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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 1: War Games (Year 3)

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Even for young witches and wizards, the children known as the cubs of the Pack were quite unusual. For one thing, they had voluntarily gotten up at six-thirty in the morning every day of their summer holidays so far. For another, they were willingly learning lessons during this precious vacation time. And then, of course, there was the simple fact of who they were: The Boy Who Lived, The Boy Who Disappeared, the brightest witch to come to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry within living memory, and the blood Heir of Rowena Ravenclaw.

On this rather damp and foggy morning, these four, plus one more, were sitting in a row outside their Devon home, the Marauders' Den, watching what they got up every morning to watch, and some mornings to take part in. A man was dancing around in front of them, wand in his hand, throwing spells at a target which moved erratically in all directions.

"Time," called the woman standing behind the five children, waving her own wand in the direction of the target. It sank obediently to the ground, as did the man, but only one of them was panting with exertion.

The smallest of the children, a petite girl of ten, picked up the water bottle sitting beside her and walked out to her father. "Here you go, Dadfoot," she said, handing it to him. "Did you make it?"

Sirius Black accepted the water, took a long swallow, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "I don't know. Letha, did I make it?"

Aletha Freeman-Black picked up the now quiescent target and tapped it with her wand three times. Gold-colored numbers rose to hover above it. "Let's see, what do you need?" she asked.

"One hundred solid hits in three minutes, and you know it. Quit teasing me."

"But why?" asked the girl still sitting in line, innocently. "It's so much fun."

Sirius groaned. "Did I sprout a sign in the night saying 'Pick on Me'?"

"No," said one of the boys, grinning. "It's permanent."

"Brat." Sirius picked up the water bottle, cocked his elbow, then brought it down sharply. Hermione Granger-Lupin ducked away with a squeal as cold water splattered all over her brother.

"That felt good," said Draco Black, shaking his head briskly and sending water droplets flying everywhere.

"I wish I'd known you were all mad before I decided to come and stay for the summer," said Neville Longbottom, mopping his face with his shirt.

“But you did know,” said Harry Potter, wiping his glasses on his sleeve. “You’ve known us for two years, you tried to stop us going after the Sorcerer’s Stone, you watched me go into the Chamber of Secrets – you had to know we were mad.”

“If anyone’s still interested in knowing the results...” Aletha drawled.

Sirius raised his hand like a schoolboy. “I am, I am. Did I make my goal or not?”

“As a matter of fact... after three solid weeks of training... yes. You finally made it. One hundred eleven hits in three minutes.”

Meghan Black squealed and hugged her father happily. Sirius gave a satisfied nod. “Excellent. Now all I have to do is cram a little to be sure I’ll pass the written tests, and I’ll be back in there with the best of them.”

“I wish I could be an Auror,” said Neville wistfully.

“You could be,” said Sirius, standing up with a grimace. “Someday.”

Neville shook his head. “I’m not good enough at magic,” he said. “Or coordinated enough. I trip on things, and break things, and forget things all the time.”

“Not so much any more,” said Hermione. “You used to be a lot worse. Maybe you’ll go on getting better.”

“And people who trip on things can be Aurors,” said Draco. “Our Cousin Tonks trips on things all the time, and she’s going into her last year of apprenticeship.”

“Hey, that’s right!” Sirius accepted a conjured towel from Aletha with a nod of thanks and began to dry his sweat-soaked hair. “Little Dora, all grown up and just a year away from being a full Auror. I remember her when she was eight or so. She tripped on everything in sight then, too.”

“She did, didn’t she?” said Aletha as Harry opened the back door to let everyone into the kitchen. She lowered her voice slightly. “What I remember is running into Dora and Andy at Diagon Alley, doing Hogwarts shopping. The day Andy asked me about Draco – and the only thing I could tell her was that he wasn’t dead.”

Sirius nodded. “Poor Narcissa. And there is something I never thought I’d say.”

“Poor Narcissa? I think you’re pitying the wrong member of the family, there. She’s dead, and well out of it. Whereas you ought to know, better than anyone, what her loving husband is going through.”

“You actually think I should pity Lucius Malfoy?” Sirius gave his beloved wife a look that said he doubted her sanity. “After everything he did, and tried to do, to our Pack – to one of our cubs in particular?”

“No, not really. No more than I pity anyone in Azkaban. If anyone deserves that place, he does.”

“Amen. And with that, let us turn to more cheerful topics. Such as – what’s for breakfast?” Sirius directed this question to the woman standing at the stove.

“Cold cereal to start,” said Danger Granger-Lupin, whose real name of Gertrude was seldom if ever used. “Juice and milk on the table, coffee and tea as soon as you get a mug and come here. Further bulletins as events warrant.”

“Did you make it, Padfoot?” asked Remus Lupin, looking up from the sheets of parchment which littered his end of the huge kitchen table.

“I did, I did indeed, Moony,” said Sirius, snagging his favorite mug from the collection on the table, and stealing a cornflake out of Harry’s bowl just before his godson poured the milk on, earning an elbow to the hip. “One hundred eleven.”

“Nicely done. They might take you on after all.”

“Might,” scoffed Sirius, dropping a teabag into his mug and holding it out for Danger to pour boiling water into. “They’ve only been asking me to come back for two and a half years.”

“Sporadically,” Aletha pointed out. “And I think the first offers were out of guilt, because they spent so long looking for you as a dangerous criminal.”

“I pity this country if a dangerous criminal ever does get loose,” said Sirius, taking a seat at the table. “If I could hide for almost nine years with practically no trouble...”

Remus nearly choked on his own tea. “Practically no trouble? When we had to live in hiding and pretend to be other people for five years, cut and run, abandon the house and our jobs, spend six months in America, then come back and pretend to be *other* other people for three years? Do tell me, what part of that amounts to ‘practically no trouble’?”

Sirius grinned. “The part where I didn’t have to do any of the work.”

“Mr. Moony would like to know if Mr. Padfoot would care to have a mug of tea upended over his head.”

“Mr. Padfoot might not mind that, but he would like to stipulate that said tea not be too hot.”

“Mr. Moony assures Mr. Padfoot that the tea is perfect drinking temperature.”

“Mr. Padfoot reminds Mr. Moony that his idea of perfect drinking temperature is about a hundred degrees hotter than anyone else’s.”

Danger laughed, coming to the table with a plate of bacon. “He’s got you there,” she said to Remus, setting it in the middle of the table. “Oy, you with the glasses.”

Harry looked up from his cereal. “Yes?”

“Come stir the eggs. I need to get the muffins out of the oven.”

“But it’ll get soggy,” Harry said in distaste, looking down at his bowl of cornflakes.

“I’ll finish it for you, and you can have a fresh bowl when you get back, how’s that?” suggested Sirius.

“If you really want it.” Harry took his spoon out of the bowl and set it on his napkin before pushing the bowl down the table to Sirius, who took a spoon from the pile in the middle of the table and dug in.

Draco scooped up the last of the milk in his bowl with his spoon and got up to put it in the sink. “What’re we doing today?” he asked the room in general.

“Fighting in bad weather,” answered Remus. “Practice at targeting by sound, a spell to make friends and enemies light up different colors so you don’t shoot your own side by mistake, and some general tips for camping out in rain or snow.”

“Outdoors first, or second?”

“Which would you prefer?”

“First,” said Draco, just as Hermione said, “Second.”

The two turned to glare at each other. Harry adjusted his position at the stove slightly so that he could see. The adults sat back to watch. Neville and Meghan exchanged speaking looks, then, by mutual consent, stole the last of the bacon for themselves.

“You want to be out there, in this?” was Hermione’s opening statement, with an eloquent gesture to the window, where the fog was swirling against the panes. “We won’t be able to see five feet!”

“Isn’t that the point? We won’t be able to choose when we fight if there’s a war. And we’ll be learning how to deal with the fact that we can’t see five feet.”

“If we wait until the afternoon, this might burn off, and then we can be comfortable while we learn. Nothing says we have to learn about targeting by sound when we actually can’t see. We could close our eyes, or wear blindfolds instead.”

“The point of training is to mimic the real thing as closely as possible. We won’t be blindfolded in a war – we’ll see lots of things, but the point will be that we can’t let them distract us. We have to focus on what we hear, while still responding to what we see if it’s a threat.”

“But we have to be inside for a little while, so we can learn the spells we’ll be using.” Hermione brought this out triumphantly. “Why not just get all the inside work out of the way in the morning, and then go at the outdoors fresh in the afternoon?”

“Because we might not have to be inside, if we’re using a spell we’ve already learned. Are we?” Draco asked Remus.

Remus nodded. “Sparks, for the targets, and the Staining Spell when we move to human targets.”

“So there. We won’t have to do any inside work beforehand, because we know how to do those already.” Draco looked smug.

Hermione pouted. “Fine,” she said snippily. “Outdoor work first, then. And I hope you get a horrible cold from it and sneeze all night.”

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A whistle came out of the fog. “*Infusco !*” shouted Ron Weasley, aiming his wand in the general direction it had come from.

Another whistle, from a different direction. Ron spun. “*Infusco !*”

A third. “*Infusco !*”

Every time he shouted the incantation, a small ball of something like black ink shot from his wand tip and disappeared into the fog. This third shot provoked a squeal from the direction he’d targeted, making Ron grin.

“Don’t let your guard down,” warned Aletha, who was supervising this exercise. “Next target, go!” she called out.

“I was the next target,” answered Ginny out of the fog. “Nice work, Ron. You hit the person next to the person you were aiming for. Really good aim, there.”

“Oy! Can you do better?”

“Think I can.” Ginny appeared in the small clearing Aletha had formed for the shooter and made a face at her brother. “Can I have a go, please?” she asked Aletha.

“Let Ron finish his round. Whoever was after Ginny, go!”

Ron fired off six more Staining Spells before Aletha called everyone in. When they arrived, the marks on their robes told the story. Ron had hit only two of them directly, three more with splatters, and Ginny by mistake.

“I’m not even that good when I can see what I’m doing,” said Ron in disgust as Aletha cleaned everyone’s robes for a new round. “I’ll never get good at this.”

“Not without practice, you won’t. Now, out with you.” Aletha shooed him out of sight, to the predetermined distance where all the human targets stood, and Ginny took up a fighter’s stance in the center of the circle. “Ready, steady, go!”

When the fog cleared away, the Pride moved on to other outdoor things, like physical training. Sirius coached them in hand-to-hand combat, Remus in the use of long staffs, and both men taught them the basics of fighting with a knife.

The Pride had undergone a long lecture on the proper uses of these techniques, which had got quite detailed as to the probable punishments involved should any of them be caught using the techniques incorrectly, or even telling anyone that they had been trained. The lecture had been calculated to strike a little fear into even the most Gryffindor of the children, and so far, it seemed to be working.

Of course, it could just be that none of them as of yet were good enough to brag about anything.

The cubs had been training in the basics of hand-to-hand, mostly the self-defense things but a few offensive patterns as well, since they were old enough to understand what it was for. To Sirius' surprise, Ron, Ginny, and Neville all demonstrated a basic knowledge as well, and the cubs admitted, after a little shuffling, that they'd been working with their friends in private. The greatest surprise, though, had been Luna.

To get their measure at the start of the summer, Sirius had invited them to rush him and try to get in a hit somewhere on him. One by one, he blocked them, got a hold of them, and knocked them to the mats they trained on. One by one, until Luna came up.

She had walked up to him and struck at his chest. He had blocked it and made a grab for her arm – which she had evaded, and used his moment of surprise to get a hold on him, then nonchalantly kicked his legs from under him and used his own weight to take him down.

“What was that again, in the lecture the other day?” Draco had commented. ““Never underestimate your adversary because of looks’?”

Aletha chuckled to herself. *He didn't think it was nearly so funny when Sirius slapped him with dishes for a week, for insubordination...*

Luna continued to be one of the more promising students at the hand-to-hand work, along with Draco and Ginny. Meghan knew the patterns, but was just too small yet for some of the more forceful moves. Sirius was teaching her a few tricks to handle someone larger than herself, which most if not all of her opponents were likely to be.

Ron and Neville both had trouble with confidence, Neville's rather simpler than Ron's.

Neville's just timid about a lot of this. He seems to think he'll never be good at anything, and it become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we can crack him out of it, he actually shows a lot of promise.

Ron's attitude problem was simply that it fluctuated immensely. He often started the day being utterly sure that he could do anything, but one loss or mistake would send him into a state close to Neville's, where he was just waiting for the other person to beat him.

If we can get him into a more permanent form of the first one, but keep him from getting overconfident and stupid...

Hermione didn't care much for this sort of exercise, but the Pack-parents had made it clear that it was all or nothing, that she had to participate in the outdoor work to get to the indoor, so she had, a little grudgingly, agreed. Her opinion had veered slightly more towards the favorable when Remus had brought up a certain story, about the time a girl called Neenie had gotten the better of a Grumpy Professor with a well-placed elbow. Still, she sometimes held back, not committing herself fully.

She wants time to think it through. But in a fight, there isn't time to think. You have to act, and act right away.

Harry was quite good at hand-to-hand, and always had been. His problem was akin to Ron's, in that when he was doing well, he began thinking he was unbeatable. When this came up, Sirius could usually deal with it by proving, with a few well-placed moves, that Harry was wrong.

That's hand-to-hand. Almost the same things apply to staves, with one or two interesting differences...

For some reason, Hermione didn't seem to mind staff fighting quite as much as she did other types. She moved from "reluctantly capable" to "somewhere near decent" when she had a staff in her hands. Neville had been afraid of the five-foot-long poles at first, until it was made clear to him that no one would be coming after him with one unless he had one as well, and unless he had clear warning they were coming. Now he was able to strike and block with, if not confidence, at least some measure of skill.

And all of them are a little leery of the knife work. And with good reason. Of all we're teaching them, even the magic, that's the skill with the most possibility for someone to get injured, even killed, if they use it wrongly.

As Sirius had promised when the cubs had received their silver daggers at the previous Christmas, he and Remus were teaching them to fight with the knife in either hand, though they made it very clear that tossing it from one hand to the other looked a lot better than it worked.

It's like putting a big sign on your weapon that says "Take Me Now." This is just in case they're caught injured, or with one arm pinned or something.

Overall, there had been a great deal of improvement in everyone's skills over the three weeks that the games had been going on. Molly had lodged a joking complaint about hardly seeing Ron and Ginny any more, but she made it clear that as long as they were enjoying themselves and not making trouble, she had no problem with them spending nearly all day, every day, at the Den.

They would have anyway, I'm sure. Or the cubs would have been at the Burrow. They still are, on the days we give them off. And, if Molly's to be believed, wait around in hiding for the twins and mob them. Heaven knows they come home with bruises and such often enough... though I suppose

I'm encouraging them by patching them up without calling them on it...

Aletha sighed at her own folly. *And here I am on the one subject I keep trying to avoid. Healing.*

Sirius had cited his wish to return to his work as an Auror as the official reason he wouldn't return to Hogwarts for another year of teaching. Unofficially, he had pointed out, in pithy and occasionally vulgar language, the general inadvisability of returning to work at a place where he had missed out on dying only by virtue of becoming a rock for two months.

We took the job because Dumbledore asked us to, and because I could tell that without the cubs around to keep us all occupied, Sirius was about to die of boredom. He'd even stopped writing. She smiled. He's back to it now, though. And isn't Professor McGonagall going to get a surprise when a formidable older woman named Athena pops up in Valentina Jett's next novel?

So, Sirius had plenty to do with himself these days. Aletha didn't. She wasn't about to ask for the Defense job for herself – for one thing, she wasn't well qualified to teach alone, and for another, it wasn't the kind of work she liked to do by herself. Besides, Dumbledore had replacements lined up already, and she rather thought they'd do a better job than she would.

She could return to the life she'd led since they'd come to Devon, pattering in the house, working with her potions, tending her garden, and taking music students from the village, those whose parents didn't mind them fraternizing with such strange folk. It had been enough for her when all the cubs had been home, and even with just Meghan, but she doubted its ability to hold her interest now, even with all the household chores added to it.

And they won't take nearly as much of my time as they do Danger's, because she isn't confident enough with magic to do them that way, and I am. Besides, I think she likes doing them by hand. But that just doesn't appeal to me.

So there it was. She needed something to do. Something stimulating, interesting, rewarding. Something she enjoyed, and something that would make a difference.

And my mind keeps working back around towards Healing.

Could I get back into the program? If I pass the tests, would they let me pick up where I left off? I finished two years of training back during the war – that would mean two more to get my license. I'm older now, stronger, more willing to deal with my own fallibility. I won't quit again because of one mistake.

She grinned wryly. *Now it'll take two.*

But of course, whether or not she could reenter the Healer's program might not matter, depending on the answer to another question.

Do I really want to?

Healing was my dream when I was young. But I just said it myself, I'm older now. I'm a wife and a

mother, a Pack-mate. I've changed a lot from that girl fresh out of Hogwarts who wanted to cure all diseases and save the world. Is Healing still what I want to do?

It's a big commitment of time and energy. If I do it, I want to be sure that it's really what I want, and what I'll stick with. There are other places I could go – I could get a secretarial job again...

She rolled her eyes. Oh, please. Filing parchments? That was to keep the bills paid, Letha, and well you know it. Now that you don't really have to worry about money, you can do whatever you please.

And that leaves me back at the same question.

What is that? What sort of work would please me?

She'd been thinking about it since school had let out, and hadn't come up with any definite answer yet. Sometimes she wondered if she ever would.

Oh, what the hell, there's no rush. It's not like I'm on a deadline...

Well, actually, I am. The year for the Healer's program starts September 1, same as school term. So if I decide for it after that, I'd have to wait another year. Besides, it would be better to have it settled before the cubs head off to school. They deserve to know what their Pack-parents will be doing while they're studying hard. Or goofing off and playing pranks. Whichever.

But nothing says I have to decide it now.

"Hello? Anyone in there?" A gentle tap on the side of her skull brought Aletha back to earth. Danger had reached up to rap her knuckles against her friend's head, and was now grinning at her. "Come back to us, oh sister, from whatever rhapsodic dream hath enraptured you."

"What?"

"Sorry, I was reading Shakespeare last night. Come inside. Lunch is ready, and then it's our turn to try to knock some learning into these wild creatures called children."

Aletha nodded, following her Pack-sister towards the house. "Are we going to start the, ah, 'special' course of study today?"

"No, we decided to delay until after we talk to Arthur and Molly, so we don't have to start over if they say yes. Gerald was charmed by the idea, and trusts us to keep Luna safe during the process, though knowing him, he wouldn't altogether mind if she came home one day with feathers instead of hair. And you remember what Mrs. Longbottom said."

"I do indeed." I am pleased that you think my grandson capable of such a feat as this at his age, the letter had read. Your point about his friends is also well-taken. I recall quite well the antics Frank would get up to at school, with little to no adult supervision. If you promise to keep careful track of him and see, as far as is in your power, that he comes to no harm, I give you permission to

teach him.

To teach him *what* , of course, had not been specified, not in writing. Augusta Longbottom was too canny for that.

It is illegal, after all.

But they had her permission, and Gerald Lovegood's. Now came the tough sell. Arthur and Molly Weasley were likely to be quite wary of what the Pack proposed to teach the cubs and their friends next. The Pride themselves would probably be willing to walk through fire for a chance to learn this, but the Pack-adults had agreed long since that they would teach those children who were not theirs nothing without their parents' or guardians' consent.

But if all goes well, we'll have that consent by tomorrow afternoon. And then we can get started.

They had kept this part of the summer's learning strictly under wraps. The cubs might suspect, recalling a promise made some years ago, but the adult Marauders had been careful to say nothing on the subject, and so far there had been no agitation.

Of course, they're not actually thirteen yet. Draco's birthday was not for another three days, Harry's for five days after that. But I'd be willing to lay money they remember that promise, and they'll be there ready to collect as soon as they are.

So we had better be ready.

And ready they would be. As long as Arthur and Molly agreed.

And if they don't?

Well, if they didn't, Ron and Ginny would have to be excluded from this aspect of the lessons, and the cubs given strict instructions not to start teaching them secretly.

But they won't obey. I know they won't. And it's a very bad idea to give a command that you know won't be obeyed.

For everyone's sakes, she hoped Arthur and Molly would listen to what passed for reason.

Even though it does make us look suspiciously like pushovers.

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"So, Arthur, is it true Lars Vilius is ill?" asked Sirius the next day in the living room of the Burrow. Only the six adults were present, the children having found other places to amuse themselves.

"Yes, that's true," said Arthur, blowing on his tea. "Hardly ever comes to work anymore, and when he does – shadow of himself. He's worn down, overworked, I think."

“Well, what do you expect,” said Molly. “A bachelor, worn to a thread with all his duties as Minister, and he lives all alone in that big creaky old mansion except for a house-elf or two. I’d wager he doesn’t eat properly at all, nor go to bed when he should.”

“He’s likely to be busy,” said Remus diplomatically, “but even the busiest man needs to take care of himself.”

“Precisely.” Molly beamed. From refusing even to acknowledge that Remus existed after he had confided in the Weasleys the nature of his condition, she had come to accept him precisely as she had before she’d known, even perhaps trusting him more, knowing that he trusted her with a secret of such magnitude.

And a secret I pray it remains. I would hate to have to leave before I’ve started.

And speaking of getting started...

Mentally, he nudged Danger. **That’s your cue, love.**

I know that. “On that subject,” said Danger aloud. “Of taking care of oneself.”

Arthur and Molly seemed to sense something was up, Molly sitting up straighter, Arthur setting aside his teacup to listen.

“We told you at the start of the summer what we’d be teaching Ron and Ginny,” Danger went on. “And we’ve kept to that. But there’s a promise coming due, from us to our little ones, and it may affect yours as well.”

“You know that we’re Animagi,” said Aletha. “You’ve seen us transform. When we started studying, the cubs wanted to learn as well. But they were ten. We told them absolutely not.”

“To be perfectly honest, they blackmailed us,” said Remus. “They threatened to start studying it themselves, on their own, the way...” He stopped.

“Go on, finish it,” said Sirius. “The way we did. Myself and James Potter. We became Animagi in school. Illegally, of course, and it was dangerous. I’m still amazed we didn’t screw it up completely. But we managed it within about two years. We were Animagi by the time we were fifteen.”

“Which means,” said Aletha, “that they started when they were thirteen.”

Molly nodded. “And now your children want to learn just like their parents did,” she said. “Don’t they?”

“Yes.” Sirius looked a bit sheepish. “And the way they see it, since we started at thirteen, they should be allowed to.”

“Are you going to teach them?” asked Arthur.

“If only to prevent them from doing it untaught,” said Danger. “And they would, if given half a chance.”

“And I have a fair guess of why you’re bringing this up to us,” said Molly. “You want permission to teach Ron and Ginny as well.”

“Yes. Only for their protection,” added Remus quickly. “So that they don’t try to learn from Harry or Draco and get themselves caught between forms, and be too scared to get help in time, so that they’re stuck that way. It almost happened to James; it was just luck that Sirius and I found the counterspell in time.”

“Luck, nothing,” said Sirius. “That was all you, Moony, don’t be modest. You know your way around a library like nobody else.”

“But I wasn’t the one who did the spell,” returned Remus. “I don’t know if I could have, then.”

“If the mutual admiration society is quite finished,” said Aletha laconically. She looked at Arthur and Molly. “I’m sorry we have to put you in this position, but we did promise. And you know our cubs will try to teach your children how to do this, even if we try to tell them not to. They have a history of that.”

“There’s something else as well,” added Danger. “You’ve already had a taste of how dangerous it could be for your family to be associated with us as closely as you are. Ron could have been hurt much worse in his first year. Ginny and Percy might have died in the Chamber. If we can teach Ron and Ginny a trick no one expects from them... well, having something up your sleeve can save your life if you use it right.”

Arthur picked up his teacup again, staring into it as though trying to read the tea leaves.

“Consorting with lawbreakers,” he said. “If my father were alive, he’d roll over in his grave.”

Molly sighed. “I don’t like it,” she said bluntly. “But you’ve made a good point. Better they have your supervision than not. Are you teaching Luna and Neville as well?”

“Yes, we are,” said Remus. “Gerald and Augusta both gave us permission. Oral, of course, not written.”

“Why ‘of course’?” asked Arthur.

“Because this way, we take the liability,” explained Aletha. “If something should go drastically wrong, it’s our fault, not yours, and the worst thing that happens is we’re banned from contact with your children. That would be a nuisance only. If you had given written permission for this, an illegal activity...”

“I do see.” Arthur nodded. “You seem to have thought this out.”

“We have,” said Remus. “And we give you our word that nothing will go wrong if it is within our power to stop it.”

For a long moment, no one spoke. The Weasleys were looking at each other, speaking silently in their own way, with the ease of many long years' practice. Finally, Molly nodded, and Arthur turned back to the Pack. "Go ahead with it," he said. "Please do be careful."

"We will," said Danger. "We promise."

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Later on that afternoon, Remus and Danger found an excuse to make their way upstairs. Danger knocked in a pattern at a certain door, which opened a bit to expose one wary brown eye. "Yes?"

"I assume you got our letter," said Remus.

"Yes."

"Do you have an answer for us?"

The eye disappeared for a moment, and there was the sound of whispering inside the room. The eye reappeared. "Yes."

"And that answer is?" said Danger, keeping her face straight, allowing her amusement to flow mentally only.

"Yes."

"Excellent," said Remus briskly. "Your first installment, then." He took a small bag from his pocket and held it within reach of the door.

A hand came out and snatched it, and from within the room, there was a muffled sound that sounded quite a lot like "Yes!"

Critical mass of laughter had almost been reached within the mind-link. Danger could no longer keep her face quite straight, and turned around instead, devoting her attention to keeping her laughter silent.

"We expect results, gentlemen," said Remus a trifle unsteadily. "Will we see them?"

