for you anyway, Harry. In the books or in real life."

"Don't remind me," Harry groaned. "I thought it was supposed to be Romilda Vane who tried using love potion on me, not Cho..."

"At least I didn't get it this time," said Ron, grinning. "You were funny while it lasted."

Harry made an obscene gesture in Ron's direction.

"I was a little sad that I didn't come in until book five," said Luna, lying down with her head in Ray's lap. "But I suppose there wouldn't have been much of a way for you to meet me before then in the book world. And we know each other really, so it's all right." She smiled up at Ray. "I wouldn't mind so much being locked up in your family's cellar."

"As long as I came down to see you lots, right?" Ray bent over and kissed her forehead. "Astoria Greengrass," he muttered under his breath. "Cross-eyed little pureblood brat. No thank you."

"It was clever of your dad's publishers to publish the first book in the Muggle world on the same day we got the last one," Neville was saying to Meghan. "Do you think they'll be as popular there as they are here?"

"I'm sure they will. Dadfoot's already holding auditions for an actress to pretend to be him for interviews and things." Meghan giggled. "It was Uncle Reggie's idea to make sure she's blonde, to account for all the stupid mistakes Dadfoot made writing the books. And Dadfoot wants her to be pretty but not beautiful, so he won't be tempted to fall in love with himself."

"I don't think Aunt Veri would let him," said Hermione. "And if he still tried, Mum would sort him out. She's good that way."

"Isn't she just," said Ray, sitting up and easing his back. "We need to pick a date to play through

this one in game mode before we go back to school. Does it have a special setting for that time you die, Harry?”

“I’d assume. Otherwise there’d be no way to move beyond that point, because it’d reset me every time I died.”

“Interesting idea,” said Ginny. “A game there’s no way to win.”

“Effing frustrating idea,” countered Ron. “I wouldn’t want to play it.”

“You won’t be playing as Harry,” Hermione said. “At least, I’d assume he wants to be himself.”

“No reason to change it now.” Harry looked around the room. “How about the day after my birthday, all? Take our own roles or equivalents, start around nine, play until the story’s over or someone has to go?”

Noises of approval met this. It was so decided. On the first of August, 1997, Harry Potter would enter a world of darkness and danger for the seventh and final time, seeking Horcruxes and Hallows, helping his friends and battling his enemies, moving inexorably towards his final battle with Lord Voldemort.

Unless his mother called him home for dinner first, of course.