"Yes," chorused two voices from within the room.

"Good. We'll see you in a few days, then."

"Yes," said one voice, and the door closed.

The Lupins managed to get one flight of stairs away from the room before sitting down and succumbing to helpless laughter.

What have we done? Danger asked when the first paroxysm was over. **We've encouraged**

underage wizardry and underhanded dealings. We've supported those boys in a plan I'm certain their mother wouldn't approve of.

Good for us, said Remus. Love, Arthur and Molly stopped trying to control the twins years ago. They just put alarm spells on the room to let them know if they get into serious trouble and forbade magic in the rest of the house. Be grateful they're not Muggle-born.

Oh, God... This set Danger off again. The Ministry would have to have a special flock of owls just for them, for delivering those prune-faced "Don't do magic outside school" notices.

Remus gave her an odd look. **How can a notice be prune-faced when it doesn't have a face?**

Literalist.

Fancifulist .

Bore.

Flighty.

Man.

Woman.

And don't you forget it, they said in unison, and started laughing again.

xXxXx

Paper went flying everywhere as Draco Black, newly thirteen years old, tore into his gifts. The Pack-parents had long ago decided that birthdays and Christmas were not days to be overly obsessed with the niceties of saving paper and ribbon. Politeness to gift-givers and party guests was more important, and far more strictly enforced.

Of course, with gifts like the one Draco was now holding, politeness didn't have to be elicited.

"Hey, I've been wanting these!" Draco flipped eagerly through the flat square boxes he was holding. "*Phantom of the Opera, Joseph, Jesus Christ Superstar* – thanks, Aunt Andy!"

Andromeda Tonks smiled at him. "You're very welcome, Draco."

"Quite a haul this year," said Sirius, looking at the volume of shredded paper all over the music room of the Den. "Don't be expecting parties like this all the time, now."

"Don't worry, I won't." Draco made a face at his Pack-father. "Not when you didn't give me anything."

"Greedy," chided Aletha. "Just you wait."

Draco looked speculative, and interested. “Wait for what?”

“Harry’s birthday,” said Danger. “We’re saving one of your presents for then.”

“Awww,” said Draco. “Can’t Harry get it early, instead of me late?”

The Pack-parents shook their heads over the sound of laughter.

“Cake,” announced Remus. “Everyone to the kitchen.”

Andy would have gotten up to follow the children, but Danger caught her eye. “Stay a minute?” she mouthed.

The room emptied quickly, leaving the two witches alone. “Something wrong?” asked Andy as Danger came to sit in a chair next to hers.

“Not wrong, exactly. But I do need to talk with you. We’ve told you about my dreams, I think – that I sometimes dream in verse, and when I do, it’s a good idea to follow the instructions therein, or to heed the warnings. We could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble over the Wormtail affair if we’d remembered that I had a dream about him being somewhere with a lot of red-haired people.”

Andromeda nodded. “Sirius acted on part of one of your dreams before the trial. The one that told him if he did something with me, something which called for my trust, it would work.”

“That’s right.” Danger sighed. “Well, I’ve had another one. And this one names you as well.” She leaned over to an end-table, opened the drawer therein, and took out a small scroll. “Here it is.” She handed it to Andy. “The first few lines are the ones that concern you.”

Andromeda read over the verse, frowning in thought. “*Whose name is stars and royalty – Andromeda was a princess in the myth, and a constellation...*”

“Exactly. And ‘Gertrude’ means ‘warrior woman.’ So I’m supposed to talk to you about something. Or someone.”

Andy ran her finger along the next two lines, then set the scroll down abruptly. “Just in case I was wondering if you were genuine,” she said, shaking her head. “No one, but *no one*, knows what I’m working on right now. Not even Ted.”

“Is that just because you’re being private about it, or is it something no one should know about?”

“Well, I certainly wasn’t going to say anything here. Not with your houseguest around.”

Danger nodded. “Relations of his?”

“You could say that.”

“That’s what we thought. Are you having any luck?”

“Some. We’ve tried quite a few things over the years with them. Most of them haven’t worked at all, and a lot of my colleagues have just given up. But I needed a new project, and it seems criminal to leave them that way if we could help them. So I’ve been pulling all the notes we have on their case and looking them over.”

“Anything you can share?”

“Most of the things that helped them were not spells but infusions and potions. They seemed to become more aware of their surroundings, less confused, under the influence of certain herbs and drafts. But many of those can be dangerous if taken for too long, and they had to keep increasing the dose to get the effect.”

“Until it reached the point where it wasn’t worth it any more.”

“Exactly. I’ve been trying to come up with some combination of the things that have worked, to see if possibly their effects all in concert might bring about a total restoration.” Andy smiled crookedly. “So far, not much luck.”

“Don’t give up yet,” said Danger. “Look here. *Her thoughts are right, and good her goal.* So you’re on the right track.”

“Nice to know. What would be even nicer is if someone could point out to me where I’m going wrong, so I can fix it.”

“See, there’s the hitch.” Danger took the scroll from Andromeda’s lap and scanned down it. “If we’ve read this right, you’re not going to be able to fix this by yourself.”

“Oh, really?”

“Here.” Danger handed the scroll back, indicating a certain line. “This is the part that interested us the most.”

Andy nodded slowly, reading it. “Eagle’s daughter, is it? I think I know who that is.”

“So do we. But it’s made very clear she can’t do it on her own. I think this may be a case where either your experience or her talent would fail alone.”

“But together, they might turn the trick.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I hope I’m adult enough not to get worked up that a little girl can do things I can’t. That’s always the way of things, isn’t it? Children surpassing their parents?”

“It’s just that they usually don’t do it when they’re ten.”

“Oh, you’re never ready for it.” Andy smiled wistfully. “Dora’s been out of Hogwarts two years

now, dating Charlie Weasley for longer than that, and I'm so proud of her, but it seems like yesterday she was my little girl. A tomboy, of course, the kind who always wanted to play Aurors and bad guys instead of tea party. And she was constantly trying to see if she could fool me by making herself look like another of the neighborhood children."

Danger chuckled. "Did it work?"

"Not well. Not after she caught on that she couldn't change her clothes as easily as she could change her face." Andy grinned. "If she ever complains that I used to dress her in the most horrid colors, that was why. So I could find her when it came time to get her home for supper."

xXxXx

Four days later, there was another party held at the Den, this one for Neville. His grandmother came to visit, and he showed off what he'd been learning for her. She was duly impressed, and confided to the Pack-parents that she hadn't thought the boy had it in him to do so well.

"He just needed some personal attention," said Remus calmly, gripping an enraged Danger by the scruff of her mental neck. **Settle down or I will throw you in the river. She doesn't mean to be rude to him, it's just her opinion.**

And her opinion is probably what's been holding him back all these years.

It's not our place to intervene. We're doing the best thing for him right now, by building his confidence and his skills. So cut this out, NOW.

Danger grumbled but subsided.

xXxXx

"And tomorrow, we get *another* another party," said Meghan happily as she and Hermione prepared for bed.

"Yeah." Hermione yawned.

Meghan sighed, climbing into her bed. "I miss the boys." With a male guest in the house, the girls' beds had been moved into the guest bedroom, which was just, barely, big enough to fit them both and still have room for the rest of the furniture and walking around besides.

"We see them every day," said Hermione, sitting on her little sister's bed. "Just about all day long. Do you really want to be with them at nights too?"

Meghan pouted, putting on her little-girl face. "Yeah, I do! I miss hearing Harry snore!"

Hermione laughed. "You'd better not tell him that. He'd get mad."

"But he does."

“I know, but boys don’t like to hear that. Actually, neither do girls.”

“OK. Then I won’t tell you.”

“Won’t tell me what?”

“Good night.” Meghan lay down.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Hermione pulled her back upright. “What won’t you tell me?”

Meghan shook her head adamantly, then made a firm zipping motion across her lips.

“Fine, if that’s the way you want it.” Hermione let her sister go and clambered across into her own bed. “I’ll find out sooner or later.”

She turned the lamp off with a click.

“You snore sometimes too,” said a voice out of the darkness.

“I do not.”

“Do so.”

“Do not.”

“Do so.”

“Do...” Hermione yawned. “Not.”

“Do so...” Meghan’s eyes closed.

“Not,” muttered Hermione before her own did the same.

“Well, I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but actually you occasionally do,” said a male voice behind her.

Hermione squeaked and jumped, spinning around. “*Alex!* ”

“What?” Alex spread his hands helplessly. “It’s only the truth.”

“You *scared* me!”

Alex shook his head. “You and your sister. You’re the jumpiest women I’ve ever known.”

“Considering what they deal with, I’d say they have every right to be jumpy,” said a woman, coming up behind Alex. “Hello, Hermione.”

“Lady Maura.” Hermione dipped a quick curtsy, then shook hands with the daughter of

Gryffindor. "Is there something special happening?"

"Just birthdays," said Alex, waving his hand around the Great Hall, which Hermione now saw was decorated with streamers and balloons. "We thought we could make this an annual tradition. Have a little get-together, this time every year."

Hermione did a quick count in her head and realized it had indeed been a year since they'd created the Pride-pendants and been named honorary Heirs. "That's really nice of you," she said. "But I do not snore."

"How would you know? You're never awake to hear yourself." Alex offered his arms to the two women. "Shall we?"

Maura accepted with a wink to Hermione, who kicked Alex in the ankle before taking his other arm.

"Everybody beats up on me," whined Alex as he escorted the ladies to the snack table.

xXxXx

"I'm glad we're here," said Remus to Gryffindor some time later, as they sat together in a quiet corner. "There was something I wanted to ask you about Danger's latest."

"I thought you might. Will you wait a moment?"

"Of course."

Rowena and Margaret Ravenclaw broke off their conversation gracefully and drifted towards the two men. Danger, in a different part of the hall, cocked her head and frowned, then came to join them. "Was that you?" she asked Gryffindor. "Because it didn't sound like him." She pointed to Remus.

"It was I. Will you join us? We are discussing prophecy."

"Certainly." Danger pulled over a chair as the Ravenclaws created their own.

"Ask away," said Gryffindor.

"Meghan was identified in the poem as 'eagle's daughter,'" said Remus. "I take that to mean that she is a blood descendant of yours, Madam Rowena." He gave her a small, sitting bow. "Am I correct?"

"You are," said Ravenclaw.

"There were others named in the poem as children of animals. Two mentions of a 'badger's son,' and one of a 'lion's son.'"

Helga Hufflepuff drifted into their sphere, sitting down between the Ravenclaws.

“May we assume that those so named are also blood Heirs?”

The three original Founders looked carefully at one another. Finally, Gryffindor turned back to them. “You may so assume,” he said quietly.

“You’re not telling us if that assumption is right, though,” said Danger.

“Not in so many words. That is forbidden.”

“We understand,” said Remus. “I hope.”

“You do,” said Hufflepuff. “Trust yourself, young man, you’re far too hard on your intuition.”

Remus smiled. “All right, I will.”

“Is that all you wished to ask?” said Ravenclaw.

“For the moment, yes.”

“I never thought I’d see the day,” said Margaret. “A man who knows when to quit. Hang on to this one, dear,” she said to Danger. “Worth his weight in Galleons.”

“Oh, don’t I know it,” said Danger, grinning. “I’d keep him around to look at even if he weren’t so wonderful in other ways.”

Remus and Gryffindor exchanged the age-old look of the outnumbered man.

“One other question,” said Remus quietly as the ladies began to talk amongst themselves. “Should we expect the lion’s son – whoever that is – to have a similar eruption of power to Meghan’s? Because that could be dangerous.”

“No.” Gryffindor shook his head. “My current blood Heir had his powers bound by his father, from whom he inherited the bloodline, when he was a baby, to prevent just that from happening. Unfortunately, since his father is now dead, there is no one to take those bindings off. But I can promise you this – if that power is ever truly needed by the Heir, it will not be notable by its absence.”

Remus nodded. “Thank you. That’s all I needed to know.”

xXxXx

Harry came awake, blinking at the fuzzy ceiling. It had been a great party. He hadn’t gotten any gifts himself, but he’d gotten to watch Ron’s surprise when he was named a secondary Heir of Hufflepuff – “for the loyalty that kept you waiting even when you’d been told to go,” said Adam, presenting the gift – and Ginny’s delight as she became a secondary Heir of Slytherin – “just so

you don't get the wrong idea about the house from my ultra-great-nephew," said Alex. "We're not all like that."

And now it's my birthday. Presents, cake, ice cream, and...

He grinned, sitting up. "Dra-co," he called quietly.

"Wha-at?" his brother called back, lifting his head from the pillow, his eyes only half-open.

"We're both thirteen now."

"So what?"

"Remember what they promised we could learn how to do once we were thirteen?"

He counted seconds. *Hebridean Black one, Hebridean Black two, Hebridean Black three...*

"Oh yeah." Draco's face suddenly displayed understanding, and then excitement. "Yeah!"

"Hunh?" said Neville sleepily from the other side of the room.

"Nothing," said Harry, getting up to find his clothes. "You can go back to sleep if you want."

"No, he can't," said Moony tersely from the doorway.

Harry frowned at his Pack-father. Moony looked as if something had happened he hadn't expected and didn't like in the least. "What's wrong?"

"Later, Harry. Neville, I'm afraid you have to get up and pack your things. Your gran wants you home right away."

"What?" Neville sat up, looking confused. "I thought I was staying all summer."

"There's been a change of plans. She'll explain when you get home. Draco, Harry, up and dressed, please, and come to the kitchen when you've given Neville a hand."

xXxXx

With five of them working, although Meghan pouted a lot through it, Neville was packed in under half an hour. Danger found Trevor under the sink in the kitchen and returned him to his owner, and Letha came upstairs to get his trunk.

"We're really very sorry about this, Neville," she said as she levitated it down the stairs. "You'll understand when you get home."

"All right." Neville shook hands with the other boys and Hermione and hugged Meghan good-bye. "I'll write," he promised. "And we can still visit, even if I'm not here."

Meghan nodded, and held on for one more second before letting Neville go.

Once Neville was gone, and Padfoot had returned from taking his trunk on ahead, the Pack gathered in the kitchen. All the Pack-parents looked as Moony had, Harry noticed, worried about something, even frightened. His initial excitement about his birthday began to sour. *What's wrong here?*

“This morning, we had a letter,” said Moony. “It came from the Ministry, informing us, as interested parties, that there has been an escape from Azkaban.”

Hermione gasped. Meghan was staring at Moony, her eyes enormous.

“A double escape.”

Draco went dead white. Harry's mouth was dry.

“Lucius Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew are currently at large.”

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 2: Learn Your Lessons Well (Year 3)

Chapter 2: Learn Your Lessons Well

How was it possible to be detached from everything, and still be so perfectly aware of it all, Draco wondered? He could hear everyone breathing; he had the feeling if he listened hard enough, he could hear their hearts beating. He could certainly hear his own. It sounded like Ron when he was in a really good mood, whaling away at his drums.

For an instant, he was eleven again, standing on a promontory and looking at a man he hadn't seen in years, a man who had spoken casually of claiming him and changing him, of turning him into someone else, *something* else. Even then, he had been frightened, although deep inside him he'd known that it wasn't real, couldn't be real, and Danger's arrival had only confirmed that.

Now, it could be real.

His father had escaped.

"How did they get out?" asked Harry, breaking into Draco's reverie.

Padfoot shook his head. "No one knows yet. It's being investigated, and they'll be keeping us updated on everything that happens. For right now, you four, stay inside. We've already done some preliminary warding on the house. You should be safe in here."

"We'll get wards on the boundaries of our property as soon as we possibly can, so you can go outside," added Letha. "And your friends may still come and visit, if their parents allow it. You're just not allowed to visit their houses until further notice."

"Will we still do training?" asked Meghan.

"You certainly will," said Danger. "Less spellwork, since we're indoors, but we have room enough for a little tumbling in the music room, if you do it one pair at a time. And the book work continues, of course."

Hermione looked smug.

"Understand this, cubs," said Moony. "You are as safe as we can make you. But we promised a long time ago that we would not lie to you if we could possibly avoid it. So I'm going to tell you a truth you may not like, because I think – we think – that you are old enough to hear it and understand it. As safe as we can make you might not be safe enough. It is still possible that someone with ill intent towards you might come here, and might find a way to bypass or destroy the safeguards we put up."

I don't want to hear this. Though Draco appreciated the courtesy of being treated like an adult, he felt that he would rather have had the childish fantasy that his Pack could protect him from all

dangers prolonged for another week, another day, another hour, anything.

But isn't it better to know? To be ready?

“What we ask of you is what we have always asked. Obey the rules. In return, we will keep those rules as light as we may, and try to explain why we need things done, if we can and if there is time. If we give you an order without explanation, please, don't argue, and don't ask questions. Your lives could hang on our being obeyed immediately. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry quietly. Hermione and Meghan echoed him.

Moony looked at Draco. Draco met his Pack-father's eyes. “I understand, sir,” he said.

“Good. Go find things to do for an hour or two. You can have something to eat on your own, but we won't be eating as a Pack until then. After that, get into training clothes and meet in the music room.”

“Pearl, you come with me,” said Letha, standing up. “We're going to go over that breathing exercise again.”

“Is Ron allowed to come over?” asked Harry.

“That's what we're going to find out,” said Padfoot. “I'm headed for the Burrow to talk with Molly about it. The wards we put up shouldn't be affected by how many people are in the house.”

“Then why did Neville have to leave?” Meghan wanted to know.

“His grandmother felt he would be safer staying at home and just visiting us, like Luna and the Weasleys do,” said Danger.

The words entered Draco's ears, his brain made sense of them, but his mind seemed disengaged and confused. Danger's statement triggered the first coherent reaction he'd had since Moony had dismissed them.

Luna.

What is she going to think? What is her father going to think?

It's dangerous to be around me now. I'm a target. Anyone who likes me could be a target too.

Unbidden, the memory rose in him of his giving his father the names of all his friends. His fists clenched until his fingernails bit into his palms. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. I handed my enemy a list and said, “Here, hurt these people and you'll hurt me. I'll be safe, but they won't. So go right ahead and go after them.”*

If anything happened to Neville, Meghan would never forgive me. If anything happened to Luna, I would never forgive me. And if something happened to Ron or Ginny... Merlin, there's so many

Weasleys my father would never find a piece of me.

The thought of Lucius Malfoy being balked of his revenge on his son by an angry mob of redheads who felt their claim should come first made him smile a little.

I'd rather be killed by them than by him.

“Knut for your thoughts,” said Danger, sitting down beside him and offering him the bronze coin.

“Not worth it,” said Draco, trying to smile at her.

“Try me.”

Draco shook his head.

“All right, your choice. But if you do want to talk about this, you know where to find us.” Danger pushed her chair back and got ready to stand up.

“What about the others?” Draco blurted. “Luna, and Ron and Ginny, and Neville. Are they going to be safe?”

Danger frowned, as if considering her answer carefully. “I have to give you the same answer again,” she said. “They’ll be as safe as possible. Their families will take extra precautions, but so will every family right now. Tell me this – why would you think they wouldn’t be?”

“Because... he...” Draco didn’t want to say it, but he’d have to acknowledge it sooner or later. “My father. What if he goes after them to hurt me?”

“How would he know who your friends are?”

“I told him. In that dream you said we shared. You remember.”

“I do remember. But you need to remember that he doesn’t know that was anything more than a dream. And that was almost two years ago. Besides...” Danger traced a pattern of wood grain on the tabletop with a finger. “I don’t know quite how to put this without making you feel worse.”

“I’m a big boy now. Just tell me.”

“You said yourself, after that dream, that – Lucius, why don’t we call him – wanted you to be his son again, and that he would prefer that you came to him willingly. He’s unlikely to hurt your friends if he wants to regain your confidence.”

“But if that’s the only way he can get me, he would, wouldn’t he?”

“He might. But he doesn’t yet know that.”

“But he will. He’s not stupid. He’ll start finding out about me, who I live with, who I’m friends

with, and he'll see the dream couldn't have been coincidence, and then he'll hurt someone, or even kill them..."

"Not if we can stop him first," said Danger firmly, cutting through Draco's rising panic. "And within a month, you'll all be back at school. We're going to make the Den as safe as we can, but Hogwarts will be even safer. Right?"

Draco sighed. "Right."

"So, you go find something to do until lessons start. Eat something, breakfast's going to be late. And don't worry too much. It doesn't help anything, and it puts wrinkles on your face." Danger covered his hand briefly with hers, pressed it, then stood up and left the kitchen.

Find something to do. Eat. Don't worry. Got it.

Yeah, right.

He shoved his chair out and headed for the stairs. He wasn't hungry, and anything he could think of to do seemed pointless. He wasn't even really sure where he was going. He only knew one thing for certain. He wanted to be alone.

For a miracle, Harry wasn't in their bedroom. Draco wondered for a moment if the girls would be sleeping in with them again, now that Neville had gone home, but found he didn't care. His bed remained his bed, at the moment unmade. He flopped down on top of it, yanking one uncomfortable wrinkle straight underneath him, then rolled over and stared at the ceiling.

So he probably won't go after Luna or Neville or the Weasleys. At least not right away. That was one comfort.

The corollary to this was less comforting. *He'll come straight for me. And Moony as good as admitted the Pack's no match for him. He beat them once, it was only because Narcissa – my mother – helped them that they got away.*

Draco fished his pendants out of his shirt and rubbed his callused thumb over the embossed flower on his first pendant, thinking of the thin, aristocratic woman he knew from photographs.

And one memory. I might have made it up, I've heard the story enough times, but I think I do remember her. Saying goodbye. She cried, and that confused me. Father used to say only babies cried.

It really wasn't fair that he had more certain memories of his father than he did of his mother, Draco thought. *The person I wish I had known, and could remember, I can't. And the person I'd like nothing better than to forget...*

There are days I really envy Ron. The worst thing he has in his family is his mum's second cousin, the accountant, and Percy the Prat for a brother. Or Neville. He has to hate seeing his parents like that, but at least he knows they loved him, and his gran and all her relatives only come down hard

on him because they think it's good for him.

Or even Harry. He can't remember his parents at all, but he knows they fought for him. And he has a stupid cousin in Slytherin, who used a hexed bat on him by accident. That's the worst he has to deal with. I'm the only one with a homicidal father. It is not fair.

He lay there, staring at the ceiling, and fumed. I wish someone else knew what it felt like, to know there's a maniac out there who wants you, and only you, and doesn't care who else he hurts, as long as he can get at you...

Some time later, someone kicked at the door.

“Go away.”

“It's my room too,” said Harry's voice.

“Fine, come in.”

“My hands are full.”

Draco grumbled under his breath, but got up and opened the door. Harry came in, carrying a tray.

“What's that?”

“It's called food. You eat it.”

“Very funny.”

“Thank you. I thought you might want some breakfast, and you might not want the girls all over you.”

Draco shrugged, then took another look at the tray as Harry set it down. “There's a lot there,” he said.

“Danger said we could both eat up here if we don't make a mess. Mind if I join you?”

“Like you said, it's your room too.”

Harry didn't answer, instead starting to load his plate. Draco followed his lead, and they ate in silence for a little while.

“It's really awful, isn't it?” asked Harry when they were both starting to slow down.

“What?”

“Sitting around and wondering when he's going to show up, if he'll go for someone else first or just you, if there's any way to stop him, what he's going to want.”

Draco stared at his brother. “Are you reading my mind?”

“No.”

“Then how the hell did you know that?”

Harry set down his fork and lifted his bangs to display the famous lightning bolt scar.

Draco wanted to bash his head against the wall. He settled for his plate as the nearest hard object and immediately regretted it. “I feel stupid right now,” he said into the ceramic.

“You look stupid right now too. Here.”

Draco lifted his face enough to see that Harry was offering him a napkin. He took it and started wiping ketchup off his forehead.

That was dumb of me. Not sticking my face in my breakfast – though that was pretty dumb – but acting like I’m the only one this ever happened to. Harry’s The Boy Who Lived. Who would know better than him what it’s like to have someone out for your blood? Voldemort’s tried to kill him twice now – three times, actually, once when he was a baby. He’s had someone after him his entire life.

“I felt like this first year,” said Harry. “After we found out Voldemort was in the Forest, and probably after the Sorcerer’s Stone. I hated it. Waiting’s actually harder than fighting, I think. Once you’re fighting, there isn’t time to be scared. There isn’t time for anything except staying alive. But while you’re waiting, you get to think of everything that could go wrong, and everything bad that could happen, and it’s the worst thing in the world.”

“Yeah,” said Draco. “It is.” *You know. You understand. I’m not totally alone. I’m not the only one.*

“I wrote home about some of it then. I thought I was being smart and not giving anything away, just asking some questions about what if this and what if that. Padfoot saw through it and wrote back telling me if I let Voldemort psych me out, I lost. That his goal was not just to get at me directly, but to stop me from having a normal life, from having fun or enjoying myself at all. And if I let him, he won.”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Subtle is still not your strong point, Harry.”

Harry grinned. “It doesn’t need to be subtle. It just needs to work. And you don’t look like you’re expecting the roof to fall in on you anymore. So it worked, didn’t it?”

“Yes. Yes, you damned cheerful bastard, it worked. I feel much better. La-de-da-de-da, let’s all go have a dance. Happy now?”

“Yes. Very. And if you don’t want that bacon, I’ll take it.”

Draco threw it at him.

Ron and Ginny arrived after breakfast and Luna a few minutes later for a tabletop strategy exercise utilizing an amazingly complicated rule system designed to make it more realistic. Ron would have been happy playing it all day, Draco thought. None of them indicated that their parents had made any fuss over them coming to the Den as usual.

Neville rejoined them for lunch, looking slightly harassed. "A couple of my great-aunts were over visiting," he said. "I had to go through 'Oh, look how much you've grown!' and 'My dear, you look so much like your mother' and 'A third year already, imagine that' and everything."

"We have an Auntie Muriel," said Ginny. "She always gives us these big sloppy kisses every time she comes to visit, and Mum won't let us go wash our faces until after she's gone."

"Are you sure she's not a Leirumant in disguise?" asked Luna. "They give sloppy kisses because they're really using their magic to see if any of your teeth are loose, and if they are, the Leirumant knows to wait around your house until it falls out, because that's what they eat. I think Muggles even know about Leirumants. They call them something else, though."

Draco quickly took a large bite of chicken sandwich so as not to laugh at Ron's face as he absorbed the thought of his aunt being one of Luna's creatures.

When they had cleaned up from lunch, they all trooped into the music room, where all the furniture had been pushed back against the walls. Moony and Padfoot were waiting for them there.

"Today, as you all know, is Harry's thirteenth birthday," said Moony. "And some years ago, we made a promise to Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Meghan that we would teach them a certain skill when they turned thirteen. Now, Hermione's not thirteen yet, and Meghan won't be for three more years. Ginny and Luna, you're a little young for this too. But from the way you eight behave, there's no point in trying to leave any of you out of anything, because you'll just teach each other. So we went to all your parents and got permission to teach you this."

"This is even more secret than the physical training," said Padfoot. "Because this is actually illegal. If anyone found out we were teaching you this, they'd have our heads on a platter and you four in foster care quicker than you can say Furnunculus Curse."

"What *is* it?" asked Ron, who had started looking interested the moment Padfoot had mentioned it was illegal.

Moony and Padfoot took a step away from each other, and both transformed into animal shape, Moony into the lion, Padfoot into the huge dog. A moment later, they were human again.

"Animagi," said Padfoot. "We're going to make you Animagi."

After an instant of stunned silence, the Pride all tried to talk at once. Moony lifted his hand, and they quieted down. "One at a time," he said. "Luna, you first."

“Will I be able to fly?” asked Luna.

“Your form is the owl, isn’t it?”

Luna nodded.

“Then yes, you will. Neville?”

“You asked Gran if you could teach me this?” Neville looked astounded. “And she said yes?”

“She did,” Moony confirmed. “Ginny?”

“Isn’t Animagus dangerous?” asked Ginny bluntly. “Could we get hurt?”

“Yes, but you could get hurt trying any spell. We’ll be with you every step of the way, and you’re not to try anything by yourselves that we haven’t seen you do successfully first. Ron?”

Ron shook his head. There was something very like hero-worship in his eyes.

“You four?” said Padfoot to the cubs. “You knew this was coming, I’m sure. But anything you want to know before we start?”

“What about me?” asked Meghan, looking a little woebegone. “I don’t even have a wand. How will I be able to keep up?”

“Very well, thank you,” said Letha, entering the room in time to hear this. “Because when we go to Diagon Alley next, we’ll stop at Ollivander’s and get you your own.”

“*We will?* ”

“Getting a wand at eleven is just traditional,” said Padfoot. “By law, you shouldn’t need one until then, and there are a lot of ways to misuse one. You won’t be using it for anything but this, will you now?”

Meghan shook her head quickly, not dislodging her beaming smile in the least.

“What about when we go to school?” asked Hermione. “We won’t be able to continue then, will we?”

“Why not?” asked Moony.

“You said we can’t do anything that you haven’t seen us do. But you won’t be at school with us.” Hermione stopped, looking uncertainly from Moony to Padfoot to Letha. “Will you?”

“Well, we weren’t going to tell you this...” Moony began.

“But it’s too late now,” finished Danger from the doorway. “Yes, we will be at school with you.

Just as before, it's Professor Lupin and Professor Granger-Lupin in public, and we won't let you off punishments if we catch you doing wrong."

"What if you don't catch us?" asked Harry.

"I think he's onto something," Moony remarked to Padfoot.

"Note to self," Harry muttered, pretending to write on his hand. "Don't... get... caught."

"Sound advice at any time," said Letha.

"Will you both be teaching Defense, Mr. Moony – I mean, Professor?" asked Ron.

"Probably a good idea to get in the habit now," said Moony with a small sigh. "Though it does make me feel terribly old. No, Ron, I'll be teaching Defense alone. Danger's on the payroll as an adjunct Professor of Muggle Studies."

"Which will leave me plenty of time to prowl the hallways at night seeking out fun and destroying it," growled Danger, glaring at the cubs. "Although we might find time to do a few other things," she added in a more normal tone.

"Now, with this, your classes, and Quidditch for you boys – and Ginny, too, if I remember right?" Ginny nodded, beaming at Moony, obviously pleased he'd remembered. "You're all going to be very busy. If I hear anything, even a hint, of your schoolwork not getting done, from anyone, this project stops until the trouble is over. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." "Clear." "Understood." "We will."

"Excellent. Now, you've all done the first step already – scrying for a form. With that done, we can move on to step number two."

Moony waved his wand. Danger moved out of the way as a large stack of heavy books soared in from the living room. Hermione sat up eagerly, while Ron scowled. "Searching for spells to transfigure each part of your body. You may have to share some of these books, since many of your forms are similar – Muggle creatures, mammals or birds, and carnivores. Meghan, Neville, you two will probably have more luck with these." Moony separated out several books from the stack and set them aside. "The rest of you – have at them." He lowered the stack to the floor.

Harry picked up the top one and opened it, leafing a few pages into it. "Felines. No good for me. Ginny, Neenie?"

Hermione smacked him lightly in the back of the head. "Give me that," she said, taking the book from his hands.

Ron was running a finger down the back of the pile, reading the titles of the books. "Canine is dog, right?" he asked.

“Dogs or dog-like creatures,” answered Padfoot. “Wolves and foxes are basically canine.”

Ron pulled four books from the stack. “Catch,” he said, pretending to toss them at Harry.

Harry flicked a leftover popcorn kernel he’d found under the couch at Ron. “Prat.”

“Sometimes.” Ron handed him the books and went back to browsing. “Here, avian. That’s birds, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” said Moony. “You and Luna will use those.”

Draco moved up beside Harry to read over his shoulder. Just the first sentence made his head swim. He hadn’t known it was legal for words to have that many letters.

“Want to share work?” he suggested. “We each go through two books, and write down whatever looks useful for both of us. Then give the other one our notes when we’re done.”

“Mmm,” said Harry absently. Draco assumed that meant yes.

He carefully lifted two of the books out of his brother’s lap and opened the first one. Within a page or so, he regretted that the Pack-parents had ever made that promise.

But it looks so cool when they change. And so easy.

I guess I never thought about how much work it is. And Transfiguration, too. My worst subject.

Nothing says I have to do this. I could back out.

But he wanted to. He wanted to find out what it felt like to take on animal shape, to run faster than any human ever could, on four legs instead of two, to hunt and catch his own food, to escape from anything that wanted to hurt him...

Escape. I could escape my father if I was an Animagus. All I’d have to do would be get out of sight for long enough to change to fox form and hide. If he tied me up, I could change forms, and the ropes would just fall off, because they were meant for a person, not a fox. And if he took me somewhere out of the way and thought I couldn’t get home because I can’t Apparate, I could get home as a fox.

Suddenly, “want” took on a whole new dimension. The only time he could recall wanting anything nearly this badly, he’d been very small, and he couldn’t quite remember what it was he’d wanted, only that he’d seen someone else getting it and been madly jealous.

And I think I got it, whatever it was, pretty soon after that.

All right. I’ll learn. No matter how hard it is, no matter if I’m the worst one of all, no matter if I look like an idiot doing it, I’ll learn this.

An idea struck him. He nudged Harry.

“What?”

“Want to go upstairs? We can use our desks there.”

“Good idea.” Harry marked his place with the ribbon sewn into the top of the book’s binding, shut it, and got to his feet, books in one arm.

Draco took a look around the room as he left. Ginny and Hermione were sitting side by side on the couch, each with a book in her lap, occasionally pointing out something to one another. Luna was using the reclining Ron for a backrest. Neville and Meghan were lying on their stomachs behind an armchair, and he was reading aloud to her, so quietly it could barely be heard in the rest of the room. The Pack-parents had found seats and produced books, all except Danger, who came back into the room as Draco noticed she was gone, carrying an armload of quills, inkpots, and parchment.

“Trust you two to forget something as important as this,” she said a little acidly in the direction of Moony and Padfoot. “Letha, think you can make them some lap desks?”

“I think so.” Letha drew her wand and started conjuring the needed items, padded on one side, stiff on the other, to fit comfortably on a person’s lap and allow them to write there.

“We’re going up to our bedroom,” Harry told Danger. “Using our desks there.”

“Good thinking.”

“Not my idea.” Harry pointed at Draco.

“Good thinking,” Danger said to him.

“Thanks.”

Draco made sure Harry was in front of him as they climbed the stairs. He didn’t feel like explaining his blush. He wasn’t sure he could, anyway.

It was normal. Just a normal thing. Harry doesn’t like taking credit for what other people do, he never has. And Danger compliments people when they deserve it. Why does it suddenly make me feel like this?

He didn’t have even a partial answer until he was sitting at his desk, pulling out parchment and his favorite quill and opening his ink bottle, listening to the familiar sounds of Harry doing the same.

I guess, maybe, thinking I might lose it made me appreciate it a little more...

xXxXx

“Were your parents worried at all?” Hermione asked Ginny as they searched through the books of spells. “About you and Ron coming over here, with the escapes?”

Ginny shrugged. “Mum was getting all set to make a fuss, but then she settled down all of a sudden and said we weren’t likely to be in more danger here than at home, and besides, if your parents couldn’t keep us safe, no one could.”

Hermione felt a little glow of pleasure. She’d have to tell the Pack-parents about that one, sometime when she needed them to be in a good mood.

“Are you worried?” she asked next. “I mean, it’s likely to be Draco that Lucius Malfoy wants. And both of them could come after Harry. We’re not exactly the safest people to know right now.”

Ginny looked amused. “You’ve never been the safest people to know. Think about last year. My brother and I got possessed by an evil wizard and nearly killed by a giant snake. Maybe that wouldn’t have happened if we didn’t know Harry, but it was Harry who saved me and Percy, and the rest of the school, by turning Sangre and by stabbing Riddle’s diary.”

“Good point,” said Hermione thoughtfully. “He does get into a lot of trouble, but so far, at least, he always gets out again.”

“If he didn’t, we wouldn’t be talking about him in the present tense,” pointed out Ginny. “But you’re right. Harry’s got a good record, and I have no reason to think Draco would fall down on the job. So I’m not about to run away from my best friends because of a pair of crazies from Azkaban, who, if they’re smart, won’t come anywhere near your Pack, if they know anything about how strong of wizards and witches your parents are.”

Hermione felt that inner glow again, and stored it carefully away, to recall when she next talked with Moony and Danger. She’d need all the help she could get, when the letter she was expecting from Professor McGonagall came.

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Sirius came awake all at once, thinking he’d heard a sound. When several seconds of careful listening revealed nothing more menacing than a few birds chirping outside, he allowed himself to relax.

Just nerves. Nothing else. Relax, Padfoot, you’ve already done it once. How bad could it be?

Bad enough.

Today was the day he’d be taking, or retaking, his tests for his Auror’s license. There were four tests – oral, written, physical, and magical. Of the tests, he was most worried about the written and the magical. He was pretty sure he could handle the oral, which was what most apprentices stressed over, and he’d stayed in pretty good shape all these years, mostly due to gentle hints from Aletha and Danger, which had occasionally strayed into the realm of un-gentleness but seldom

farther than refusing to serve him dessert.

I've studied hard for the written, but there's so much to know. What if they ask something I just didn't have time to learn? And the magical is keyed for those young kids who can hit anything, not for an old fart like me...

At this point, he had to stop worrying to laugh.

I am not an old fart. Not even by Muggle standards. And I've been practicing for a month, not to mention staying in general practice for all those years before. I should be just fine.

"I hope," he muttered.

"You hope what?" asked Aletha, rolling over.

"Hope I'll do well on the exams."

"Something I never thought I'd see again," said Aletha, laughing a little. "Sirius Black with test anxiety."

"Hey, aren't I allowed to be anxious?"

"Of course you're allowed. But I'm also allowed to tease you a little. A very little. And I won't let anyone else do it, not even Remus."

"Is that a promise?"

"If you want it to be. But I'd rather promise to help Danger frost your victory cake."

"I like that too."

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"So, Mr. Black, why do you want to be an Auror?" asked Rufus Scrimgeour, looking at Sirius over his glasses.

Sirius squelched several smart-mouth responses – *Because I do*, *For the same reason I did when I was twenty-one, look it up*, and *Did you know that you look like a cheap knock-off of Godric Gryffindor?* – and answered respectfully. "I've always wanted to help people in trouble, and I have a very strong personal aversion to Dark magic. I'm also good with my wand and fast on my feet. And I like having a little thrill in my life."

"We're not looking for thrill-seekers," barked Amelia Bones from her place beside Scrimgeour. "We need people who won't take stupid risks."

"Maybe 'thrill' is the wrong word," Sirius acknowledged, trying not to let himself get flustered. "I'm not talking about taking stupid risks. I'm talking about the feeling I get when I can put my

life, my skills, my magic between innocent people and harm, and keep them safe. I've been doing that, one way or another, all my life, and I intend to keep on doing it, Auror or not."

That got them.

The oral examination lasted half an hour. The written exam took an hour. The physical testing was forty-five minutes, and then came the magical tests.

First up was the power test, designed to see how much raw force a wizard's spells could deliver. Sirius had to fire three basic spells as hard as he could into a stationary target, at point-blank range. Imagining Wormtail's and Malfoy's faces on them helped a great deal.

Next was the speed test. An examiner called out the name of a spell, and Sirius had to produce it as quickly as possible. He was a little embarrassed when his Color-Changer turned the target a nasty shade of pink instead of the nice red he had intended, but since no one else knew what he'd been going for, it didn't much matter.

Finally came the accuracy test, for which he had trained the hardest. He would have three moving targets to shoot at, on which he had to score a total of one hundred hits in three minutes.

Sirius performed the breathing exercises Aletha had taught him, letting tension flow out of him as he exhaled and peace enter as he inhaled. When he was ready, he nodded to the examiner, who released the targets. They flew into position.

It didn't even feel like work. Sirius' wand darted from one to another, burning into them easily. He knew he had passed the hundred mark well before time was called, but kept shooting anyway. Extra credit was definitely available on this type of test.

The results, when they came, were welcome, although not a surprise.

"Congratulations, Mr. Black," said Amelia Bones, shaking his hand. "And welcome back." She lowered her voice. "We've come a long way from the holding cells, haven't we?"

Sirius smiled at her and fought down a blush. "Yes, ma'am, we certainly have."

"You'll work with another Auror for your first six months," Scrimgeour told him. "Someone with some field experience." His tone was just shy of insulting. "I've had a few requests already. I'll let you know who I match you up with."

"Thank you, sir." Sirius tried very hard to keep his tone polite. "When should I report for work?"

"Monday morning, nine o'clock, my office, level two at the Ministry. You do know how to get there, I trust."

Since the tests had been held at the Ministry, there could be no doubt that this was an insult. Sirius reminded himself that Scrimgeour had obviously been unable to find anything that would bar him from requalifying. For some reason, the man didn't like him personally.

Well, the feeling's mutual. Thank heaven I'm not likely to be high enough in the hierarchy to deal with you in person for quite a while.

"Yes, sir," he answered aloud. "I'll be there."

Enough of this. Time to go home and celebrate.

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"So?" said Remus as Sirius stepped out of the fire. "How did it go?"

Sirius shrugged. "It went."

"Good to know, but not what I asked."

"Did you pass?" asked Harry excitedly. He and Draco were sitting at the kitchen table, while Remus leaned against the counter. There was no sign of anyone else, which was making Sirius a little nervous.

Where are the girls?

"No, I failed miserably. They said the only job I was qualified for was janitor."

"Ha," said Draco. "Undercover janitor Hit Wizard, maybe."

"I'm flattered. Yes, I passed."

The boys applauded. Remus nodded knowingly. "I thought you would. So, you're an Auror again."

"Yep."

"Fully qualified to deal with Dark wizards."

"Yep."

"Strong hero of the magical world, brave and noble and true."

"Er, I guess." Both boys were looking highly amused. Sirius was starting to get suspicious.

"Moony, where is this going?"

"Going? It's going nowhere. I just wanted to make sure you could handle yourself against a few harmless, defenseless witches who want to congratulate you."

A few... oh, no.

Before Sirius could even get himself properly set for it, the women of the Pack mobbed him, hugging him, kissing him, shouting congratulations. He went down under a tangle of female body parts, and didn't try to move. *There are some men who would kill to be in a situation like this. Just*

because I'm not one of them is no reason not to enjoy it while it lasts.

Of course, he would have appreciated it a lot more if Harry and Draco's enjoyment hadn't been quite so audible.

Eventually, the women got tired of the game, which wasn't much of a game at all since Sirius wasn't fighting back, and let him up. Lunch was produced, and the promised cake for afterwards, and everyone was getting ready to go outside for a family game of football when an owl flew in through the window.

"International post," said Remus, getting the bird a dish of water. "From Aunt Amy?"

"No one else," said Aletha, picking up the letter, which was addressed to her. "Read it now, or later?"

"Now," said the cubs in almost perfect unison.

"No surprise," said Danger. "Yes, go on, read it to us."

"If you like." Aletha carefully tore open the parchment envelope and pulled out the letter within.

Dear Aletha and all,

I heard the latest news from Britain today. I'll have to recheck my connections on the grapevine – I ought to be hearing important things like this faster than three days later.

"Three days?" interrupted Sirius. "The breakout was four days ago."

"This is dated yesterday," said Aletha. "Transit time and all that."

"Right."

I certainly used to. But I'm not writing merely to commiserate, though you have my thoughts and hopes during this hard time. No, I have some practical advice for you.

Goblins are notorious for not caring about the legal status of people who use their vaults, so long as those people are legally entitled to the money therein. Your Draco's birth father will be able to get at his money without much trouble, and if I recall correctly, that's an old name, with quite a pile attached. He could do a lot of damage with access to that much gold. Unless he's stopped.

You can stop him. Have your boy withdraw all the money from that vault and put it in another one that belongs to your family, preferably one that Malfoy character doesn't have any connections with. He may have already made a sizable withdrawal. Stop him from making any more. You don't need the kind of trouble that amount of gold can buy.

Aletha set the letter down. "She has a very good point," she said. "If we could get at your vault, Sirius, while you were supposedly an escaped murderer..."

“Then an actual murderer shouldn’t have much more trouble,” said Sirius through his teeth. “And those withdrawal forms are right out on the counters. How much do you want to bet a certain rat could get in there without being noticed and steal one, or two, or five?”

“And once he has them, it’s just a matter of attracting a post owl,” said Remus. “The goblins have no trouble making withdrawals and deposits by owl. All they need is a bag enchanted against theft.” He looked over at Draco. “How soon can you be ready to go to London?” he asked.

“Let me get my shoes.” Draco ran upstairs.

“What about Wormtail?” asked Harry. “Did he have a vault?”

“Probably,” said Sirius, “but we haven’t got access to it the way we do to the Malfoy vault. And Peter was never rich. He wasn’t quite poor, but he wasn’t rolling in gold by any means. Aunt Amy’s right. This will cut down on a lot of what Malfoy can pull.”

“Would the goblins tell you if anyone had made a withdrawal?” asked Hermione. “Within the last few days? We haven’t been to London since school let out, and we didn’t go to Gringotts then. If anyone’s asked for money from that vault in the last three days, it would have to be Lucius Malfoy.”

“Good thinking, Kitten,” said Remus. “We’ll have to ask that. Now, since we’ll be in Diagon Alley, is there anything else we desperately need? I’d rather keep this short if I can, but I don’t think even Lucius Malfoy would be quite crazy enough to try anything in public, in broad daylight, with me right beside Draco.”

“Two days after the full moon,” added Danger. “He doesn’t know about the taming, and he might just be stupid enough to think you retain some wolfish qualities past your actual transformation.”

Remus sighed. “Considering who else he’s met with my condition, I’m sure he would think that.”

Before Sirius could ask Remus to go on – he hadn’t known Malfoy knew any other werewolves – Draco skidded through the kitchen doorway, breathless. “Shoes,” he said, displaying them. “Are we going alone?”

“Yes. I’m sorry,” Remus added over the sounds of disappointment emitted by Harry, Hermione, and Meghan, “but we don’t need you three, and if anything does happen – which I doubt, but it’s possible – you’d be in the way.”

“Also, changing patterns is smart,” said Aletha. “We always go to Diagon Alley all together, so now no one will be expecting just the two of you to go.”

“Come on, then, fox,” said Remus, heading for the music room. “We have a vault to plunder.” Draco followed him, grinning. Sirius suspected his Pack-son had been feeling a bit helpless, and liked the idea of doing something to cripple his father.

His father. Poor kid. My parents hated me, and the feeling was mutual, but at least they never

actively tried to kill me. Though I wouldn't have put it past Mother, in one of her moods.

“Well, there’s no reason we can’t play until they get back,” Sirius said, leading the way outside. “Makes teams a little harder, though.”

Harry shook his head. “You and me and Hermione against Danger and Letha and Meghan,” he said.

“Oh, yeah.” Danger leaned down to slap hands with Meghan. “Come on, you three, get ready to get your collective arses kicked.”

“Whatever happened to sisterly love?” protested Hermione, taking up her preferred position at goal.

“All familial bonds cease on the sacred football field,” said Aletha silkily, stretching one leg. “You are no longer my Pack-daughter, Harry no more my Pack-son, and Sirius no more my beloved, if oafish, husband. You are simply the enemy, and you must be defeated.”

“Remind me never to get on her bad side,” Sirius said under his breath to Harry.

Harry chuckled. “Too late now.”

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“That was easy,” said Draco as he and Remus left Gringotts.

“Yes, it was.” *Almost too easy. I keep waiting for the catch.*

By default, most of the Malfoy money (there had been a withdrawal, a fairly large one, within the last three days, and Remus had taken note of the amount) had been transferred into Remus’ own family vault, since it was the only one he could legally sign for. He felt a bit odd about asking Draco to put all his money into his, Remus’, keeping, but Draco had signed the transfer form with no sign of reluctance, or even of second thoughts, and was now whistling the main theme from Mozart’s 40th Symphony perfectly happily.

I suppose this means he trusts us. He trusts me.

I should have known that already.

But it was still nice to know.

“Special edition!” shouted a newspaper stand on the corner. “Only four Knuts! Big news! Read all about it!”

What the hell. Remus dug into his pocket, pulled out four small bronze coins, and slipped them into the stand’s slot. The stand swallowed, burped, and opened its front.

“Thank you,” said Remus, pulling out the paper.

He looked at the headline and froze.

LARS VILIAS FOUND DEAD IN OFFICE!

Amelia Bones, Rufus Scrimgeour collapse at desks

Healers suspect foul play

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 3: Exit the Dragon (Year 3)

Chapter 3: Exit the Dragon

“Lars Vilius?” repeated Danger. “The Minister of Magic is *dead*?”

“Give me that,” said Sirius, taking the paper out of Remus’ hands and skimming the article. “Bones and Scrimgeour collapsed? That can’t be right, I saw them both just this morning, and they looked fine.”

“Which is probably why Healers suspect foul play,” Aletha said, reading over Sirius’ shoulder. “That, and three of the highest Ministry officials all falling ill at the same time. Someone is trying to upset our government.”

“Who would do that?” asked Hermione.

Draco snorted. “Who do you think, Hermione?”

“But what would he get out of it? It’s not like *he* can become Minister.”

“The more chaotic things are, the less likely it is that he’ll get found and arrested again. I bet he sent Wormtail to poison them all three, and Bones and Scrimgeour just didn’t eat enough of it to kill them, and Vilius did.”

“But Vilius has been looking sick for a while,” countered Harry. “Remember last year, at Hagrid’s? He didn’t look well even then. And Ron was saying how his dad never sees Vilius anymore.”

“So maybe it worked better on Vilius because he was already sick,” said Meghan. She looked at the Pack-parents. “What happens now?” she asked.

“Someone in the government will take care of things until they can hold emergency elections,” said Remus. “I don’t know who’s going to be running, though.”

“Maybe they’ll get Bagnold out of retirement,” suggested Sirius.

“Or maybe Fudge,” said Danger. “If he’s fully recovered from his own, er, ‘health problems.’”

Sirius and Remus carefully avoided each other’s eyes and whistled discordant tunes.

“I’m sure they’ll ask Dumbledore,” said Aletha. “And I’m just as sure he’ll say no. He always does.”

“Always?” said Harry. “How many times has he been asked?”

“What are we up to now, five?” Aletha asked the other adults.

Remus frowned. “Let me see... yes, I think five is correct.”

“Why doesn’t he ever accept?” asked Hermione.

Aletha chuckled. “He told me once that he prefers pleasant surprises to unpleasant ones. Therefore, he’d rather work with students, who are expected to be immature and often surprise him pleasantly by showing a great deal of maturity, than with politicians, to whom the reverse applies.”

The cubs, once they had worked through this, found it funny.

“And I hate to sound callous, but I don’t really see how this affects us,” said Sirius. “I mean, it’s a shame Vilius is dead, he was a decent Minister, but as long as we don’t get a total idiot in his place, I don’t see that it matters.”

“So long as we don’t find out that his people were using the same kinds of security we are,” said Remus.

Sirius glared at him. “You’re a pain in the arse when you’re right, you know that?”

“I try. And I do have an idea about security, but we’ll talk about it later. You do have a point, though, about this affecting us personally. I don’t see that it will, except that everything even remotely related to the Ministry will now move exceptionally slowly.”

“Everything?” repeated Hermione, looking a trace uneasy.

Remus nodded. “Everything.”

“Who will you be reporting to on Monday, then?” Danger asked Sirius.

“Probably Gawain Robards, he’s Scrimgeour’s second-in-command. Not a bad type, overall. Very political, like a lot of the upper ranks, but that’s how they get there. You don’t stay at the Ministry unless you can play politics.”

“And can you play politics?” asked Danger.

Sirius grinned. “Just watch me.”

“Heaven help us all,” said Aletha dryly.

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Sirius arrived at the Ministry on Monday morning and, as he had predicted, was met by Gawain Robards, a harried-looking wizard who had only time to say, “Oh, Black, of course – good to have you – you’ll be working with Shackbolt – down the hall, take a left, third cubicle on the right –

he'll brief you, I'm terribly busy, have to run..."

Sirius stepped aside as Robards dashed for the lift, just making it. He watched the door close, then turned back to the empty chair. "Good morning," he said to it. "Nice to meet you, sir. Shame about Auror Scrimgeour. I hope he recovers soon. Auror Shacklebolt? That's excellent. Thank you, sir, I'm sure we will get along."

Footsteps and the shifting of a shadow on the wall warned him of someone behind him just in time for him not to yelp as he turned around and nearly ran into Kingsley Shacklebolt himself. The tall, bald, black wizard looked down at him with amusement. "Talking to yourself, Black?"

"Just having the pleasant conversation Robards didn't have time for," answered Sirius. "Nice to see you again, Shacklebolt." They shook hands.

"We're not on the really hard cases," warned Shacklebolt as they returned to his cubicle together. "No escaped prisoners. That might be a conflict of interest in your case, anyway."

"Might." Sirius kept his face level. He wasn't about to betray how much he would have liked to be the one to find Malfoy, or Wormtail, or preferably both.

And how much have my priorities changed, that I list them in that order?

"We're on a three week rotation. One week office work, one week patrols, one week training with the apprentices."

"Oh, that should be fun. You know the apprentices well?"

"Names and faces at least. I know the older ones better. Why?"

"You know a final year apprentice, Nymphadora Tonks?"

"The one who won't let anyone use her first name. Yeah, I know her."

"She's my cousin."

Shacklebolt looked Sirius over. "If I knew what she looked like normally, I might say you have a family resemblance," he said.

"Thank you." He was going to like working with this man, Sirius decided.

"This one's mine," said Shacklebolt, turning into a cubicle. "You're next door. And we have a little window we can talk through."

Sirius entered his own cubicle, which was bare of all but a desk, chair, and file cabinet at the moment. He found the little window and slid it open and closed several times. "I should warn you," he said through it. "I'm easily amused."

“I can see that.” Shacklebolt had a tolerant grin on his face. “I think I’ll like working with you, Black.”

“It’s mutual. And call me Sirius.”

“Then I’m Kingsley.”

They shook hands again through the window.

xXxXx

18 August

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

There’s been a most distressing accident. I was checking on the products of my summer’s jam making and found one jar of raspberry jam that didn’t seal correctly. It’ll have to be eaten right away, before it goes bad. I was hoping you could give us a hand with it, perhaps this afternoon with some fresh scones and tea.

GGL

P.S. We might find some time to talk about recent events and safety, if you don’t mind.

xXxXx

It was early on the morning of 25 August. Sirius yawned, partly to get that just-Apparated feeling out of his ears, and partly because it was early and he would have liked to be back in bed with Aletha.

I forgot about that part of work. Getting up at truly horrid hours of the morning.

“Morning, Arthur,” he said as his neighbor Apparated in next to him. “Have you seen the *Prophet*?”

“Oh, yes.” Arthur indicated the paper tucked under his arm. “Molly wasn’t sure whether to laugh or scream. But he was the only one of the candidates with any real experience.”

“And that ‘reluctant leader’ act he put on was very convincing.” Sirius scowled. “All that ‘well, if you insist’ and ‘for the good of the people’ and such. If we’d known he’d be back, we would have been more careful with those photographs.”

“What photographs?”

Oops. Sirius pretended he’d gone suddenly deaf, and Arthur didn’t pursue it any further.

I need to be more careful. Cornelius Fudge is now once again a very powerful man. And it is not

wise to humiliate the powerful.

Listen to me. I sound like Remus.

“Have you heard anything about Scrimgeour or Bones?” he asked Arthur. *If there’s anything to know, he’ll know it. Best connected man in the Ministry.*

“They’re still ill, but the prognosis is good. They’ve got one of the top research Healers investigating what happened to them. Your cousin, I think.”

“Andy? Andromeda Tonks?”

“She’s the one. We’ve met occasionally, but it was some time ago, and I’m not sure she would remember me, except as Charlie’s father.”

“I’ll have to reintroduce you,” said Sirius. “Maybe at Christmas, or sooner if we get the chance.”

“I’d like that.”

The lift arrived, and the crowd of wizards and witches climbed aboard.

xXxXx

At that precise moment, Andromeda would have greatly preferred to be reintroduced to her bed. They hadn’t met in far too long.

I might not even recognize Ted if I saw him. Or Dora.

What was I thinking? Even working from home, I can’t do two full-time projects. No one can.

But they’re both so important. And I can’t give either of them to anyone else. Everyone else thinks the Longbottoms are a lost cause... but I’m the best candidate to find out if Vilius and Bones and Scrimgeour were poisoned...

She shook her head. *Enough of this. I’m a Healer. I’ll Heal myself. No more work today. A shower, a good meal, then I’ll sleep until Ted and Dora get home tonight and spend some time with them before I start working again.*

The objective here is not for me to kill myself.

xXxXx

Ron groaned and slammed a book shut. “I can’t find anything that looks right!” he complained. “Half this stuff doesn’t make sense anyway!”

“Don’t panic,” said Danger, taking the book. “This is one of the longest phases of Animagus transformation. Finding the spells, and then learning how to do them.”

Ron sighed hugely. “Why does it take so long anyway?”

Danger beckoned for him to follow her. “We’ll go in the other room,” she said. “So we don’t disturb anyone else.”

Ron reddened slightly. “Sorry,” he said to the rest of the Pride, who either waved dismissive hands at him or ignored him entirely.

“So you want to know why it takes so long to find these spells?” Danger asked in the kitchen, pouring both of them pumpkin juice.

“Yeah. I mean, they’re just spells, aren’t they? Why can’t everyone who turns into the same sort of animal use the same spells? There have to have been other hawk Animagi before me. Why can’t I find out what spells they used and use them?”

“That might be a good place to start,” acknowledged Danger. “But tell me this. Are you the same as any other wizard?”

“No.”

“How are you different?”

Ron stared at her. “Lots of ways.”

“Name some. How are you different from... let’s say, Harry?”

“Well, I’m taller. I don’t wear glasses. I have red hair, his is black. I play chess better than he does, but he flies better than I do...”

Danger held up her hand. “That’ll do for the moment. Now, imagine for a second that you and Harry had the same Animagus form. Do you think, in light of everything you just said, that the two of you could use the same spells?”

“I don’t see why not. I mean, the spells are just changing us into animal form. We’d look different when we got there, but we’d be the same every other way.”

“And how would you get back to human form, afterwards?”

“By undoing the spell...” Ron’s eyes cleared slightly. “Is that why the spells have to be special for us? So that when we undo them, we’re still us afterwards?”

“Yes. And so that you stay you, even in animal form. When I turn wolf, I still have my human mind, and all my memories and thoughts. I think a little differently, a little more simply, but I’m still essentially human. As you will be, even in hawk form.”

“So we’re finding spells, not just to turn us into animals, but to turn us into us as animals.” Ron frowned. “Did that make any sense?”

“Perfect sense. And you’ve got it exactly.”

“Has it ever happened the other way? Where someone didn’t use the spells right, and got turned into just an animal, not them as an animal?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to them?”

“They were trapped in animal shape all their lives,” said Danger. “Because they didn’t have any humanity left. It’s one of the greatest dangers of this process.”

Ron gulped. “I think I understand now,” he said. “I wish our teachers at school would explain things like this. I never understand why they want us to do things the way they do.”

“Usually they have good reasons,” said Danger. “Occasionally they’re just set in their ways. I’m sure you can think of a few like that.”

“A few.” Ron grinned at her, then downed the rest of his pumpkin juice. “Thanks, Mrs. Danger – I mean, Professor.”

“Back to your studying, hawk-boy, before I decide I need a new quill,” said Danger, shooing him towards the music room.

xXxXx

He soared on high, his wings set to make the most of the thermal currents rising from the rocks below. He could see everything below him in wonderful detail. Including the slight shifting where no such movement should be.

Ah-ha. Invisibility Cloak, indeed.

But as he circled once more, he saw that this was due less to his own eyesight than to the foolishness of the Cloak’s owner. A long, straight, dark-furred tail lay on a rock, apparently with nothing attached to it.

Perfect. If I come in fast, he’ll never know what hit him.

He wheeled once more, to set up, then dove. Faster – faster – faster –

Suddenly, where the tail had been, there was a scurry of movement, and a flash of white teeth grinning up at him –

He screeched and broke off his dive barely in time, as the teeth clashed together just below him, harvesting one tail-feather for their pains. With his flight thus interrupted, his landing was the opposite of graceful, and just to put the final touch on, he lost control even of his form and hit the ground hard, human once more.

Laughter behind him clued him that his erstwhile prey had also changed back. He rolled over, brushing dirt off his face. “You think you’re funny, don’t you?” he said angrily.

“Yes,” gasped out his friend, rolling around on the rocks in an ecstasy of mirth. “You fell for it! I set you up, and you fell for it!”

He sat up and dusted off the rest of him. “You little piece of dung,” he said, but without any real anger now. He must have looked pretty funny, after all, and it was his own fault if he couldn’t recognize a setup after living all his life with the twins. “See if I help you the next time Draco steals your towel.”

“The next time Draco steals my towel, he’s going to turn blue,” said Harry, catching his breath. “Fred and George are letting me test one of their new products. It’s a paired thing, soap and towel. If you use one of them and not the other, after about fifteen minutes you turn a pretty color. Green for the soap, blue for the towel.”

“Remind me not to borrow your soap.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“Good.” Ron held out his hand to Harry, and as Harry took it, pulled harder than was necessary, yanking his friend past him, off-balance. Harry went with the movement, using it to try to twist Ron’s arm, but Ron brought a foot up and shoved him away, and Harry let go and collapsed in a heap, laughing.

“Nice,” he said, getting up by himself. “We’re all getting pretty good at that.”

Ron nodded. “Now all we have to do is convince the Death Eaters to come after us without their wands.”

“We’ll figure something out. Race you back to the castle?”

“Give me a start?”

“Sure.”

Ron concentrated. The world went a funny shape and became much clearer, with every movement instantly noted. Harry, suddenly a giant, bent down and offered his wrist, and Ron sidled onto it, bating a little. Harry stood up, leaned back, and shot his arm forward as if throwing a ball, and Ron launched himself into the sky.

He loved flying on a broom, but this was even better. This was real.

“Ready?” called Harry from below.

Ron positioned himself on a thermal, caught his breath, and squawked a yes.

“Go!” Harry vanished. In his place was a rangy, black-furred wolf, bounding towards the Forest and distant Hogwarts. Ron broke out of the updraft and dived towards Harry, giving voice to a long, joyous shriek as he came, and brushing his talons through Harry’s back fur at the bottom of his dive.

Nothing in the world could be as much fun as this.

xXxXx

“Ron, wake up.”

Ron blinked. His face was pressed against something firm and smooth, which smelled like paper. His back was bent at an odd angle. All he could see was a large expanse of white and black.

“You fell asleep in your book,” said Ginny in a patient tone. “You need to wake up now. It’s almost time to go home for dinner. Charlie’s coming tonight, remember?”

“I wasn’t sleeping,” said Ron, lifting his head. “I was resting my eyes.”

“Do you always drool when you rest your eyes?” inquired Harry from behind Ginny.

“Shut up. You snore.”

“I do not.”

“You do so. Doesn’t he?” Ron appealed to Ginny.

“I’m not getting into this,” said Ginny, shaking her head. “You two fight it out.”

Harry looked around the room. “Hermione!”

“What?” Hermione looked up from her book.

“Do I snore?”

“Yes.”

Ron laughed. “Thank you!”

“I do not!” protested Harry indignantly. “Neville!” Neville, who had just come in from the kitchen, jumped at being so loudly addressed. “Do I snore?”

Neville looked uncomfortable.

“Just tell me the truth,” said Harry with a sigh.

“Yes,” Neville admitted. “But it’s a very polite snore. Ron’s is much worse.”

Ron bridled. “Oy!”

“He’s right,” said Ginny. “When you snore, it sounds like the castle’s falling down.”

“First I drool, now I snore. Make up your mind!”

“You do both,” said Hermione. “And you talk in your sleep.”

“I do not!”

“Yes, you do. At our last den-night last year, you yelled something about Quafflepocking that woke me out of a sound sleep. I wanted to kick you.”

“You always kick at den-night,” countered Ron. “That’s why no one will sleep near you. They know they’ll wake up all black and blue.”

“Better than deaf, next to you,” shot back Hermione.

xXxXx

In the kitchen, Remus looked at Draco, who appeared to be ready to hide under the table, and Luna, who was her usual oblivious self, immersed in one of the books about avian transformation. Meghan was attempting to make an unobtrusive exit. Remus coughed slightly, making her jump guiltily, then motioned her to go. The shouting from the music room, rather than ceasing, was elevating.

“Is it just me,” he said conversationally, “or do Ron and Hermione seem very conversant with one another’s sleeping habits?”

Luna looked up from her book but didn’t say anything. Possibly she’d caught sight of Draco’s hand, which was signaling an emphatic *Shut up* where he thought Remus couldn’t see it.

“And did I hear Ron mention the words ‘den-night’ and ‘always’ in the same sentence? Seeming to argue that he is familiar with den-nights as a recurring phenomenon?”

Draco tried an ingratiating smile which didn’t quite work. “Would we be in trouble if I said yes?”

Well, that answers that question.

As if I didn’t already know.

“Does anything go on at these den-nights that parents wouldn’t like knowing about?”

Draco shook his head. “We tell stories and sing songs,” he said. “Practice hand-to-hand. Do homework. Sleep. That’s about it.”

“Where?”

Draco gave an artfully careless shrug. “Around.”

“All right, if you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine, as long as ‘around’ isn’t anywhere you shouldn’t be.”

“It isn’t,” said Luna. “The Map said it was safe, and Alex said we could use it.”

Draco winced. Remus didn’t blame him. He was having a hard time believing what he’d heard. “Alex said?” he asked delicately.

“Should I not have said that?” Luna asked Draco.

“Probably not.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

“Why don’t you try saying that less like someone’s twisting your arm,” suggested Remus.

Draco glared at him.

“It really is all right, you know,” Remus added. “If you don’t want to tell me any more, you don’t have to. As long as it’s nowhere dangerous and you’re not intruding on anyone.”

“Thank you, it isn’t, we’re not. Excuse me?” Draco slid off his chair and headed for the stairs.

“He’s been touchy ever since his father escaped from prison,” observed Luna. “Do you think he’s afraid?”

“Probably.”

“He shouldn’t be. The wards on your house won’t let anyone through who means to hurt him.”

“How do you know that?”

“I can see it. I see lots of things other people don’t seem to. It’s why I like being with the Pride. All of us are a little different than other people.” Luna smiled, then returned to her book.

Luna Lovegood, mistress of understatement.

And just where are you that you can hear her?

Upstairs in our bedroom, borrowing your ears.

Without asking me?

What’s wrong with that? It’s not like I’m snooping on anything private, you’re not hiding in

a room somewhere telling secrets about me.

It's the principle of the thing.

Of what thing?

Are you being deliberately obtuse?

No. Are you?

No, but... Remus stopped, taking a deep breath. I would appreciate it if you didn't use my senses without my permission.

Oh, come on, Remus. What does it hurt? You never know I'm even there.

That's the point!

It is?

Yes! I shouldn't have to wonder if you're looking through my eyes or not before I look at something!

Are you looking at things you don't want me to see?

No!

Really now? Then why don't you want me along?

It's... it's just... it's a matter of privacy.

Privacy? Since when have either of us had that?

That's the point. We deserve it. And if you're just going to sneak into my mind whenever you want, I can never be sure I'm alone.

Well, be fair, Mr. Righteous. You could just as well do the same to me.

Yes, but I won't!

That's what you say now, but the first time you suspect I'm up to something you won't approve of, I know you'll be right in there.

No, I won't! I wouldn't do anything like that to you!

Oh, really? This from the man who drilled a hole through the wall in the prefects' bathroom to get a good look at the girls' side?

Remus' hands contracted on the edge of the table. Confound you, woman, I was fifteen years

old!

I'll remember that for two years from now.

Two years... oh. Remus chuckled slightly. **I somehow doubt either of our boys will be named prefect.**

Oh, one never knows, does one? Danger paused. **Weren't we fighting a minute ago?**

I think we were. But now we're not.

Funny how that happens.

Yes, it is. But the point remains. Please don't just come into my head unless there's an emergency.

Point taken. And the same applies to you, even though I know you never do anyway.

I'll admit I've been tempted...

Ah-ha!

But as far as I can recall, I've never followed up on that temptation. Remus allowed his tone to range a bit into the "smug" zone.

Well, you know what they say. A clear conscience is the sign of a bad memory.

And the only person who quotes proverbs is one who has nothing original to say.

Come here so I can hit you.

Can I convince you to kiss me instead?

Possibly, possibly.

In that case, I'm on my way.

xXxXx

Ted Tonks got up the next morning to find his wife still working.

"Andy, sweetie, you don't need to do this to yourself," he said, leaning on the doorframe of her study. "Is this really so important? No one's going to die if you don't finish this at a certain time."

Andromeda shrugged. "I don't know. I just feel driven right now. Like I might not have another chance. And I slept most of yesterday – I have my days and nights all turned around – so I'm fine for another few hours here. I promise I'll sleep when I need to. And eat."

“Good. Ruddy Healers, never take care of themselves.”

“Stupid parchment shufflers, always think they know how to run everyone’s lives.”

They kissed.

“Make sure Dora’s up,” Andy called after her husband as he left. “And ask her to come and say goodbye to me before she goes.”

xXxXx

Nymphadora Tonks rummaged through her bag, then swore. She’d left her essay at home. And she could absolutely not look like a scatterbrained little twit in front of her cousin Sirius. He’d tease her about it for years.

She checked her watch. She had just enough time to run home and get it if she hurried.

No more than a minute later, she fell out of the fireplace at home. “Mum, it’s just me!” she called out. “I forgot something!”

There was a loud bang, as if her mother had dropped something. Then silence.

“Mum? Are you all right?”

No answer.

Tonks frowned, then started for the stairs. “Mum?”

Still no answer. She was halfway up now, and starting to get worried. “Mum, this isn’t funny. What’s going on?”

Something cream-colored caught her eye on the hallway floor. Parchment, it was a scrap of parchment, dropped by someone in a hurry, it looked like. Had her mother had an urgent call from the hospital?

Tonks came level with the doorway and squinted into the room. “She keeps it so dark in here,” she muttered, drawing her wand. “*Lumos* .”

Then she screamed.

xXxXx

The Floo at the Burrow chimed, making Molly Weasley look up in surprise. Had Ron or Ginny forgotten something?

But neither of her children emerged from the fireplace. Instead –

“Aletha! What a surprise! I wasn’t expecting—” Molly got a look at her friend’s face and stopped. “Is something wrong?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. Is Charlie here?”

“He’s upstairs. I’ll get him.”

“Thank you.” Aletha sat down at the kitchen table, looking as if she were holding off tears by sheer force of will, as Molly hurried up the stairs.

What in heaven’s name could have happened that she needs to see Charlie?

Thankfully, her second son was a light sleeper. A few good shakes, and he was following her down the stairs. “Mrs. Freeman-Black,” he said respectfully, offering his hand.

“Hello, Charlie.” Aletha shook hands with him. “Would you sit down, please? I’m afraid I have some bad news for you.”

Charlie sat, as did Molly.

“Andromeda Tonks is dead.”

Molly gasped in horror. “Dead? How? What happened to her?”

Aletha was looking at neither of them. “She appears... to have been murdered.” She turned her attention to Charlie. “Tonks is at our house, and asking for you.”

“I’ll go right away,” said Charlie in a rough voice, and shoved his chair back, standing up and Disapparating.

“He’s in his nightclothes,” said Molly, staring at the place where Charlie had been. “But I suppose that doesn’t matter... oh, Aletha, how horrible. I’m so sorry.” The words couldn’t possibly do what she wanted them to, but she hoped they would help, at least a little bit.

Unfortunately, they seemed to have the opposite effect.

“Oh, dear.” Molly got up and pulled her chair around the table, setting it directly beside the now sobbing Aletha, so that she could put a comforting arm around the other woman’s shoulders and Summon a box of tissues for her.

Murdered. But who would do such a thing? Who would murder a Healer?

“I’ve made up my mind,” said Aletha a few minutes later, wiping her eyes. “I’ve decided.”

“About what?”

“I’m going back to school. I’m going to finish my training and become a Healer myself. There are

always too few. And now there's one fewer than there used to be. I'm going to change that."

"Good for you," said Molly, and meant it. She had often thought that her brothers would have been quite annoyed with Aletha for giving up her Healer's training over them, although she had never told Aletha so.

I only hope Dora doesn't give up her own training over this.

xXxXx

"I'll find them," said Tonks' voice, muffled both because of her tears and because she was speaking into Charlie's chest. "I'll find them, and I'll bring them in, and I hope they get the Kiss for this. They deserve it."

Tonks and Charlie were in the music room. Sirius had gone back to the Ministry, to find Ted Tonks and break the news to him as gently as possible, and to get a team of Aurors in to study the Tonks' home and see what they could find out. Remus was upstairs with the cubs, comforting them and answering their questions as best he could.

And I... am doing the dishes. By hand. I don't think I could concentrate enough to use my wand right now.

Danger sniffled and watched a tear fall into the dishwasher. *God, who would do this? Who would kill Andy? She never hurt anyone, and she's helped so many people... she suspected us for all those years, but she kept our secret, even after she sent us Narcissa's ring for Draco...*

She stopped, her hands closing convulsively around a wooden spoon.

Narcissa's ring. Andy was there when Narcissa died. And she saw Lucius there, in custody, and Stunned him because she couldn't stand the look on his face...

I wondered how long it would take you.

Now who's eavesdropping?

You were broadcasting again. You never have learned not to do that.

Never mind that now. Do you really think...

It seems plausible. But let's not jump to conclusions.

A sound like a dishtowel snapping jerked Danger back to awareness of her surroundings. Sirius sat down wearily at the table. "Her study was ransacked," he said. "Her notebooks were in the bottom of her cauldron, covered with all the samples she's taken and all the potions she's tested. No one's sure if all the notes are there, or if anyone will be able to read them and find out what she'd just figured out that made someone so sure they had to kill her."

“Remus and I had a thought,” said Danger quietly. “Andy had history with Lucius Malfoy. Besides being his wife’s sister, she Stunned him the night Narcissa died.”

Sirius nodded. “Makes sense. And if it was him and Wormtail behind the poisonings, they’d want to get rid of anything that might lead back to them. Besides, what better way could they have to remind us that we’re none of us safe?”

“Yes.” Danger dropped the spoon into the sink and sat down beside Sirius at the table. “Yes.”

Neither adult heard the light footsteps on the stairs.

xXxXx

Draco ran into the boys’ bedroom and dropped down on his bed, shaking, utterly grateful that his siblings were with Moony in his and Danger’s bedroom.

I should have known. Damn it, I should have known.

Padfoot said it himself. “We’re none of us safe.”

No one is safe, as long as I’m here.

It’s me he wants. And he’ll go through anyone in his way to get me. He just proved it.

I can’t let him hurt the Pack. But he will, if they try to protect me.

So I can’t let them protect me.

I’ll go tonight, after it’s dark. They can’t stop me if they don’t see me.

He started thinking about what he could take with him, and where he could go.

I can’t stay anywhere too long. If I keep moving, he’ll take longer to find me. The longer he takes, the more likely it is he’ll get caught. Then I could come home...

He snorted at his own folly. *Fat chance. More likely, he’ll catch me and do whatever he wants to me – try to turn me – and get caught while he’s doing that, since he’ll have to stay in one place to do it.*

Or maybe he won’t get caught. Maybe he’ll succeed. Maybe he’ll turn me into a spy and send me back here to bring the Pack down from the inside...

He purposely thumped his head against the wall. *Stop that. Think about the present, what you can change, not what you can’t. The future will come soon enough.*

My father will come soon enough.

And it's only going to be me he hurts. No one else.

xXxXx

It was a long, miserable day. Everyone's pendants were warm verging on hot, and no one could seem to summon up enough energy to bespell them quiescent again.

The Auror Office gave Sirius two days' compassionate leave. Sirius said he would rather have been working.

An owl arrived from Hogwarts with the cubs' letters. Hermione seemed very happy to see hers, but then, she was always happy to see reminders that the school year would soon begin.

Charlie took Tonks back to the Burrow with him in mid-morning. Ted Tonks was under the care of some friends from work. Both father and daughter seemed all right where they were, as much as anyone who had just lost a wife or a mother could be all right, and no one had the heart to take them back to the house where Andromeda had died. They stayed where they were.

Lunchtime arrived. No one really wanted to eat, but everyone forced something down. Then they went back to their solitary pursuits – the cubs finishing summer homework, Aletha studying in fierce earnest for the tests she would soon take to qualify as a third-year Healer student, Sirius, in his writing room, pounding out his feelings on his old typewriter, and Remus and Danger doing last-minute preparations. Their expected package from Fred and George Weasley had arrived a few days before.

“It almost seems wrong to be getting ready for fun, when someone we know is dead,” Danger said quietly, tapping the edges of a stack of parchment to neaten it.

“Andy loved having fun,” said Remus, though his eyes were suspiciously bright. “She wouldn't want us to give it up because of her.”

Danger sniffled. **Are you sure?**

Remus blinked hard. **No.**

They held each other and cried together.

The cubs drifted out to play with their friends after a while, or rather, Harry and Hermione drifted out. Meghan had cried herself to sleep in the girls' bedroom, and Draco was holed up in the boys'. Even their play was subdued, quiet and without much fun to it.

Dinner was almost as cheerless as lunch. The usual jokes and laughter of the Pack were completely gone. They ate in silence, cleaned up in silence, and returned to their own places.

All except one.

xXxXx

“Moony?”

Remus turned. “Hello, Kitten,” he said.

Hermione crossed the room and sat down on a footstool near Remus’ chair. “I have something I need to ask you,” she said. “About school.”

“Go ahead.”

Hermione withdrew a letter from her pocket. “I want to take an extra class,” she said. “But there won’t be enough time for it, unless I do something unusual.”

“Unusual, like what? Private lessons?”

“No.” Hermione handed him the letter. “I asked Professor McGonagall about it at the end of last term, and she’s been writing to the Ministry about it ever since. She would have had an answer before now, but everything’s been so disturbed.”

Remus squinted at the letter in the fading light from the window, then drew his wand and turned the lights on. “Let’s see here. ‘Exceptional student... value of hard work... extraordinary measures...’”

He read through a sentence, stopped, and went back to the beginning.

That cannot say what I think it said.

The second reading did not change the meaning.

Remus looked at Hermione in amazement. “You want to use a Time-Turner? To attend an extra class?”

“It’s the only way I could – and I’d only use it for class, I’d be as careful as anything, I wouldn’t tell anyone about it...”

“You’d meet yourself coming and going, you’d wear yourself down to nothing, and there are no secrets in this house. No.”

“No?”

“No. You are not going to use a Time-Turner. You can read the books for Muggle Studies, you can even have some private lessons with the adjunct professor, but I will not allow you to meddle with time for something as silly as wanting to take an extra class. You have enough on your plate as it is. No.”

Hermione stared at him. “But—”

“No buts. The answer is no.”

“You’re being completely unfair! You won’t even listen to me!”

“I have listened to you. You have no idea the dangers of playing around with time—”

“Yes, I do! I know the laws! I have to be back where I left from by the time I left, and I can’t let me see myself, or let anyone see me being in two places at once, and I can’t do anything to change what’s already happened – and I wouldn’t! I just want to take the class!”

“That is quite enough!” Remus was on his feet. “You will not use a Time-Turner, and that’s final!”

Hermione shot upright as well. “I hate you!” she shouted. “I hate you, I hate you! I wish we’d never met you! I wish I’d never changed my name! I hate you!”

She turned and ran out of the room. Remus watched her go.

That’s one thing we never thought of when we founded the Pack. Three children the same age in one house. Which means, three teenagers.

What have we got ourselves into?

xXxXx

Hermione stormed upstairs, headed for the big bedroom the four cubs had shared until this summer. She had a stash of chocolate in the closet she intended to raid.

The window which led to the big tree was open. Draco was halfway out of it. A loaded backpack lay on the bed within his reach.

“Are you running away?”

“Yeah. Are you going to tell?”

Hermione scowled. *They’re so fond of running people’s lives, let them figure it out for themselves.* “No.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Hermione pulled the closet open, knocked over a stack of boxes, and dug through piled clothing until she found what she was looking for. Bag of chocolates hugged to her chest, she crossed the hall to the bathroom and locked herself in.

The rest of this family can go eat a puffskein for all I care.

xXxXx

“Hermione?” Danger knocked on the bathroom door. “Come on, sweetheart, I know you’re in

there. Don't make me unlock the door myself, please don't."

There was no reply.

"Danger?" Sirius came out of his and Aletha's bedroom, which had his writing room attached to it. "Have you seen Harry?"

"No. Why?"

"I was just wondering where he was. I haven't seen him since just after dinner."

"Nor have I."

"Here, let me try something." Sirius went into the boys' room and came out with a shirt of Harry's. "*Induco Erum*," he said, waving his wand around it.

The shirt flew out of his hands and plastered itself against the door of the linen closet. Danger jerked the door open, and Sirius leaped into place just in time to stop an unconscious Harry from falling on top of her.

"Oh my God." Danger felt quickly along Harry's neck as Sirius lowered him to the floor. "He's alive – I don't think he's hurt – but how could he have been attacked, here in the Den? Who could have done this?"

"We'll find out." Sirius went to one knee and aimed his wand at Harry. "*Ennervate*."

Harry's eyelids flickered, then came open. "Padfoot?" he said uncertainly. "Danger?"

"We're here," said Sirius, pressing Harry's shoulder. "We found you in the linen closet. What happened?"

"Where's Draco?"

"We haven't seen him for a little while," said Danger. "Why?"

"He did this," said Harry, rubbing his forehead. "He didn't want to hurt me, he said, but he couldn't let me stop him. So he Stunned me."

"He couldn't let you stop him?" repeated Sirius in surprise. "Stop him doing what?"

Harry sat up and looked into the boys' bedroom, then back at the adults. "Running away," he said. "He's running away. Because he thinks that we won't ever be safe with him around."

Danger had to lean against the wall for support.

Why does everything have to happen at once?

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 4: Think Fast (Year 3)

Chapter 4: Think Fast

Sirius frowned. Something didn't add up here. "You're telling me that Draco Stunned you?"

Harry nodded cautiously.

"With his wand?"

Another nod.

The answer came to Sirius with a jolt. He'd been working with the boys for weeks now, observing them for years... "How? How could he overpower you? I've worked with you both. You're faster and more powerful than he is. How did he do it?"

"It was a sneak attack!" protested Harry. "I didn't think he'd actually curse me!"

"You're lying," said Sirius hotly. He couldn't believe Harry thought he'd accept a story this blatantly fake. "You're trying to protect him. You let him Stun you, so you'd have a cover story. I'm not stupid, Harry, and I'm not falling for this. How much do you know?"

xXxXx

"You're telling me that Draco Stunned you?" said Sirius, frowning a bit.

Danger, leaning against the wall, felt a tugging inside her mind, somewhere near where her bond with Remus began, but not coming from that bond. Someone wanted her attention, but it wasn't her husband.

She closed her eyes. **Yes?**

I shouldn't be doing this, hissed a voice she knew. **But it's technically not telling you anything you don't know already. Go after him, and soon. The longer you wait, the harder it's going to be to track him down, and the more chance there is that someone else will find him first. I have to go –**

The contact was broken.

Thank you, Alex, said Danger anyway.

Just in case we needed more confirmation that time is of the essence...

"I'm not stupid, Harry, and I'm not falling for this," said Sirius angrily. Danger quickly opened her eyes. "How much do you know?"

Harry scooted backwards, away from Sirius, his eyes wide and frightened. “Nothing, I don’t know anything, I swear!”

“Stop lying!” Sirius yelled. “Don’t you understand? His *life* could depend on this!”

Harry shrank away from Sirius, bringing his arm up as if to shield himself from a blow.

We’re going to need help here...

Already on our way.

Feet pounded on the stairs. Aletha’s head and arms came into view, and without breaking stride, she hurled a wadded-up ball of parchment down the hall, striking Sirius in the middle of the back. “Stop it,” she snapped, mounting the last few stairs and standing at the end of the hall, hands on her hips, as Sirius twisted to face her. “I don’t care why you did this, but stop it now. Look at him, Sirius. Look what you’re doing to him.”

Sirius turned back around, still with anger stamped on his face, anger which drained away almost instantly as he took in Harry’s posture, his normally fearless godson cowering back from him, curled in on himself, arms shielding his head.

“Harry, no – no, I didn’t mean that – I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that...” He moved closer, reaching out tentatively to put an arm around Harry, then more firmly as Harry didn’t resist.

The door of the girls’ bedroom opened and Meghan stumbled out, rubbing her eyes. “What’s happening?” she asked sleepily. “I heard yelling.”

Aletha nodded to Danger, then took Meghan’s hand and led her back into the bedroom, shutting the door behind them.

We’re going to have to leave someone behind with the girls and Harry, said Remus, appearing at the top of the stairs himself.

Leave someone behind? Where are we going?

To look for Draco. Unless we’re going to ignore common sense *and* a visitation from our serpent-loving friend.

Ha! You *were* listening in!

Yes, but this is an emergency, that’s different... Remus sighed. **No, I suppose it’s not different, and I apologize, but can we talk about it later?**

Of course. I just couldn’t resist twitting you once. It’s not like I get a lot of chances, O Perfect One.

You of all people ought to know I’m not perfect.

Funny how that works both ways.

“All right now?” Remus said aloud, coming down the hall.

“Will be in a minute,” said Sirius, looking up. He shook his head. “Why do I always have to do the boneheaded stuff around here?”

“Because you’re good at it?” suggested Harry in a voice which still shook a little, but was regaining its usual good humor.

“You’re fine,” said Remus, reaching down to scent-touch Harry. “What can you tell us?”

“I’d come upstairs to get something, and I saw Draco putting stuff in a backpack,” said Harry, letting Sirius help him up. “I asked him what he was doing, and he pulled his wand on me. I wasn’t expecting it, I didn’t have time to react. I asked him if he was running away, and he said yes, and he couldn’t let me stop him. He apologized and asked me to tell everyone that he loves them, but that he’s doing the right thing, and before I could yell he Stunned me.”

“About what time was this?” asked Sirius.

“I’m not sure.” Harry looked into the boys’ bedroom, at the windows. “It wasn’t dark yet, but it was getting dark. Maybe half an hour ago, maybe more. I didn’t look at the clock.”

“Pack honor on this, Harry?” asked Danger. **Sirius had a point. It would be easy for him to be lying, trying to protect Draco.**

Harry looked a bit offended. “Pack and Pride honor,” he said. “I wouldn’t lie about something like this.”

“Please forgive us, Harry, we just have to be sure,” said Remus. “We’d ask the same of any of you cubs...” He looked over at Danger, an idea dawning in his eyes. **Are you thinking what I’m thinking?**

I think I am. Hermione?

Yes.

“What’s up?” asked Sirius.

“Hermione might have seen Draco after you did,” said Danger. “You didn’t see her come upstairs, Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “She was walking around in the ground floor hallway looking at a letter and talking to herself when I went upstairs,” he said. “If she came up, it was after me.”

“We can at least get a better idea of when he left, based on if she saw him or not,” said Remus, turning to the bathroom door. “Hermione?”

There was no answer.

“Hermione, I know you’re angry, but we need to talk to you.”

Still no answer.

“Last chance before we come in on our own.”

“Go *away!* ”

“Wrong answer,” said Remus, taking out his wand and tapping the lock. It clicked open, and he turned the door handle and pushed on the door.

It didn’t open.

She’s probably sitting against it, said Danger. **Let me try?**

If you think you’ll get anywhere.

“Hermione, we just want to ask you about Draco.”

“I’m not telling you anything! I hate you all! I’m sick and dying and you don’t even care!”

“If you’re ill, I’m coming in there right now,” said Danger, rising on her toes in preparation to Apparate.

“No! I’m fine! Just leave me alone!”

This is taking too long. “Hermione, did you see Draco when you came upstairs?” Remus asked.

“Yes.”

“What was he doing?”

“Climbing out the window.”

Oh God.

Yes. “And why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“Because I’m not a tattletale like Harry!”

“No, you just let him go off to get killed!” shouted Harry. “Hermione, Malfoy is out there, and Wormtail, and they want him *dead!* ”

“At least now he has a chance! If he stayed here, he’d be a sitting target!”

“You’re so—”

Sirius put a hand firmly over Harry's mouth and steered him into the boys' bedroom before they could hear what Hermione was so.

"This is not over, young lady," said Remus sternly. "We're going to be having a serious talk about this."

"Fine." Hermione's voice radiated contempt.

This isn't like her. What's got into her?

Remus displayed his memory of his and Hermione's last interaction. **This is probably part of it, but I don't know what would make her react this way in the first place. She's usually so calm. But there's no time to be thinking about that now.**

No, you're right. We need to get after Draco, and quickly. We know he went out the window, and probably down the tree. Is there any way we can track him by magic?

Not that I can think of... wait. Not by magic, per se, but we do have magic that will let us track him.

What?

Our Animagus forms. We can track him by scent. Unless he took a broomstick, and I don't think he did...

Danger hurried down the stairs to look in the closet where the family kept their brooms. **They're all here,** she reported. **He's on foot.**

Excellent. We'll not only be able to track him, we'll be moving faster. We should be able to catch him up quickly.

I hope.

Sirius emerged from the boys' bedroom, looking grave, as Danger came to the top of the stairs and Aletha exited the girls' room. "Bad news?" Remus asked him.

"I'm not sure. Strange, certainly. Harry says Draco kept a stash of money in his desk drawer. It's gone. He must have taken it with him."

"Nothing strange about that," said Aletha. "He knows things cost money in the real world."

"But look what he left behind." Sirius displayed it.

"That is bizarre," said Danger. "Why wouldn't he take his wand?"

"And it looks like he wrote something before he left, but I can't find that anywhere either. I was just going to see if I can get anything from the desk. Want to watch? The more eyes, the better, I

can only do this once.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Meghan, sliding out from behind Aletha and preceding her mother and Pack-mother down the hall and into the boys’ room, where Harry was already sitting on his own bed.

“Basically, I’m asking the desk to remember what was written on it last. Muggles can do this, sometimes, with powder or ink or things. Magic just makes it better.” Sirius set Draco’s wand aside, drew his own, pointed it at the desk, and moved it in a careful pattern, brows furrowed in concentration. His Pack-mates drew in behind him.

The writing which appeared on the desk was sketchy but legible.

Draco Black, born Draco Malfoy, has run away from his home in Devon. His current whereabouts are unknown.

Overlapping this were four words, written larger.

Daily Prophet News Office

Aletha groaned. “The *Prophet* – my God, they’ll be all over this, it’s a huge story, they wouldn’t even care if it wasn’t true – and it is, and he’s sent it to them himself...”

“No, he hasn’t,” said Meghan.

“How do you know?” asked Danger.

Meghan pointed. On the windowsill of the open window sat Hedwig the snowy owl, looking in at everyone.

“Hedwig,” said Harry, crossing quickly to her. “Have you been anywhere this evening? I mean, taken any letters?”

Hedwig hooted in what sounded like the negative.

“Besides, she wouldn’t have had time to get to London and back,” said Danger. “Look at her, she’s obviously not tired. He can’t have sent it yet.”

“But he wrote it,” said Sirius. “So he intended to send it. I suppose he could be planning to use a public post owl, that’s harder to trace, but how could he get anywhere to send one from? He’d have to be in a city, or at least a town with a wizarding population, like Hogsmeade...”

“Then he must be headed for somewhere like that,” said Danger.

“How would he get there?” asked Aletha. “He’s walking, not flying, and he can’t Apparate. Unless he breaks into someone’s house to use the Floo...”

“We can find out,” said Remus. “Harry, you’re in charge here. Let’s go, everyone, we have a trail to find.”

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Draco’s scent was absurdly easy to locate. It came straight down the tree outside the cubs’ window and across the grass, then down the road for a while, before it abruptly terminated at a spot with a lot of exhaust fumes around it.

“Do you think he got a ride from someone?” asked Danger, frowning.

“Not exactly.” Sirius had a curious half-smile on his face. “But I do think he made a mistake. Stand back, everyone.” He threw out his left hand theatrically.

A loud BANG erupted, and a bright purple, triple-decker bus screeched to a stop directly in front of them.

Of course, said Remus. **I feel stupid now.**

Don’t worry, it’s mutual. You think this is why he took money?

Probably. That and to rent the owl.

“Welcome to the Knight Bus,” recited the pimple-faced young man in a violet uniform who had just leapt out the door of said conveyance. “Emergency transport for the stranded witch or wizard...”

“Yes, thank you,” said Sirius, cutting him off. “I’m Auror Sirius Black, I need to have a word with you and your driver.”

“Sirius – Sirius Black!” The conductor looked somewhere between amazed and appalled.

“*Auror* Sirius Black,” Sirius repeated a little more forcefully. “And you are...”

“Me? Stan, Stan Shunpike, sir, an’ the driver’s Ernie Prang – somefink wrong, sir?”

“I just need to know who you’ve picked up tonight,” said Sirius, beckoning for Stan to board the bus with him. “And where you took them. It shouldn’t take too long.”

The door closed behind them.

“Well, it seems Aurors are good for something after all,” said Danger with an effort at lightness. Then it evaporated. “*Why?* Why would he do something this stupid? Why couldn’t he just stay home?”

“Harry said he thought he was protecting us by running off,” said Remus.

“Protecting us by running off?” Aletha scoffed. “Doesn’t he understand anything about wards? If the person they’re targeted on leaves the house with no intent of coming back, they go down. I’m sure ours are down now, and it’s going to be harder to get them back up again than it was to get them up in the first place.”

Danger suddenly felt a complex burst of emotions, mingled anger and frustration with traces of dark humor and a sense of wasted effort. **Was that you?** she asked Remus.

Yes. “Refresh my memory,” said Remus. “Did we ever *tell* Draco about the wards on the house?”

Aletha swore under her breath. “No. No, we didn’t.”

“We told him we’d warded the house and grounds,” corrected Danger, chagrined. “But we didn’t tell him to what extent. So he must have thought we were still vulnerable.”

“And we didn’t tell him what we worked out with Dumbledore last week,” said Remus. “If we’d thought to do that, this might never have happened.”

The door of the bus thumped open before either woman could reply. “Thank you,” said Sirius, stepping off. “You can go now.”

The bus was away almost before the words were out of his mouth.

“What did you say to him?” asked Aletha.

“Pointed out the inadvisability of taking aboard a thirteen-year-old without any parents or guardians visible. I could report him, but I don’t think I will. Not after what he told me.” Sirius started back for the Den. “A boy with blond hair who gave his name as Dean Thomas boarded the bus just about here earlier this evening, and paid extra to move up in the queue. He got off in Hogsmeade.”

“Hogsmeade.” Remus drew the word out thoughtfully. “I suppose that’s where we should start, then. Who’s going, and who’s staying behind?”

“Going,” said Danger. “I look enough like a dog that most people won’t notice me, so I can trail him even through the village. Sirius, you should come too...”

“No,” said Sirius. “I think I need to stay.”

“Why?” asked Remus and Aletha together.

“Because there’s just the outside possibility that this is a blind.”

“A blind?” repeated Aletha. “You mean a diversion?”

“Yes. We put up the best wards possible, but they’re not invulnerable. What if – I’m not saying I think this happened, but just consider it – what if Malfoy, or Wormtail, got close enough to put

Imperius on Draco, and make him run off like this? What better way could they have to pull us out of the Den and leave it – and Harry – relatively undefended?”

“That... makes too much sense,” said Danger slowly. “Two go, two stay, then?”

“That sounds reasonable,” said Remus. “Sirius, you’re right, you should stay.”

“Mark today on the calendar, someone. Moony just admitted I was right.”

“Because the wards involve you as well, and if there’s any chance there’s some of them left, you need to stay to keep them going, and because you’re one of the best wand-users I know. And Letha, you teamwork with this immature prat better than anyone I know, even me.”

“It was self-defense,” said Aletha with a touch of irony in her voice. “After I was stupid enough to marry him.”

“Oy!”

“Enough,” said Remus, reaching forward and separating Sirius and Aletha deftly as they reached the front door of the Den.

“Did you find anything?” said Meghan, jumping up from her seat on the landing as soon as the adults were inside.

“Yes, and we’ll explain in a minute,” said Aletha. Meghan nodded and sat back down next to Harry, who put his arm around her.

“If we’re going, let’s go,” said Danger, trying to hide her nervousness and outright fear under bluster and aware that she wasn’t succeeding very well. “The sooner we leave, the sooner we’re back.”

“Take care,” said Aletha, hugging Danger and Remus in turn. “Bring him back safe.”

“Bring yourselves back safe,” was Sirius’ wish. “And if you do see Malfoy, Moony, bite him on the arse for me.”

“I’ll consider it,” said Remus. “See what you can do for Neenie?” he asked Aletha. “I can’t help feeling she might be ill or hurt and not telling us.”

“Of course.”

“Don’t get hurt,” Meghan instructed Remus. “I don’t want to have to take care of you.”

“We will certainly keep that in mind,” said Remus gravely.

Harry pulled something long and thin out of his pocket. “Give him this,” he said, handing it to Danger. “He forgot it.”

Danger nodded, tucked the item into her pocket, and hugged Harry once, tightly, then took her cloak from the coat tree in the corner by the door and followed Remus outside.

Outside the Three Broomsticks?

Sounds good.

A soft pop and a somewhat louder crack sounded outside the door of the Den.

xXxXx

Even so soon after sunset, and at the end of August, it was chilly at night in the mountains. It would have been nice to have a fire. It would have been almost like having company. Like having a friend along.

But I can't have friends now. It's too dangerous.

And besides, a fire attracts attention. It would be like jumping around, waving my arms, screaming, "Here I am!"

But isn't that what I'm doing anyway?

Draco lay curled up on the floor of a cave, feeling more than usually young and thoroughly miserable. He rearranged his position slightly, shivering inside several layers of clothes, and wished he had his recorder with him, or his flute. He hadn't brought either, because there was no point. He wouldn't be needing them, once his father found him.

And if a fire would attract attention, so would music. I'm better off the way I am.

But aren't I supposed to be trying to attract attention? To pull it off everyone else?

I'm so confused. I don't even know why I did this anymore. It was stupid, it was the dumbest thing I've ever done...

But what else was I supposed to do? Sit at home and wonder who else was going to get killed?

He uncoiled a little, just enough to get his hand up to his chest, where he could hold onto his pendants. They were warm, as they had been all day, reflecting the Pack and Pride's general state of distress over Andromeda Tonks' death.

I've seen enough death. I don't want anyone else to die. Especially not because of me.

I sent that letter before the post office closed, so it should be in London in time for the morning papers. If the Prophet makes a big enough deal out of it, I shouldn't have too long to wait.

Once he finds me, what then?

Not for the first time, the irony of the situation struck Draco. *If I were anyone else, running away from what amounts to a foster family and hoping my real father will find me would be a really great story. But I'm not anyone else. I'm me. And I don't really want him to find me.*

But better me than someone else.

That thought, which had driven him into this in the first place, was starting to lose its urgency, and a very unheroic wish to go home was gaining strength in its place. Draco closed his eyes and deliberately summoned up all the worst thoughts and images from the ones which had been haunting him all day:

Luna, collapsed on the ground, her eyes open and unblinking, her face frozen in her eternal expression of mild, pleasant surprise.

Hermione, screaming and writhing in pain, being allowed only a few seconds between spells to breathe before another curse was laid on her.

Meghan, biting and kicking frantically against her captor's hold, trying to get to Harry, who lay on the grass, eyes shut, glasses askew, a huge dark patch spreading on his robes.

The Pack-parents lying in their beds, Padfoot's arm under Letha's neck, Danger's head on Moony's shoulder, too still and too silent to be asleep, never to laugh or sing or play pranks again.

The Burrow in flames, collapsing under its own weight.

Neville, tortured into insanity like his parents.

And that could happen – all of it could happen – if I ask them to protect me.

Better me than someone else.

A scraping sound on the path outside brought him to full awareness instantly.

Now? Already? What do I do?

His hand dropped automatically to his waist, fumbling for the hilt of his dagger.

Could I – can I – kill him? Is that even possible?

The sounds were now obviously footsteps, two sets of them, getting closer. Draco got slowly to his feet, his dagger in his hand, backing up until he ran into the wall of the cave.

Ow .

He felt his way along the back wall, looking for a place to hide, and found a little space like a natural closet, tucked into a corner. It was large enough for him to squeeze into.

Emphasis on squeeze.

And he was just in time, as a man's figure was silhouetted against the entryway. Draco clamped down on his breathing, forcing himself to keep it regular and quiet, neither gasping nor holding his breath, as a second figure followed the first.

Wait a second – that looks like a woman. Why would a woman be with my father? And where's Wormtail? I would have thought they'd stick together...

He just managed to keep from yelping as flames suddenly erupted in the center of the cave, and again as their light revealed the faces of the two people who had tracked him down.

No. No, no, no! You weren't supposed to follow me! You were supposed to be glad I was gone, because I was endangering the whole Pack!

Maybe they don't know I'm here.

He would have hit himself, but that was problematic at the moment. *Right. It's just coincidence that they came straight to the cave where I am, not an hour after I left the Den. I don't think so.*

Still, if Moony and Danger did know he was there, they weren't showing it. They were sitting one on each side of the fire, staring into it, and as Draco watched, Danger took something from her pocket and placed it on the cave floor, carefully out of range of the flames. The firelight flickered on the sheen of carved and polished wood.

They definitely know I'm here. There's no other reason they'd have brought my recorder.

"I wish we had some company," said Danger quietly, so that Draco had to strain to hear her over the crackle of the flames.

"So do I," returned Moony. "I wish we could have a chance to explain a few things that we should have explained weeks ago. Such as why the Den was actually safer when the Pack was together."

Safer when the Pack was together? What does that mean? Draco inched a little way out of his rocky cubbyhole to listen.

"Yes, that," Danger agreed. "And maybe discuss that old joke about steak sauce and a dragon's cave."

Moony chuckled. "I do like that one."

Draco leaned just a little farther out –

And lost his balance and fell over. The layers of clothes he was wearing ensured that he wasn't hurt, but it was still embarrassing.

Moony waited for Draco to sit up and brush himself off, then beckoned him over to the fire, and

Draco came, first sheathing his dagger, then standing up and coming to the place Danger had marked for him, picking up his recorder and sitting down where it had been.

“So,” said Moony, “do you know why the wizard doused himself in steak sauce and ran into the dragon’s cave?”

Might as well play along. “No. Why did the wizard douse himself in steak sauce and run into the dragon’s cave?”

“Because it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

The heat on Draco’s face was not all due to the fire.

“Your turn,” said Danger. “Why did the cub run away from the Den?”

“Because the cub didn’t want to see his Pack get killed just because of him.”

“Why did the cub think his Pack might be in danger?” asked Moony.

“Because of my father!” Draco shouted, suddenly fed up with their patience. How could they not see what was so clear to him? “He killed Aunt Andy, didn’t he? And Padfoot said none of us are safe now. I heard him. And he was right. No one’s safe with me around. Maybe he doesn’t want me dead, but he doesn’t give a rat’s arse about anyone else – he’d kill everyone, Pack and Pride, just to get at me and take me back. But if I’m out here, then he can just take me, and no one has to die.”

Moony and Danger exchanged looks. Danger spoke next. “You’re quite right, Draco, Sirius did say that we’re none of us safe. But the answer to making us more safe is not for you to make a target of yourself. And this is partly our fault – we should have explained to you what we were doing to make the Den more secure, but we had no idea you were worried.”

Draco shuffled his feet. “I hid it.”

“You hid it very well.” Danger sounded at least partly approving. “Now. How much do you know about blood magic?”

“Only what’s in the den-night stories. That it’s why Harry went to his aunt and uncle’s, because his mum died to save him, and that created magic with his mum’s blood relatives, so that no one who wanted to hurt him could do it while he was living with them. Except them.”

“Yes, but that’s another story,” said Moony. “Draco, when this new threat arose, we talked to Albus at length about safeguarding the Den, and he discovered something very interesting. Harry is not the only one of our cubs whose mother’s death left magical protection behind.”

“Hermione?”

“Not quite,” said Danger.

But Meghan's mum is Letha, and Letha's not dead...

“Your mother died so that no one could use her against you,” said Moony quietly. “So that you would never have divided loyalties. You know the story – what did she ask of us?”

A small bird seemed to be fluttering in Draco's chest, making it difficult for him to get his breath. “She asked you to make me forget her. To erase her name and her face from my memory. But you wouldn't.”

“Because that would have been wrong,” said Danger. “Now more than ever. Your mother's death was enough of a sacrifice for you that Professor Dumbledore was able to raise blood magic wards on the Den, because Sirius and Meghan live there, and they are your mother's blood relatives.”

Blood magic wards – the strongest kind there are. The only thing they don't defend against is other people of that bloodline, and it was my mother's blood, not my father's – he wouldn't be able to pass them!

The bird was much larger now, and beating its wings to the rhythm of his heartbeat, or maybe it was his heart beating, he couldn't tell, and it didn't matter.

I can go home. The Pack will be safe – and they'll keep the Pride safe if need be – and we'll be at Hogwarts within a week anyway – I can go home!

“Now, back to Harry's story,” said Moony, in a tone that warned Draco there was still a reckoning to pay. “When, and why, did the blood magic wards around his relatives' house collapse?”

Draco thought hard. “They collapsed when you took him away,” he said finally. “Because they could tell that you didn't mean to bring Harry back to the house, so they weren't needed any more.”

“Precisely,” said Danger. “So what do you think happened to the wards on the Den – which, I might add, protect everyone, since anyone who wanted to hurt one of us would probably want to hurt you as well – when you went out a window without the intent of coming back?”

Oops. “I didn't even know about them,” muttered Draco, knowing he sounded sulky.

“We know,” said Danger. “So your punishment will be very light. You have to come home right away and not make any trouble about it.”

“What if I don't?” Draco challenged.

“We will make you,” said Moony flatly. “Do not test us on this, Draco, we are not playing games. What you did tonight can be explained with a combination of ignorance, which is our fault, and your wish to protect the people you love, which is not a fault at all, though I'd rather you think a little harder next time.”

“And remember that love goes both ways,” added Danger. “We want to see bad things happen to

you about as much as you want to see them happen to us.”

Moony nodded thanks to her and continued. “This is not the time for open defiance. You will, eventually, need to make your own decisions about your life and what you do with it, but not tonight, and not about this, and if you try, I will personally Stun you, haul you home, and confine you to the Den for the next six months.”

Draco met his Pack-father’s cold blue eyes. “You wouldn’t do that.”

Moony folded his arms. “Try me.”

He really means it. Draco held his rebellious pose for one more second, careful not to let Moony see how much he secretly appreciated this, then relaxed and grinned. “Gotcha.”

Moony stared at him for an instant, then scooped up a handful of fire and threw it at Draco like a snowball. Draco yelled and ducked, and the fireball missed him, turned around in midair, and came back, shattering against the side of his head before he could dodge it again, with no effects except a sound like water on hot metal and a slight smell of smoke.

“And if I get any more lip from you, I won’t damp the next one,” warned Moony, but Draco could see something in his eyes which reminded him of Professor Dumbledore.

“I suppose we did something right, if he can bluff even you that well,” said Danger, chuckling. “Come on, fox, there are some anxious people waiting for us. We should go home.”

Home.

It sounded even better now than it had a minute ago.

Then he remembered one of the last things he’d done before he left, the thing that had made it necessary for him to leave before full dark fell. “Er, I think I owe Harry an apology,” he said a little uncertainly.

And if they say “What are you talking about?” so much the better...

“Yes, I think you do,” said Danger, fixing him with a semi-amused look. “The linen closet? Really, Draco, couldn’t you find anywhere better for your poor brother?”

“Not on short notice!” protested Draco. “I was in a hurry!”

“And someday you may be in a hurry in enemy territory,” said Moony, with the look which meant this had just turned into a lesson. “The linen closet was a bad choice, why?”

Draco scowled, picking up his pack. “Because people are in and out of there a lot, and someone probably found him before he woke up.”

“Correct. Name three other places on the first floor of the Den which would have been better

choices.”

“Under the beds,” said Draco, as Danger snapped her fingers to put the fire out. “In a laundry hamper, covered up with clothes so no one would see him right away. And...”

“Bathtub,” said Moony, leading the way out of the cave. “If you pull out the shower curtain a bit, no one will see him in a cursory inspection, and that’s all you need to buy some time for a getaway. Grab on, now. I’m going to Apparate us home.”

Draco took hold of Moony’s arm and held on tight. Just before the pressed-in feeling of Apparition began, he felt Danger’s fingers touch his cheek.

I’m going home.

It was the best feeling he’d ever had in his life.

xXxXx

To Remus’ surprise, Hermione met them at the door with everyone else, and ran to him as soon as he was fairly inside. “I’m sorry,” she blurted out, rocking on her feet as if she wanted to be hugged, but wasn’t sure if he would take her in his arms or push her away. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t really mean any of that, and I won’t take Muggle Studies if you say not to, and I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you Draco was leaving, I should have, I know, he could have gotten hurt and it would have been my fault, and I ought to be punished...”

Aletha caught Remus’ eye and signaled to him. *No punishment. Explain later.*

“No, you shouldn’t,” said Remus, opening his arms to her. “Come here, Kitten.”

Hermione made a little sound like a sob and clung to him.

xXxXx

The cubs had gone off to do something by themselves, so the adults were taking full advantage of their last cub-free time tonight, since this would certainly be an occasion for denning. Remus firecalled the offices of the *Daily Prophet* to tell them that the letter they would soon receive was a fake, then went to help Aletha assemble the den while Danger measured out the spices for mulled mead and Sirius dug some double-chocolate brownies out of the freezer.

“Now,” Remus said when everything was ready, sitting down at the table with a brownie in one hand and a mug of mead in the other. “Letha. Why exactly shouldn’t Hermione be punished? I trust you, but I’d like to know.”

“First things first,” said Aletha around a mouthful of brownie. She swallowed and looked at Danger. “You owe me.”

“For what?”

“For laying out for one Hermione Granger-Lupin the basic facts of life.”

“Basic facts of... oh. *Oh.* ”

“Translation?” said Sirius, looking as baffled as Remus felt.

“Hermione is, shall we say, turning into a woman,” said Aletha with a small smile. “And that was why she thought she was dying – seeing blood on that piece of clothing can be a little unnerving if you’re not expecting it, which she wasn’t.”

“Which is probably my fault,” said Danger, shaking her head. “I should have realized, she’s been so moody lately. Poor girl.”

Sirius set down his brownie, looking faintly unwell.

“On that subject,” added Aletha, looking at the men. “The boys will be needing *the talk* soon, now that Hermione’s gotten it. You two get to fight over who does it.”

Remus turned to Sirius and set his fist on his palm. Sirius did likewise. They pounded them once, twice, three times, and Sirius flattened his hand while Remus shot two fingers out.

“Yes!” Remus took a victorious gulp of his mead as Sirius cursed darkly.

“Baby,” said Danger. “It can’t be that bad.”

“With these boys? Yes, it can. They’re going to figure out some way to turn it around on me and embarrass the hell out of me. You watch.”

Aletha grinned. “Watch you get embarrassed? Love to.”

xXxXx

Draco didn’t want to look up – it was so much more comfortable to keep his gaze fixed firmly on his bedroom carpet – but he knew he had to. Slowly, he raised his head and met Harry’s eyes.

What he saw there made him want to cringe. For the first time in his life, Draco Black could believe that Harry Potter would be ashamed to call him a brother. Hermione and Meghan looked on silently.

“You put Pack and Pride in danger,” said Harry coldly. “You attacked your alpha. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Draco dropped to one knee, keeping his eyes locked with Harry’s, tilting his head back to expose his throat. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I was wrong.”

Harry put his hand on Draco’s throat and constricted it ever so little, just enough that Draco could feel it. He resisted the urge to swallow nervously, since Harry would certainly feel that. A moment

later, Harry let go and gave him a small nod. Draco bowed his head thankfully, and felt again the flutter of hope and joy in his chest at the touch of Harry's hand on the back of his neck.

He doesn't hate me. He still thinks I can be Pride. And Moony obviously thinks I can still be Pack.

He recalled the moment before they had entered the Den, when they had been alone, since Danger had gone ahead to tell everyone the good news.

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“Moony?”

“Yes?”

“Do we have to go in right away?”

“Why, is there something you have to do?”

“Sort of.” A bit awkwardly, unbalanced by his backpack, Draco knelt and looked up at Moony, his head tilted back.

Please let him understand...

Surprise colored Moony's features for one moment before it was replaced by the calm mask of the alpha male. Deliberately, Moony placed his hand around Draco's throat, not applying any pressure at all, just touching him, then let go and laid his hand on top of Draco's head.

Draco had to squeeze his eyes shut tight. *Forgiven*, his Pack-father and alpha had said in that one small gesture. *All forgiven, all over. You are Pack, now and forever.*

xXxXx

“Draco.”

Harry's voice called him back to the present. “What?”

“Think fast.”

Draco's eyes shot open to see Harry's foot moving into position for a shove. He grabbed it and tugged, and Harry fell on his rump, prompting Hermione to jump down from the bed and perch on his chest. Meghan tackled her from behind, trying to pull her off him, and almost succeeded, until Draco started peeling her off finger by finger. She turned and threw herself onto him, knocking him over backwards.

Soon they would call a truce, and go downstairs and have a snack, and then would come den-night, with stories and songs and games. Whatever tomorrow might bring, tonight they were the Pack, and nothing and no one could change that.

Hermione screeched. Harry had her pinned now, and was sitting on her back looking smug.

Well, we can't have that.

Draco abandoned abstract thought and dived into the game.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 5: Planning and Promises (Year 3)

Chapter 5: Planning and Promises

Harry drifted into wakefulness, all his thoughts hazily pleasant.

Denning is good. Having Draco back safely is good. Going to Diagon Alley today is good.

He took a deep breath, then let it out in a slow hiss, stretching all over, bringing his whole body awake. When he felt ready to get up, he opened his eyes to make sure he wouldn't hit anyone. The usual welter of den-night presented itself before him, the Pack lying tangled comfortably with one another, sheets, light blankets, and pillows mingled with arms, legs, and heads in a mess that would have been disturbing if it hadn't been so clear that all the body parts were safely attached where they should be.

Harry frowned. Not everything was where it should be. Someone was missing.

"Good morning," said Padfoot quietly from behind him. Harry turned to see his godfather sitting in an armchair he must have brought in from the living room, with parchment, ink, quills, and his wand all on a small table in front of him.

"Morning," Harry answered. "You're up early."

Padfoot smothered a yawn and nodded. "I was up at six. Standing watch, or sitting, rather. We took it in turns all night."

Harry nodded. "Because the wards went down when Draco left."

"The blood magic wards went down when he left," Padfoot corrected. "The wards we put up ourselves stayed. But they're not as strong as the blood magic, and we wanted to be certain we'd be ready if anything did happen. Not to mention, we didn't want to give anyone a chance to sneak out on us again."

"I don't think he will," said Harry, coming over to sit near Padfoot's chair. "I hope he doesn't."

"Draco's not the only one I meant."

"Huh?" Harry was confused for a moment. "What, me?"

"Are you honestly telling me it never crossed your mind?"

"Running away?"

"Yes."

“Why would I do that? It’s stupid. Going out and getting killed wouldn’t make anyone safer.”

“Hold on to that attitude,” said Padfoot under his breath. “You may need it.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Listen, Harry, there’s something I need to ask you.”

“Yeah?”

“Moony’s planning on introducing your year to magical creatures. Hinkypunks, grindylows, and the like. He was going to start out with boggarts. Is that going to be a problem?”

“A problem?” There was some subtle undercurrent here Harry wasn’t getting. “What kind of problem?”

“You’ve seen a boggart before, haven’t you?”

“Yes. First year, going after the Sorcerer’s Stone.”

“Do you remember what it turned into?”

For a moment, Harry didn’t. Then he did, and wished he hadn’t. “I can explain,” he said, sounding lame even to himself.

“I’d appreciate that. I won’t laugh, and I won’t tell anyone, not even Letha. Marauder’s honor.”

It brought a small smile to Harry’s face to see his godfather holding up his left hand to swear. “All right.”

He had to go back farther than he thought he would, back to Alex’s story about his family, which made more sense now that he knew who Alex actually was, and from there to the dream he’d had that night and the boggart later that year.

“I don’t think that’s what I’d see anymore, though,” Harry said, winding a scrap of parchment around his finger. “I mean, it happened. The dream came true. Parts of it, anyway. Draco ran away, and it was sort of my fault. But you didn’t do what you did in the dream. You were angry, but you didn’t shake me or threaten me or anything. So I don’t think you’re what I’m most afraid of anymore.”

“I appreciate that, Harry,” said Padfoot with a straight face. “I really do. But do you have any idea what you might see instead?”

Harry shrugged. “I guess... Voldemort. Except I don’t really know what he looks like. I saw the face on Quirrell’s head, but that can’t be right, can it?”

“I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter. If you thought it was Voldemort, that’s the form the boggart

would take. And if I remember your description right, it sounds likely to scare your friends. Not to mention, it's what they'll be expecting from you. Some of them will be hoping for it, some of them won't, but all of them are likely to panic if he actually turns up."

"So I shouldn't face the boggart?" Harry didn't like the idea, but still less did he like the thought of being responsible for class-wide panic. He was hoping to get through this year without losing any points from Gryffindor.

Well, except the ones lost in honorable prank endeavors.

"Probably not." Padfoot reached over to ruffle Harry's hair. "I'm sorry, Greeneyes. I know you hate being different."

"It's not like it's anything I can get away from." Harry tugged at the parchment moodily. "It's part of who I am now. Not all of it, but it's there, and I can't very well pretend it isn't. I just have to live with it."

"Hunh." Padfoot sounded surprised, but with a trace of thoughtfulness in his tone as well. "Harry James Potter, I do believe you're growing up."

"Oh no," said Harry, lying down and flailing his arms and legs as if he were drowning. "Help, help. Someone save me."

"I'd love to," said Padfoot, blocking another yawn, "but I'm too lazy. If I had some tea, maybe..."

"Stop trying to be sneaky," said Harry, getting up. "You're not very good at it."

Padfoot grinned. "That's what makes it so much fun."

xXxXx

Well, there was no point in making tea and not starting breakfast.

It didn't take the Pack long to follow their noses to the source of the smells of sausage and toast. "Thank you, love," said Danger, hugging Harry from behind. "What a lovely way to wake up."

"Can I ask you something?" said Hermione to Draco.

"You just did."

"Something else?"

"You just did again."

Hermione picked up the saucer of marmalade threateningly.

"Yes," said Draco hastily.

“Why didn’t you take your wand with you?” Hermione set the marmalade down and helped herself to a generous spoonful.

“Because we’re not supposed to do magic outside school, and I’m a good little boy...” Anything else Draco might have had to say was drowned out in a general chorus of incredulity from the rest of the Pack.

“No, really,” said Hermione when the noise died down.

Draco made patterns in his ketchup with his fork. “Because I didn’t want *him* to have one.”

Breakfast was much quieter after that.

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In the boys’ bedroom, Draco dumped out his backpack on his bed and started digging through it, sorting out everything he’d taken with him to put away later, then frowned.

Something’s missing.

It only took him a moment to figure out what, and when he did, he hurried downstairs to the music room, where he remembered seeing Danger last. She was there, sitting in a corner of the sofa, reading. “What’s going on, fox?” she asked, looking up.

“I can’t find my socks.”

“They’re on your feet.”

“Not these socks. The ones you made me. I know I took them with me, but they’re not in my bag now.”

“Maybe you dropped them somewhere,” Danger suggested. “On the bus, or in the cave.”

“Maybe.” Draco looked at her sideways and debated whether or not to try his innocent act. It probably wouldn’t work so soon after a major episode of rule-breaking, but there was always a chance.

“Do you want me to go and look in the cave?” asked Danger, one corner of her mouth twitching slightly.

Draco gave her a tiny smile. “I just feel bad about losing them after you went to all that work making them for me.”

Danger shook her head. “If I put butter in your mouth right now, it would freeze,” she said, standing up. “I’ll go and have a look.”

“Thank you.” Draco stepped back, giving her room to turn on the spot and vanish with a crack.

She's never been very good at that.

He hadn't been lying. He did want those socks back. But with Moony showering, and Padfoot and Letha out reinforcing the wards, this was also an opportunity.

After all, he couldn't allow a new school year to start without playing one big prank.

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Danger slipped into the cave and conjured a fireball above her head to light the place. It looked much as she recalled from the night before, and yes, there on the stone floor lay a pair of hand-knitted green and blue striped socks. She crossed to them and bent over to pick them up, but stopped as the light of her fire revealed something unusual about them.

What is that? It looks like little pellets of dirt.

She changed forms, took a cautious sniff, and sneezed hard. *Ugh. Something wasn't happy about these. Small animal of some kind. Rodent, I think. Mouse or mole or...*

She froze for a second, then started sniffing around the rest of the cave. Her own scent, and Remus', and Draco's, were all clear. But there were others. Two others. And the three scents she knew about were scarcely older than the two she had not.

An hour at most. Probably less. I can't tell unless I get a good comparison spot.

She continued around the perimeter of the cave and found a place, hand-height on the entrance, where two hands had rested. One had belonged to her husband. The other had not. And the one had been there barely ten minutes before the other.

The wolf-mind, working this out, was not perturbed by it. The part that was Danger Granger-Lupin wasn't so lucky, and lost its hold on the wolf, emerging into human form and sitting down with a thump.

Ten minutes. Dear God, if we hadn't found Harry when we did – if we'd delayed much more tracking Draco – if we'd been held up by anything down in Hogsmeade...

What is it? You're shaking so hard, I can feel it from here.

We were just in time last night, Remus. Here. Danger spread what she'd gleaned before him.

There was a pause, then a low-voiced curse. **I'm going to the Ministry as soon as I'm decent. You come home. Don't touch anything, they'll want to search the cave, and that whole area.**

On my way. Danger stood up, careful not to touch the place which had given her the information she sought, and left the cave for the cheerful, sunlit path, not quite so friendly now as it had been a moment ago.

Is someone watching me?

She carefully pulled her mind away from that and fixed it on her destination, wanting with all her being to be home in her Den with her Pack. Rising on her toes, she turned in place.

She was being squashed, pressed, sandwiched, flattened, constricted, crushed...

Impressive. Six in a row.

Danger appeared with a loud crack in the music room. **I can do better.**

I'm sure. Later, love. Sirius and Letha are on their way in. Brief them?

Yes, sir.

“At least they’re not showing any signs of decay,” Sirius said over his shoulder as he opened the back door and came inside.

“Why would they decay? They’re barely a month old.” Aletha followed him in.

“What looks like decay might be someone nibbling at them, testing them, trying to get them down.”

“They’re nowhere near the Den,” said Danger, getting the Blacks’ attention. “If you mean who I think you mean.”

“Who else?” asked Sirius. “And how do you know?”

“I was just up north again. There were signs and scent all over that cave. Malfoy and Wormtail were in there not ten minutes after we left.”

“Ten minutes?” repeated Aletha with a slight sound of strain in her voice.

Sirius shook his head. “I’ve always said your timing is perfect, Danger,” he said, “but this is ridiculous.”

xXxXx

Sirius waited in the Leaky Cauldron by the fireplace, Aletha on the other side. They weren’t taking any unnecessary chances here – the two of them had Apparated to the pub first, the cubs would follow by Floo, and then Remus and Danger would Apparate in, ensuring that the cubs were never left with fewer than two Pack-parents to defend them at any one time.

Maybe we are being paranoid. But better paranoid and alive than easy-going and dead. Or anything else.

Meghan was the first out of the fireplace, followed by Harry, then Draco, then Hermione. A

moment later, Danger materialized with a loud snap, causing several heads to turn. Remus appeared with a quiet pop and flashed Sirius a hand sign.

All quiet. Good.

At least they weren't attracting too much attention. Only one or two of the denizens of the pub were still looking at them. Still, one or two people openly staring could make even a grown wizard, otherwise quite sure of himself, highly uncomfortable, and Sirius saw with a feeling of sullen irritation that their eyes were lingering on Draco the longest.

We should have expected this. Hell, we did expect it. And there's not much we can do to avoid it. Bringing everyone else here and leaving him home wouldn't do – besides dividing us at a time we really can't afford division, it's unfair to Draco. He deserves as much normality as we can give him.

Sirius kept an eye on his cubs, chattering like any children of their age, as Remus opened the wall leading to Diagon Alley. They really had come a long way from where they'd started. He hoped their parents, wherever they were now, approved. *Minus Lucius, of course.*

But the cubs weren't quite like other children their age. Sirius watched with approval as their eyes roved through the crowds, seeking and finding places to run, places to get the wall at their backs, places where they could hide, and Floo hookups for a quick getaway. Even Meghan was sizing people up as they approached, and Sirius felt a brief moment of regret for his little girl, who had never been able to give the entire world the unmixed trust she naturally would have. Her whole life had been tainted by secrecy.

No, not tainted. Secrecy's touched her life, been part of it, but it hasn't hurt her any. And maybe if other children knew more of what she knows, there wouldn't be as many cases for that one squad of Aurors. That was one assignment he never wanted – to follow up on the reports of child abuse or neglect or other crimes against children, which were, thankfully, less frequent than they were in the Muggle world, but did sometimes happen.

Sirius glanced up, half-expecting to see a storm cloud hovering over him, raining on him. *Aren't I cheerful today. Enough of this. Time to enjoy myself. I won't have much more time with these four before they head off to school again.*

He slid up into the center of the cubs, sensing Aletha moving into the tail position he'd left, and pointed out a "SALE" sign at Gambol and Japes to Harry and Draco, getting exactly the response he'd hoped for – widened smiles, furtive looks at one another, and flickered hand signals, some of which Sirius couldn't interpret. It seemed the Pride had improved upon Marauder hand signs.

Good for them. Never let anyone else know all your secrets.

All the necessary chores were completed, buying robes and parchment and quills and books – the required book for Care of Magical Creatures was a little startling, as it seemed to be alive, and would bite anyone who came near it. The manager looked appalled when presented with three

students who all needed a copy.

“Three *Monster Book of Monsters*, coming right up,” he said resolutely, pulling on leather gloves and picking up a thick cane.

“Who assigned this?” asked Hermione, watching in fascination as the manager battled with the books, thwacking away with his cane, separating one from the herd and yanking it out of the cage, then sitting on it until it stopped struggling.

“Someone who thought you needed practice handling dangerous creatures,” said Remus, catching Sirius’ eye with a small smile. The Pack-adults all knew who was teaching Care of Magical Creatures this year. “Can I help you with that?” Remus added to the manager, who was attempting to Spellotape the book shut without getting bitten.

“I doubt it,” said the manager frankly, dodging a lunge by the book, “but if you care to try, go ahead...”

Remus stepped forward and seized the book, clamping it shut with both hands, then turned and presented it to Danger, who ran her hand firmly down the spine. The book shivered a little, then relaxed, as much as a stiff-bound book could, and lay quietly in Remus’ hands.

“They like to be stroked,” said Remus, returning the now quiescent book to the staring manager.

Two more *Monster Books* were lured over to the bars and stroked, then removed from the cage as quietly as any book in the store. The other books stopped tearing at each other and started sidling hopefully over to the bars, and the manager called up a pair of employees to stroke them all.

“Thank you,” he said fervently to Remus. “This will save us a lot of time.”

“Always happy to help.”

Three Transfiguration texts, three Charms texts, two for Arithmancy, and two for Ancient Runes finished the textbook shopping. Danger and Hermione were staring at the fiction section with identical wistful expressions. Sirius had to turn around hastily to avoid laughing in their faces.

“Why don’t we stay here,” suggested Remus blandly. “And you and Letha can take Meghan to get her wand, Sirius.”

“If you’re sure.”

“We should be all right. And you’ll know if we’re not.”

“True enough.”

xXxXx

Sirius had only been to Ollivanders twice before, once as an eleven-year-old to get his own wand, and once with James to buy a replacement (James had dropped his wand out of a Gringotts cart

while attempting to see if there was really a dragon at the end of a passageway). Both times, he had felt as though he were being called on the carpet. Mr. Ollivander seemed to know about everything he'd ever done and a few things he hadn't.

Aletha poked him, bringing him back from his reverie. "Good morning," said Mr. Ollivander, appearing around the corner of an aisle. "How may I help you today?"

Sirius looked at Aletha. *Go on*, her eyes said. He cleared his throat. "Meghan needs a wand," he said, trying to keep his voice from being unnecessarily loud.

"Meghan?" Mr. Ollivander looked slightly puzzled. "How odd. I was under the impression she wouldn't be starting school for another year."

"I'm not," said Meghan, sliding out from behind Aletha. "But I'm apprenticing to Madam Pomfrey at the hospital wing at Hogwarts, and I need a wand to learn some of the spells."

Good girl! I hadn't thought of that – of course, that's why she needs it, and it's not even illegal there, because she is at school, even if she's not officially a student yet...

"I see," said Mr. Ollivander, nodding slowly. "I do see. Very well, young lady, may I see your wand arm, please?" He pulled a long tape measure from his pocket and set it to measuring various parts of Meghan's body while he began collecting wands from the shelves. Sirius wondered what point there was in taking the measurements if he didn't look at them. Maybe he kept them on file so he could replace a wand more easily, or maybe the tape measure gave them to him as it took them.

"Let me see. Cherry wood and phoenix feather, seven and a half inches, pliable..."

Meghan tried half a dozen wands before a springy piece of ebony, eight and a half inches long, containing a unicorn tail hair, sprayed red and blue sparks across the shop, making her squeal with delight.

Mr. Ollivander beamed. "Lovely, lovely," he said, taking the wand back from Meghan and wrapping it up. "And something rather interesting. I don't suppose you'd recall it, Mr. Black, Mrs. Freeman-Black, but this is one of the wands I had your young ward Harry try out when he was here two years ago. Very interesting, that it should now choose to go to his sister."

"I'd just prefer to hear that there's nothing dodgy about the unicorn you got the tail hair from," said Sirius. "Or the people you sold other wands with this core to."

"No, nothing... dodgy," said Mr. Ollivander, fixing Sirius with his rather unnerving pale eyes. "I obtained four tail hairs from that particular unicorn. A lovely female, just into adulthood, quite graceful. Two of the wands I sold long ago, and the third I have not yet made. That particular hair is not ready to be used."

"Understandable," said Aletha. "Seven Galleons, then?"

The sale completed, the Blacks left the shop. “Not ready to be used?” said Sirius once they were on the street again. “What does that mean?”

“Oh, come on,” said Aletha. “You’ve told me yourself about writing something, then taking it out of that story because it doesn’t fit and putting it somewhere else where it does. This is no different.”

Sirius felt that somehow, it was, but refrained from saying so.

As they approached Flourish and Blotts, the manager Remus had assisted earlier came hurrying out the door. “Looking for the people you were with earlier?” he asked. “Brown-haired man and woman with two boys and a girl?”

“Yes, we are,” said Aletha, seemingly casual, but Sirius sensed that she’d tensed a bit at this, and he was on alert himself.

This might be a trap...

“They went over to the Magical Menagerie. They asked me to tell you.”

Or it might not. “Thank you,” said Sirius.

“Not at all. The least I can do, considering how much they’ve made my life easier.” The manager gestured to the window, where, instead of the cage which had been there earlier, three pretty young witches in Flourish and Blotts uniforms sat stroking copies of *The Monster Book of Monsters* .

“That’s one way to sell books,” said Sirius when they were well away from the store.

“What is?” asked Meghan.

“To show how to handle them,” said Aletha smoothly.

Nice one, Sirius signed to her behind Meghan’s back.

Someone has to take care of you, she signed back.

The door of the Magical Menagerie swung open. Sirius looked around. Harry and Draco were back in a corner, looking at a cage filled with ravens. Remus was observing the poisonous snails, and Danger was watching a white rabbit turn into a top hat and back again. Hermione –

Hermione was just turning away from the counter, beaming, her arms filled with orange fur. “There you are!” she said, hurrying over to Sirius and Aletha. “Look what I’ve got! Moony said I could, he’s an early birthday present. His name is Crookshanks.”

Sirius reached out gingerly and stroked the cat. He was immediately rewarded with a purr that resembled the engine on his motorbike. “Looks like he’s part kneazle,” he said, seeing that the

cat's tail ended in a lion-like tuft.

"And part Persian," Aletha put in, allowing Crookshanks to sniff her fingers. "Either that, or he had an argument with a brick wall and came out worst off."

Sirius couldn't deny that. The cat looked as if it had been dropped on its face several times as a kitten. Still, he liked cats, or it might be more accurate to say that he didn't mind them. He really had no strong feelings about them either way, as long as they didn't claw him or eat his food.

Remus joined them as Hermione and Meghan went to look at the fire-crab in the window. "I'm glad you're here," he said. "We need to have a quick conference."

"Something wrong?" Aletha asked as Danger drifted over as well.

"Not wrong. I just need a second opinion. Draco's asked for an advance on his pocket money so that he can buy an owl of his own. I see no real reason not to, unless you think we ought not to reward him so soon after last night."

"It's not a reward, exactly," said Sirius. "It's not like we're giving him the money above and beyond what he usually gets. And he'll have that much less to spend in Hogsmeade."

"Hogsmeade," said Danger, frowning. "That we will need to talk about. But later."

"Agreed," said Aletha. "On both points. All three, actually – that we need to talk about Hogsmeade, that it can wait until later, and that Draco's not getting anything special by this. He's old enough to understand that what he spends now, he can't later. I think it's fine."

"Second?" asked Remus. Sirius stuck up his hand. "All in favor?"

"Aye," said all four in chorus.

When they left the Magical Menagerie fifteen minutes later, Harry carried Meghan, Hermione Crookshanks, and Draco a male tawny owl in a cage.

"Why do I always get the old stuff?" asked Harry, hoisting Meghan a little higher on his back. "I got the old broomstick, I get the old owl..."

"You wanted to keep Hedwig," said Draco. "Just like you wanted to keep your Nimbus Two Thousand."

"That's not the point."

"What is the point, then?"

"The point is, I never get anything new. The next time I need something new, I want something really new. New and special."

“Like that?” asked Sirius, pointing to Quality Quidditch Supplies, where all four males of the Pack, even Remus, had spent ten minutes staring longingly at the newest broom on the market, the Firebolt, until the females physically removed them from the premises.

“Yes. The next time I get a broom, I want a Firebolt.”

“The next time you get a broom, you’ll probably be buying it for yourself,” said Aletha. “At which point you’ll be perfectly free to buy a Firebolt.”

“But what if I need a new broom while I’m in school?”

Remus laughed. “All right, Harry. If you need a new broom while you’re in school – and that’s need, not want, and destroying your old one on purpose doesn’t count – we’ll get you a Firebolt. Pack honor. Happy?”

“Very.” Harry grinned. “Now all I have to do is think up ways to smash my broomstick without it looking like it was me.”

xXxXx

Sirius closeted himself with Harry and Draco for nearly an hour after dinner. No one was ever told what went on in the bedroom during that time, but all three participants emerged looking vaguely disgusted and a little shocked. Harry was occasionally heard muttering, “I *really* didn’t need to know that.”

Sirius reported to the other Pack-adults that he had fulfilled his fatherly duty, and someone else could bloody well do it the next time. Danger and Aletha told him that wouldn’t be a problem.

xXxXx

“So,” said Remus at lunch the next day, the Pride safely out of the way in the boys’ bedroom upstairs, working on their Animagus spells. “Hogsmeade.”

“Yes.” Aletha sighed. “Damn it, they’re normal thirteen-year-olds. They love adventure, and anything new, and they hate being different. They’re going to want to go. But it’s not safe.”

“Not for any of them,” said Danger, peeling an apple. “You could get Harry or Draco to do just about anything if you threatened Hermione. Mind you, as soon as you weren’t actively threatening her, your life wouldn’t be worth a tin Knut. But it’s still a danger.”

“What about Ron, then?” said Sirius, arranging his crisps in a pattern around the edge of his plate. “I know Arthur and Molly mean to let him go. And you could get at Harry just as easily through Ron as through Hermione. Draco, too, for that matter – he’s not as close to Ron as Harry is, but he’s already proved that he has a very high sense of responsibility.”

“You know,” said Remus, turning from the window where he was looking out at the partly overcast day, “there might be a way to let the cubs go to Hogsmeade safely. If there was someone

with them. One of their teachers, perhaps.”

“Are you volunteering?” asked Aletha.

Remus looked disingenuous. “I suppose I am.”

Sirius threw a crisp at him. Remus shot a tiny fireball at it from his finger. It was ashes in an instant. Remus blew a not-so-imaginary puff of smoke off his finger and smiled smugly.

“Catch,” said Danger from the counter. She tossed a small piece of apple peel toward Remus, who caught it in his mouth.

“There’s something wrong with you,” said Sirius. “You’ll waste a perfectly good crisp burning it up, but apple skin, you’ll eat.”

“There’s nothing wrong with liking apple peel better than crisps.”

“Enough,” said Aletha. “Remus, are you sure you won’t mind escorting them around Hogsmeade?”

“I’m sure. They may mind, but if we explain that it’s be escorted or don’t go, I think they’ll come around.”

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Aurors had been unable to get anything from the cave other than what Danger had discovered herself – that Lucius Malfoy and Peter Pettigrew had both been there, and then left. Several searches of the area turned up nothing.

“Of course, that doesn’t mean anything,” Sirius told the other three adults late at night, after making certain the cubs were asleep. “They could still be hiding anywhere around there, just moving to avoid the searches.”

“Well, they won’t get onto Hogwarts grounds,” said Remus positively. “Dumbledore’s tightened up the wards until not even a rat could slip through. And I’ll put alarm spells on the secret passages myself. Nothing will come in through them without my knowing about it.”

“There’s something else you need to know about,” said Sirius darkly. “Some of the higher-ups think Hogwarts needs what they call one more layer of security.”

“Why don’t I like the sound of that?” asked Danger rhetorically.

“They want to put dementors around the school.”

“Dementors?” Aletha sounded as if she couldn’t believe her ears. “That’s ridiculous. Dumbledore wouldn’t allow dementors within a mile of the school.”

“He may not have a choice,” said Remus. “He’s the ultimate authority on school grounds, but past those gates, he doesn’t have anything. The Ministry can post dementors all around the grounds, and the only thing Dumbledore can do is protest it.”

“Well, I hope he does protest it,” said Danger. “Early, and often. And I hope they listen to him.”

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“You know, we’re going to have a hard time getting everyone into one compartment,” said Harry, surveying the space available aboard the Hogwarts Express. “We might have to split up.”

“Hmm.” Remus frowned. “Hold on a minute.” He turned and climbed off the train, weaving through students and parents until he got to Sirius. “Do you think that spell we put on that one compartment might still be active?” he asked.

“Spell... oh, yeah.” Sirius grinned. “Why don’t we have a look?”

The two Marauders walked up and down the train, tapping their wands idly against each doorframe. Sirius said hello to quite a lot of students, many of whom were disappointed he and Aletha hadn’t returned. He took the opportunity to introduce Remus, and usually added something like, “And he knows more about Defense than I do.”

“You don’t have to keep saying that,” said Remus between groups.

“Why not? It’s true.”

“You’re the Auror around here.”

Sirius snorted. “Being able to throw up a good block and pick people off at a hundred yards doesn’t mean I know a lot about Defense. You’re smarter than me, always have been, and you’ll make a better teacher. I needed Letha there to keep me from losing my temper when the kids got rude or distracted. You’ll do fine on your own.”

Remus didn’t know what to say. Fortunately, at that moment, Sirius tapped his wand twice against the corner of a doorframe and was rewarded with a two-toned chime. “Got it!”

“Excuse me, ladies,” said Remus, looking into the compartment, which contained some rather giggly second-year Hufflepuff girls. “I’m afraid we’re going to have to ask you to move. There’s a compartment a few cars down where you can go. We’ll move your luggage for you.”

The girls hurried out into the hall and followed Sirius, who was floating three trunks at once, all chattering at him.

“You were really good, Professor Black.”

“I was sad when you got Petrified.”

“Is it true our new teacher is a vampire?”

Remus nearly choked when he heard this.

“No, that’s not true,” said Sirius, setting down the trunks by the compartment Harry and Draco had provisionally claimed and waving them out. “Your new Defense teacher is Professor Lupin, and he’s standing right behind you.”

The girls turned as one to look at Remus, who made sure to pass through a large patch of sunlight coming through one of the windows as they did. “Hello,” he said, setting down the two trunks he was carrying. “I hope we’ll enjoy this year together.”

The girls might have answered, but Harry and Draco came out of the compartment at this moment, and Remus saw every one of the girls’ eyes go big and round before they started whispering to each other. Harry hoisted one end of his trunk in one hand, lifted Hedwig’s cage in the other, and set off down the car without a backward glance. Draco followed his brother, pulling his own trunk and carrying the owl he’d named Morpheus for its tendency to sleep all day long, his cheeks pinking up and an expression of grim endurance set on his face.

“I’ll go with the boys,” Remus said quietly to Sirius. “Send in the others when you see them, and bring the other trunks down when you have a minute?”

“Will do.”

Remus hurried after his Pack-sons and caught up with them two compartments before the special one. “It’s going to be like first year all over again, isn’t it?” asked Harry. “People pointing and whispering?”

“Probably.” Remus wished there was something else he could say, but he knew anything he tried to tell them at this point would just make matters worse.

“They’ll get tired of it,” said Draco with the hearty and confident tone he used when trying to convince himself of things. “They always do.”

“True.” Remus opened the door of the compartment and ushered the boys in. “Welcome to the Marauders’ special compartment,” he said, shutting the door.

“How is it special?” asked Harry, looking around with a slight frown.

Remus pointed his wand at the ceiling. “*Molesti sunt Dei,*” he said carefully, hoping he’d recalled the correct trigger phrase.

Harry’s mouth hung open and Draco stared as the compartment suddenly grew in several directions, becoming twice as wide and nearly half again as long as it had been.

“We didn’t care for being cramped,” said Remus, putting his wand away. “It took three years’ worth of train rides, but we managed to get these spells in place just in time for seventh year. And

now, you reap the fruits of our labor.”

“Wow,” Harry said.

Draco lay down on one of the benches. “I could get used to this,” he said, sliding his arms above his head. His fingertips just brushed the wall on one side as his toes touched it on the other.

Ron pulled the door open. “Mr. Padfoot said you were down here...” His voice trailed off as he surveyed the splendor of space before him. “I call window seat.”

“How’d you get it so big?” said Ginny from behind him, pulling her trunk in.

“Magic,” said Remus, helping her stow the trunk under one of the seats.

“I knew that. What kind?”

“Probably spells like Dad has on the car,” said Ron. “Right?”

“Basically. I should probably check to make sure they’re still functioning right, the last thing we need is for them to die halfway to Hogwarts and try to fit us all into the actual space there is here.” Remus stepped out into the corridor and started the process that would tell him about the state of the spells.

“’Scuse me,” said Draco, sliding past him. “Need the loo.”

“Me too,” said Harry, following him.

“Better now than later,” said Remus absently, then lost himself in his work.

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Danger jumped as the train whistled. “Bother, it’s getting late, I should get on board – go on, girls, on with you,” she said to Hermione and Meghan, who hugged Aletha once more each, then climbed aboard, Hermione carrying Crookshanks in his wicker basket. “Goodbye, Letha, best of luck with the program...”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine,” said Aletha, hugging her. “I passed the tests, didn’t I?”

“You certainly did. They’ll be lucky to get you. Write when you can.”

“I will. Take care of Meghan.”

“We will. Goodbye, Molly, I’ll see you at Christmas if not sooner.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do with myself without all these children around,” said Molly, shaking her head. “I might actually find some time to do things I enjoy. Heavens, what a strange thought!”

All three women laughed. The train whistled again.

“Have a good year, Danger,” called Molly as Danger leapt onto the train steps. “And write to me straight away if the twins make trouble for you, they won’t listen to a word Percy says, Head Boy or not...”

“I will!” Danger waved out the door until the train rounded the corner, blowing a kiss to Sirius as he jumped off at another door, then climbed the steps and went to find Remus and the Pride.

She opened the door to the next car and stared. A tall, skinny, blond boy was backed into the wall of the hallway, staring fearfully at Harry, who had his wand out and trained on the boy’s upturned nose. Draco stood beside Harry, looking as though he weren’t sure whether to be angry or ashamed. Harry was unabashedly furious. The strange boy looked scared out of his wits.

Danger cleared her throat. All three boys jumped. “Mr. Potter,” she said, giving Harry the most teacher-ish look she could conjure up on short notice. “Detention for threatening a fellow student.” *We’ll talk later*, she signed on seeing the rebellious look on Harry’s face. “Return to your compartment. Mr. Black, you as well.”

“Yes, Professor,” said Draco, and beat a hasty retreat down the car, Harry following more slowly, still looking mutinous.

“Just a moment, young man,” said Danger to the strange boy, who was also trying to sneak away. “What’s your name?”

“Smith. Zacharias Smith. Hufflepuff.”

Danger nodded. “Why did Mr. Potter have his wand out on you, Mr. Smith?”

“I don’t know, Professor.”

“Don’t you?”

“No. I don’t.” Smith’s tone was just shy of openly contemptuous. Clearly, he had decided she wasn’t anyone to respect.

“Very well. Pardon me.” Danger squeezed past the boy and continued down the car, conscious of his eyes on her back.

She opened the door to the compartment Remus had directed her to and blinked. “Well, this is an improvement,” she said, entering and sitting down. “I was wondering how we were all going to fit in, with ten of us.”

Harry looked as though he’d burst if he didn’t get to speak soon.

“Something wrong?” Remus asked him mildly, as Danger filled him in on the hallway incident in a quick thought transfer.

Harry made a few strangled noises before he was able to speak. “*He* deserves detention, not me!”

“Harry, please don’t,” said Draco. “Just drop it, it’s not important.”

“Hell yes, it’s important! You heard what he said!”

“So we’ll get him back for it. But we don’t have to tattle about it.”

“Telling your professors the truth hardly counts as tattling,” said Danger. “And I would like to know what I walked in on the end of.”

“We were coming back from the toilet,” said Harry, still looking murderous. “And we passed Smith in the hallway.”

Draco turned to look out the window, as though the passing countryside were the most interesting thing in the world.

“Draco bumped into him and said excuse me,” continued Harry, “and Smith said, ‘Excuse you for what? Going to let your dad in the castle so he can murder us all, Malfoy?’”

Hermione gasped. Ron snorted angrily. Ginny’s eyes narrowed with rage. Luna put down her copy of *The Quibbler*. “Where is he sitting?” she asked.

“Who, Smith?” asked Harry.

“Yes. Where is he sitting?”

“Why do you want to know?” asked Danger.

“Because I want to go hit him.”

“That’s not a good idea,” said Remus.

“He was rude. He needs to be hit.”

“No,” said Draco, turning back from the window. “Hitting him wouldn’t work right, Luna. He’d just get mad back at us. We need some way to get back at him without him knowing it was us. Maybe one of those creatures you were telling me about last week.”

“Which one?”

“The one that looks like a shell that you can hear the ocean in, but when you put it to your ear, it bites you and hangs on for three days, so you have to walk around everywhere with a shell stuck to your ear.”

“Oh, you mean a Nisiree. Yes, that would be funny, if we sent him one by owl post, and he put it up to his ear and it bit him...” Luna giggled. “He’d dance all around the Great Hall yelling. Nisiree

bites really hurt.”

“Or we could put itch-a-bod flowers in his bed,” suggested Neville, sitting down beside Luna. “Their petals make most people really itchy. They don’t bother me, though. And I know Professor Sprout has some in greenhouse four.”

“No, even better,” said Ron. “Stick them in his drawers. And I mean that both ways.”

“You’re mean,” said Hermione as the boys snickered.

“You didn’t know that?”

“Of course I knew it. Everyone knows it.”

“So why’d you say it, then?”

And they’re off, said Remus.

A friendly debate never hurt anyone.

I didn’t say it did. But what you ran across in the corridor... that does have potential to hurt.

True. If Smith thinks he can get away with that sort of thing...

I’ll have a word with Pomona when we get there. I don’t want people thinking they can insult Draco and get away with it. The last thing he needs is more trouble in his life.

Danger sighed. **And unfortunately, it’s the thing he’s most likely to get.**

The Pride eventually got tired of talking about ways to get back at Smith and moved into discussion of the upcoming year, pestering Remus and Danger with questions about what Defense Against the Dark Arts would be like and speculating on the contents of the other classes. The older five told Ginny and Luna, often in contradictory and garbled terms, about second year classes, and Meghan listened to everything carefully.

She is going to be the most prepared Hogwarts student there ever was, said Danger. **If they’d allow such a thing, she might even test out of a year and move up to second year classes her first year there...**

I doubt it. She’ll be busy enough working in the hospital wing. Now that she has a wand, Poppy’s going to be treating her as a full apprentice, even more so since she’ll be a student next year and won’t be able to spend all her time on Healing. I doubt she’ll have time to learn anything extra.

She can try.

The lunch cart came around at one o’clock. Crookshanks chased Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans

all over the floor of the compartment, amusing everyone immensely, and Morpheus and Hedwig woke up long enough to accept some crumbled Cauldron Cake before going back to sleep. Neville had some flies in a little package for Trevor.

Games of wizard chess, Go Fish, and Exploding Snap came out as the afternoon went on. Danger dug a novel and her knitting out of her bag and charmed the book to float in the air in front of her and turn the page when she told it to, so that she could read and knit at the same time. Remus had his quill out and was making notes on a long scroll, frowning thoughtfully between scribbling things down on it.

It had been raining for some time when the train began to slow down. Hermione dropped her Go Fish cards. “Quick, everyone get your robes on! We must have lost track of time, we’re nearly there!”

“Hold on a moment,” said Remus, raising a hand. “No one panic.” He flicked a spell into place to hold the two owls’ cages on the upper luggage rack just as the train stopped with a jerk which would otherwise have tumbled them out onto Harry and Ron’s heads.

“Thanks for that,” said Ron, looking up at Hedwig’s cage, leaning precariously against the bonds of the spell.

“Anytime,” said Remus.

Ginny, closest to the door, got up and peered out. “I don’t see anything unusual,” she said. “Just a lot of people looking around – oh!”

The lights had just gone out.

“Everyone stay put,” ordered Danger. “We don’t need you tripping over each other’s feet.”

She felt an odd sensation, akin to having cold water drip down the back of her neck. Remus had just had a realization he didn’t like. **What is it?**

I think I know what may be going on here.

What?

I’ll tell you in a minute.

Danger growled under her breath as Remus conjured a handful of flames, lighting the compartment. Ginny was back in her seat, looking pale and worried, as did everyone.

The door of the compartment slid open. Crookshanks backed away from it, hissing. Danger looked and felt her stomach turn over. A tall, hooded figure, all in black, with its hand still on the doorframe – a hand which looked slimy and grey, like something which had decayed underwater...

A wave of chill swept over her, and darkness obliterated the light of Remus’ fire. She heard faint

cries behind her, but they were overridden by a sudden scream, a scream she could not only hear but feel, because it was her own voice screaming, her own pain and anger and disbelief that her world could have been so suddenly ended, swept away with no warning and no regard for her...

Danger!

No, she whispered, ignoring the voice. Mum, Dad, no... please, not them, they can't be dead... why not me? I'm not important, no one needs me that much...

That's not true, said the voice firmly. I need you. Come back.

Come back? I wanted my mum and dad to come back...

I know you did, but they couldn't. You can. You have cubs of your own now. They need you. I need you, to help them so I can send this thing away. Come back now.

You'll send it away?

If you help me. I need you to come back first. Then I can send it away.

A spot of light appeared in the darkness surrounding her, light which she hurried toward. Fire, it was the light of a fire, strong and bright, and as she approached it, she felt an answering burning in her own soul –

And suddenly she was in a dark and cold train compartment again. **I'm back**, she told Remus.

Good. Remus had his wand out and was facing down the dementor. **Take care of them. I need all my attention to get a good Patronus.**

Danger conjured a handful of flames of her own and turned to the Pride.

Harry was lying on the floor, glasses askew. He seemed to have fainted. Meghan was on Neville's lap, Ginny and Hermione clinging to Ron, one on each side. Luna was leaning back against the seat, eyes shut. Draco was pressed into the corner, his eyes wide in terror and just that bit unfocused which made Danger think he wasn't seeing the compartment.

I might get through to him. I doubt I could help Harry at the moment. We'll deal with him when this thing goes away.

She stood up and crossed to Draco, pulling him to his feet. He whimpered but didn't fight her. "Hush, little fox," she whispered, sending the flames to hover over their heads so that she had both arms free to embrace him. "Everything is all right now. Come back to me. Whatever you're seeing, it's not real. It's not real."

Draco shuddered all over and stared at her. "Are you real?"

"As real as you are," Danger told him, stroking his hair out of his eyes. The compartment was

beginning to warm up again, and the unreasoning panic in the back of her mind was easing. “As real as you are.”

Draco hugged her hard and held on. “Was that a dementor?”

“Yes. It was. But now it’s gone. Will you be all right?”

“I don’t know. I think so.” Draco looked around. “Luna!” He let go of Danger and shook the blonde girl urgently. “Luna, wake up!”

“I’m awake,” said Luna faintly. “Don’t bother me. I’m listening.”

Thus freed, Danger glanced around. Neville was holding tightly to Meghan, his eyes squeezed shut. It looked like he was concentrating hard on something. Ron, Ginny, and Hermione were all very pale and shivering, but seemed to be comforting one another sufficiently. That left Harry.

Danger knelt beside him and touched his hand. It was cold, as though he’d been outdoors without a cloak or gloves, and his face was damp with sweat. Danger pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and began to wipe his face, humming as she did. It was a melody she’d learned from Aletha, one of her Pack-sister’s original compositions, written for a tiny boy with his father’s hair and his mother’s eyes. Aletha had sung it to Harry the night Danger and Remus stole him from the Dursleys, and many times since then.

If he can hear me, he’ll know it’s safe to come back.

Harry’s breath caught in his throat, and he moaned quietly. “How is he?” asked Remus, looking over Danger’s shoulder.

“I think he’s coming around.” Danger shook Harry gently by the shoulder. “Harry, wake up. It’s all right.”

The train began to move again with a jerk as the lights came back on. Hermione let go of Ron as if he were red-hot and scooted hastily down the seat. Crookshanks leapt up beside her and into her lap, where he began to purr so loudly Danger could hear it across the compartment. Neville peeled Meghan off his shoulder, revealing a large wet patch where her face had been. Luna opened her eyes and blinked several times, looking more owlish than ever.

Remus pulled the trunk he and Danger shared out from under the seat and opened it, digging around in it until he found two or three large bars of chocolate. “Here,” he said, handing them to Ginny, who was closest. “Everyone gets some. I’ll be right back.” He headed out of the compartment and up the corridor.

Ginny began snapping the chocolate into pieces and handing it around. Danger shook Harry again. “Wake up, Harry,” she said. “Come on, time to get up.” She submitted to a slightly evil urge. “You’re going to be late for Quidditch practice.”

Harry’s eyelids shot open. Ron gave a shaky chuckle, and two or three other people managed weak

grins.

Harry looked around the compartment, slowly pushing himself up to a sitting position with trembling hands. “That was a dementor,” he said. “Wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Danger took a piece of chocolate from Ginny and handed it to Harry. “Eat that.”

Harry stared at it a moment as though he’d forgotten how to eat, then lifted it to his mouth and took a bite. Danger took a piece for herself, and sucked on the lump she bit off rather than chewing it, savoring the rich, sweet flavor and the soft, creamy texture.

“You do need to get changed now, everyone,” she said as Remus murmured information into the back of her mind. “We’ll be there in ten minutes. Is everyone all right?”

“Define your terms,” muttered Draco.

“Will everyone be able to walk to the carriages, endure a ride to the school, pay at least nominal attention to the Sorting, eat supper, listen to announcements, and get to bed without falling over on the way there?”

Danger’s dry recitation of what they’d be required to do elicited a few more wobbly smiles and even a hesitant laugh or two. Harry pulled himself up onto the seat with Ron’s help, took another bite of his chocolate, and looked around the compartment, meeting everyone’s eyes before looking back at Danger. “I think we can do that,” he said.

“Excellent.”

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 6: Feasts, Fights, and Feathers (Year 3)

Chapter 6: Feasts, Fights, and Feathers

Thestral-drawn carriages bumped their way towards the school, each with a cargo of students on board. Harry leaned back against the cushioned seat, his eyes shut, trying not to think about what he'd heard on the train. He knew that dementors forced people to relive their worst memories. What he didn't know was how far back those memories went. Could he really have heard...

No. I don't want to think about it.

Another reason to have his eyes shut was so that he didn't have to look at the rest of the Pride, at least the half of it crammed into the carriage with him. He was certain that Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were all looking at him, and that the only thing keeping them from asking him questions was the fact that he was assiduously ignoring them.

Finally, when he couldn't stand the sounds of whispering and tapping any longer, he opened one eye just a slit. Hermione and Ginny had their heads together and were poring over a book Hermione had produced from inside her cloak. Ron was looking at the opposite wall of the carriage, over the girls' heads, and drumming his hands on his knees in a complicated rhythm cadence Harry thought he recognized, but wasn't sure.

Feeling relieved, Harry shifted to look out the window. The carriage was coming up the road outside Hogwarts now, he could see the stone gateposts –

And the black-hooded dementors standing guard, one on either side of the gate. Harry shut his eyes again quickly and tried to think of something happy, anything to combat the sick chill that was starting to build in his stomach.

“Dinner,” he heard Ron muttering. “We'll have dinner when we get to the castle. Chops and potatoes and ham and chicken and carrots and peas...”

“And then pudding,” Ginny answered from across the carriage. “I want ice cream and chocolate cake.”

“Apple pie for me,” said Hermione. “And hot spiced pumpkin juice to go with it.”

The sick feeling was ebbing, whether from the carriage passing the dementors or from his friends' chatter Harry couldn't tell. He was grateful to them twice over, though, for distracting him without making it too obvious what they were doing. “I hope they have shepherd's pie,” he said, opening his eyes. “And pumpkin tart after. Did anyone see how many first years there are this year?”

“Didn't look like too many,” said Ron. “Maybe the Sorting'll go fast. Hope it does, I'm starving.”

“You’re always starving,” said Hermione. “Anyone would think your mum never feeds you.”

Ginny looked over at Harry and rolled her eyes. Harry shrugged slightly and offered her a small smile as Ron and Hermione continued to bicker.

Finally the carriage rolled to a stop in front of the great stone steps of Hogwarts castle, and the occupants of the carriage got out. Ron was about to go up the steps when Hermione snagged a fold of his cloak. “Wait for the others,” she hissed at him.

The next carriage rumbled up stopped, and Meghan leapt out, followed by Luna. Neville climbed down and offered Draco his hand, but the blond boy waved it away politely, sliding out of the coach without assistance. Draco’s face was still paler than usual, Harry saw, and he stood still a moment before stepping away from the carriage, which moved hastily away when he was clear of it.

“Hello, Harry,” said an excited voice beside him. Harry turned.

“Hello, Colin,” he said to a small Gryffindor second year, who was dancing up and down in place.

“Did you see the dementor, Harry?” asked Colin breathlessly. “It came right into our compartment – one of the girls screamed, and I felt cold and sick all over – did it come into your compartment?”

“Yes,” said Harry as Moony and Danger climbed out of their carriage, which had been next in line. “But Professor Lupin chased it out.”

“Who’s Professor Lupin?”

“I’m Professor Lupin,” said Moony, stepping up beside Harry. “I’ll be teaching Defense this year. You must be Colin Creevey, Harry’s told me about you.”

Colin’s eyes widened even more than usual at the thought that Harry Potter had told someone about him. “Really, sir? He – he did?”

“Inside,” muttered Danger, shooing the Pride in front of her. “Come on, the sooner we’re in the sooner you lot can sit down.”

Sitting down sounded good to Harry. He hadn’t realized his knees were still wobbly. He climbed the stairs as quickly as he could so as not to make it obvious to anyone that he didn’t feel too well, then followed the crowd of students into the Great Hall and found seats along the Gryffindor table for himself, Ron, Neville, and Draco – the girls had split off and were sliding into places along the other side of the long House table.

“You all right now?” Draco asked Harry under the noise of several hundred students reunited after two months of separation.

“Fine. You?”

“I’ll manage.”

“Oi, Harry!” called Seamus Finnegan from down the table. “A dementor come in your compartment at all?”

“Yeah,” Harry called back. “Yours?”

Seamus nodded. “Nasty things,” he said with conviction. “What’re they doing here, anyway? What would Lucius Malfoy want at Hogwarts?”

“Who knows,” said Harry with as careless a shrug as he could manage on short notice. “How’s your summer?”

“Fine. Yours?”

“Not too bad. We had a lot of fun playing capture-the-flag and team sneak attacks and things like that.”

“All right for some,” said Seamus, making a face. “I’m the only wizard for miles where I live, and Mum won’t let me Floo by myself, so I can’t go visiting unless she comes along.”

Harry made a sympathetic noise and would have replied, but Ron poked him. “First years,” he said under his breath.

Professor McGonagall led a line of white-faced, slightly damp eleven-year-olds up the center aisle of the Great Hall. Harry felt a little sorry for them – why was Sorting such a big mystery, anyway, he wondered? Maybe it was just that it was a tradition to keep it mysterious. But they wouldn’t be scared too much longer.

Professor McGonagall produced stool and Sorting Hat, set them down in front of the first years, and stepped away. Harry grinned to see the first years’ open mouths as the Hat opened its own mouth, or rip, and began to sing.

Well, I declare! Upon my soul!

(If soul a hat can own.)

Each year I sit upon my stool

Like king upon his throne,

And welcome into Hogwarts School

A crop of students new,

And every year those students have

The options facing you.

Will you end up in Hufflepuff,

Where workers all belong,

And loyal hearts and true are sent

When finished is my song?

Perhaps you'll be a Gryffindor,

And wander in the land,

Impressing all and charming some

With brave deeds of your hand.

Or if you love to think and ponder

Rather than to roam,

Then you would rather Ravenclaw

Became your school years' home.

But if you think in crooked paths

And aim for power high,

Then Slytherin is quite the place,

So give it now a try.

I listen well to what you say,

And what you leave unsaid,

So I shall Sort you rightly here;

There is no need for dread.

You must advance and try me on,

So summon up your heart –

For all of you must Sorted be

Before the feast can start!

Even the first years laughed at this, and joined in the applause offered by the rest of the school. Professor McGonagall stepped forward with her list and began to read names. Harry watched with half his attention, applauding when a new Gryffindor was chosen, joining Ron in surreptitious boos every time the Hat shouted “SLYTHERIN!”

When the Sorting was finished and Professor McGonagall had removed the Hat and the stool, Professor Dumbledore stood up, gaining everyone’s attention. “A new year at Hogwarts,” he said. “A new crop of students, a few new faces here at the High Table, and one important and quite serious announcement which I beg your indulgence to hear before the feast begins.”

“He never does announcements before the feast,” whispered Hermione. “What’s going on?”

“As you are all by now aware, Hogwarts is at the moment being guarded by dementors, who normally guard the prison of Azkaban but some of whom have been asked to come here by the Ministry of Magic. All entrances and exits of Hogwarts grounds are being watched, and I wish to make it entirely clear that no student is to leave these grounds for any reason without permission. Dementors are not fooled by common tricks or disguises, or even uncommon ones such as Invisibility Cloaks, and they will not heed excuses, no matter how clever.”

“I wonder who he’s talking to?” murmured Draco, his eyes lingering on Fred and George.

“I would be loath to have to inform any of your families that you ran afoul of a dementor. I will, of course, be relying on the prefects, the Head Boy and Girl, and the teachers to help protect you, but you will defend yourselves best by staying within the school and grounds, where dementors are not permitted to come. If any students are found straying too close to the dementors, punishments for the survivors will be quite severe.”

Harry saw Ron gulp. He wasn’t surprised. Dumbledore didn’t usually exaggerate.

“Now, some happier news,” said Dumbledore after a moment to allow his words to sink in. “Two new teachers have joined us this year, and one whom you all know but will be seeing in a different place. First, Professor Remus Lupin, who will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

Moony bowed in acknowledgement of the polite applause.

“Professor Gertrude Granger-Lupin, an adjunct teacher of Muggle Studies.”

Danger inclined her head.

“And finally, I am sorry to report that our Care of Magical Creatures teacher, Professor Kettleburn, tendered his retirement over the summer. In his place, however, I am delighted to announce the appointment of our own Rubeus Hagrid.”

Hermione and Meghan squealed together as the Great Hall, the Gryffindor table more than any other, exploded into applause. “That explains the biting book!” shouted Ron, laughing and

pumping his fist in the air. Harry stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly, when he could stop grinning long enough to do it.

Hagrid was bright red under his whiskers, staring at the table but unable to completely hide his huge grin. Danger, sitting next to him, passed him a handkerchief, which looked absurdly small in his hand. He wiped his eyes with it as the clapping died down, then offered it back to her, but she refused, telling him to keep it, and no wonder, Harry thought. It was completely saturated.

“It is always a pleasure to hear enthusiasm,” said Dumbledore when the Hall was quiet again. “So in order to hear it again, I say – let us eat!”

There was another round of applause, this one brief, as people needed their hands for other things than clapping, like serving themselves and wielding knives and forks. It seemed exposure to a dementor, among other things, made people hungry afterwards.

“It uses up a lot of energy to be scared,” said Hermione when Harry pointed this out. “Your body gets ready to run away or fight whatever it is that’s scaring you.”

“Ron must be scared all the time, then,” quipped Draco, prompting Ron to fling a forkful of sweet potato at him. Draco retaliated with a forkful of his mashed potatoes, and the rest of the Pride was just about to join in when a small burst of flame in the center of the table startled them all.

Guiltily, Harry put down a spoonful of peas and looked up at the High Table. Danger was staring at them, and when she saw she had their attention, shook her head firmly. Then she displayed a hand-sign, one which made Harry chuckle.

Later.

“Is she saying we can have a food fight later?” asked Meghan.

“I think so,” said Ginny. “Maybe in private.”

“Den-night, anyone?” said Ron, wiping mashed potato off his sleeve. “Food fight in the kitchen?”

“Only if you convince the house-elves to clean it up,” said Harry. “Or do it yourselves.”

“Yourselves?” repeated Draco. “As if you’re not going to be part of it.”

“Well, it wasn’t my idea, and it’s my kitchen.”

“Your kitchen? Since when?”

“Since I’m the only one who uses it.”

“You are not.”

“Am too, Mr. I-burned-a-salad.”

“That was an accident! And croutons are supposed to be crunchy!”

“Yes, but setting them on fire with your wand wasn’t the best way to get them crunchy, was it?” said Hermione.

“I didn’t mean to set them on fire! I just wanted to heat them up!”

At last, dessert faded from the golden plates and Dumbledore announced bedtime. The Pride hurried up to the High Table to congratulate Hagrid on his new appointment.

“I’ll be relyin’ on Meghan ter patch me up if I make any mistakes,” he said, beaming at them all. “An’ I’ve got yeh older ones – all of yeh – in my firs’ class! Monday after lunch, don’ be late!”

“Don’t worry, we won’t,” said Harry. “We’ll see you then, Professor.”

Hagrid nodded hard, dabbing at his eyes with Danger’s handkerchief. Danger herself and Professor Sprout had vanished through a side door with Zacharias Smith in tow. Moony was talking with Professor Snape, or listening to him, rather –

And then suddenly Professor Snape was staggering back, clutching his jaw, and Moony was shaking out his hand as though he’d punched something hard. Which he had.

“He just *hit* him,” whispered Hermione incredulously. “Moony just *hit* Snape!”

Snape appeared more than ready to return the favor, but Dumbledore stepped between the two wizards and held up his hand. “Gentlemen, please,” he said politely. “I think we should discuss this in my office. Come with me.”

Snape and Moony followed him out of the Great Hall, each glowering at the other.

Ron shook his head. “It’s not fair,” he said. “I’ve always wanted to do that.”

xXxXx

“My father works at the *Daily Prophet*,” admitted Zacharias Smith, squirming under Professor Sprout’s eye. “They got a letter there saying that Draco Black had run away. I thought maybe he’d gone to try to find his father, especially because the letter made a big point of his being born Draco Malfoy.”

“That letter was a fake,” said Danger, clenching her teeth between sentences. “The *Prophet* was informed of that.”

“It’s easy for someone to say it’s a fake,” said Smith sullenly. “Why wouldn’t he want to go find his father?”

“Whether he wanted to or not, whether it was a fake or not, does not excuse what you said in that hallway, Smith,” said Professor Sprout sternly. “You admit that Professor Granger-Lupin has it

correct?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said Smith after a poisonous glance at the parchment Professor Sprout held out for his perusal and another at Danger herself. “I said that.”

“Three days’ detention,” said Professor Sprout. “And you’re to apologize to Black in my presence within the week.”

“What?” Smith looked astonished. “Apologize?”

“Yes, apologize. You slandered another student, and he deserves an apology from you. I’m ashamed of you, Smith. Maybe Severus encourages his students to insult their fellows, but I never have. You’re dismissed, and I’ll not have you whining that you were unfairly treated.”

Smith slunk out of the office, glowering.

“Thank you,” said Danger. “Of course, I expected nothing less from the head of Hufflepuff House. Fairness and justice is what you do best.”

“Go along with you, before you turn my head, child,” chided Professor Sprout gently, but she was smiling. “I recall that madcap husband of yours when he was a boy, and if you’re any right match for him, we’re in for a wilder year even than last.”

“We’ll try.” Danger winked at her and slipped out of the Herbology teacher’s office, reopening her mental connection with Remus, which she had closed so as not to bother him with her troubled emotions while she watched Sprout deal with Smith.

She was amazed to find his emotions in as much or more of a tangle than her own had been. **What happened to you?**

None of your business, said Remus brusquely.

It’s not?

No. It’s not. The connection closed as if he’d slammed a door in her face.

Well, I like that. Danger found her temper rising again. *None of my business? It’s not as if I shut you out of what I do! And what do you think I’m going to do, shout at you instead of listening?*

“Professor?” said a voice beside her.

She blinked. “Oh, Ginny. Hello.”

“You wouldn’t know why Professor Lupin punched Professor Snape, would you?”

What? “I’m sorry?”

The rest of the Pride seemed to appear out of the shadows of the entrance hall. “It’s true,” said Hermione. “He just hit him. They were talking – well, Professor Snape was talking, and Moony, I mean Professor Lupin, was listening – and then all of a sudden Professor Lupin just hit him.”

Danger shook her head slowly, confused. *What in the world could Snape have said to him to make him lose his temper like that?*

“Professor?”

Danger came out of her momentary trance, recalling that the Pride was still gathered around her. “Oh, I’m sorry. No, I don’t know what happened. I’m sure the gossip chain will have it soon. To bed with you now, and no sneaking around where everyone can see you.”

The Pride shared secret grins. “Yes, ma’am,” said Harry. He made a signal to Neville, then turned and led the way up the stairs. The rest of the Pride followed, and as Danger watched them, they seemed to blur under her eyes, becoming, if not entirely invisible, hard to see. When she looked away, then tried to look back at the place she knew they should be, her eyes slid away from them, refusing to acknowledge that they were there.

She chuckled. *Literalists. At least they won’t get in trouble for being out of bed.*

And speaking of bed...

May I ask where you are? she sent flatly, keeping her emotions out of it as much as she could.

I’m on my way to the Defense teacher’s quarters. The response was as dry and bland as her query had been. **You?**

In the entrance hall, on my way up.

Fine. The connection closed abruptly once more.

Oh, Remus. Why did you do it?

She wasn’t quite sure yet how to feel. It depended on how much more of their enemy Snape became after this, and to some degree on why Remus had done it.

But just being provoked isn’t enough. Not for an adult wizard, not in public, and not when he’s supposed to be your colleague. And especially not for a teacher. We have to set a good example, and brawling in public does not count!

By the time she reached her new quarters, her emotional state had settled into annoyance verging on anger. *Our first day – no, not even our first day – and you have to go and pull a stunt like this! Keep this up, and I’ll start thinking Sirius isn’t the only one with bone where his brains ought to be!*

The door opened before she could touch it. “Don’t even start,” Remus warned her, stepping back

to let her in, his eyes icy blue with only the barest touch of brown.

“Why not?”

“Because I already know what you feel about this.”

“Don’t start telling me I’m broadcasting again. I closed off against you when you did against me.”

“I’m sure you did. But even if I can’t *hear* you, I can *feel* you, and you’re mad at me, aren’t you? Angry because I hit Snivellus?”

Danger stared at her husband. He never called Snape by the disrespectful nickname James Potter and Sirius had used in their Hogwarts days. “What in the world is wrong with you?”

“Harry is not the only one who can be pushed too far.” Remus whirled and shot a ball of flame into the fireplace. “Would you care to hear what exactly put me over the edge?” The wood in the fireplace was crackling as though it had been burning for hours.

“Go ahead,” said Danger, seating herself and preparing to calm a firestorm, should Remus lose his temper completely.

“He inquired how I planned to keep our children safe from the many threats in the world. He reminded me that Lucius Malfoy would likely want Draco, as he put it, ‘undamaged.’ And he suggested that if I were to ‘damage’ him sufficiently, Lucius would leave him alone.”

“What type of damage did he suggest?” Danger suspected she knew, but she wanted to hear Remus say it.

“Do I really need to tell you that?” Another fireball followed the first, incinerating the wood entirely and leaving a pile of ash. “He suggested that I *bite* Draco. He *dared* to suggest that it would be the truly fatherly thing to do, to curse my own son and ruin his life as mine was ruined! I should have thrown him through the wall, not just hit him!”

“I’m glad you didn’t!” Danger was on her feet, appalled. “I can’t believe I’m hearing you right! I thought you were beyond this sort of thing, Remus! You know perfectly well Snape spews poison as easily as he breathes – I would have thought you’d laugh it off, or turn it around on him to make him look like the idiot he is! You can’t go around hitting everyone who says something rude to you!”

“Laugh it off? Let him say that to my face? What kind of man do you think I am?”

“A civilized one, I’d thought!”

“Civilized?” Remus made a sound which might have been a laugh, if it hadn’t been so angry. “Tame, you mean. Coming to your call, submitting to your every whim. No, thank you. You may be in it more than I’d like, but I do still have a mind of my own! I’m not so much of a tame werewolf as all that!”

Danger stared at him, open-mouthed. “How in the *world* did you come up with that? I’ve never wanted you to be like that! I was trying to be helpful, and you’ve taken everything I said the wrong way! Well, fine, then! If you hate me that much, I’ll just take myself out of your sight!”

“You do that!”

“Fine!” Danger crossed the room in three strides to the entrance to the private quarters, then whirled for a parting shot. “And *you* can sleep on the couch!”

She slammed the door shut behind her.

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Remus threw himself down on the couch, his anger having ceased to blaze with the slam of the door, but now smoldering.

That was incredibly stupid of me. Alienating her the night before a full moon. I don’t think she would refuse to come to me, but she could certainly keep me in suspense about it.

Why are we suddenly fighting so much? We survived an entire year at home together, without anyone else around, and we almost never fought then. Maybe it’s just the stress that’s making her so unreasonable.

I’ll leave her alone for tonight. She’ll come around eventually. And if she doesn’t...

Well, there’s always the Shrieking Shack.

Suddenly exhausted, he drew his wand and put the lights out with it. *Enough. I need sleep. Maybe tomorrow will be more survivable.*

xXxXx

The Lupins’ coolness towards one another the next morning at breakfast was notable. Severus’ open disdain for them both, of course, was nothing new, but it was unusual to see the two of them acknowledging each other with polite nods and nothing more. Dumbledore hoped they had not fought, but had to admit they probably had.

I wish I had not had to speak to Remus in that way. But I cannot have teachers fighting physically, nor publicly. I hope he knows that I also had a sharp word with Severus, letting him know that sort of language is entirely unacceptable.

And I hope I have not done true damage, considering what happens tonight.

He sighed, turning his mind away from such considerations. *I do what I must, to keep the school running smoothly. If that involves angering a man whom, in other circumstances, I am proud to consider a friend, so be it. Here, he is my subordinate and Severus’ colleague, and we must all abide by the rules.*

The usual flock of morning post owls soared into the Great Hall as Dumbledore took another piece of toast.

If there is one thing my long life has taught me, it is that all will be well in time.

Or, if not well, at least tolerable.

xXxXx

He wished he could put off opening the letter, but the eagle owl was sitting on the table eyeing him, and he knew it would peck him if he didn't open it right away.

Sullenly, he ripped the seal off the parchment.

I will accept no quibbles. You are of an age to understand that lying is sometimes necessary. Do as you are told, or find yourself a new name and family.

Your instructions, then, are to do what you can to stir up trouble for him. The worse people think of him, the better. I would prefer that you not break laws, but if you must, do so quietly.

xXxXx

"How was Divination?" Harry asked Ron as the red-haired boy slid into the seat Hermione had saved for him.

Ron groaned. "Awful. Your parents were right, the teacher's a freak. She wears these ugly specs that make her eyes look ten times bigger than they should be, and enough shawls for fifteen grandmothers, and she spent the whole class talking about how she can tell when people are going to die, and she feels the vibrations of death over the castle, enough for two people, ones we all know but not anyone present..."

"She said something about hair of raven and flax," said Neville, turning around in his seat the row ahead. "And tragedy of lives blighted so young."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Three guesses and the first two don't count."

"People are so stupid," said Hermione witheringly. "Everyone knows Divination's a load of rubbish."

"Not all of it," put in Draco. "There are some true Seers. Like Danger, with her dreams."

"Yes, but she doesn't ask for them. They just happen. I don't think anyone can just sit down and say, 'I want to see what's going to happen next,' and have it actually work."

"Right now I know what's going to happen next," said Ron.

"You do not."

“Do so. McGonagall’s about to yell at us.”

“If we may begin,” said Professor McGonagall sternly from the front of the classroom.

Hermione snorted but refrained from further comment.

The lesson that day, to the Pride’s amusement, was Animagi. McGonagall gave them a look warning them not to show any superior knowledge on the subject, so they held their comments to a minimum, but it was hard, especially when Lavender Brown kept mispronouncing it “Ani-maggie.”

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“Did Professor Granger-Lupin and Professor Lupin have a fight?” asked Luna at lunch, looking at the High Table.

“They don’t usually fight,” said Hermione. “But they are being rather cold to each other. Maybe they just had a disagreement.”

“Disagreement,” said Draco, as though he were reading the dictionary. “Noun. Hermione Granger-Lupin-ese for fight. See also altercation, discussion, debate.”

Hermione hit him with her Arithmancy book.

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After lunch, they started down to Hagrid’s. “I wonder what magical creatures we’ll start with,” said Hermione as they walked. “Maybe nifflers or mokes, they’re native to Britain, and not too difficult to handle. Or knarls, or crups or kneazles.”

“You don’t need lessons on how to handle a kneazle,” said Harry. “You do just fine with Crookshanks.”

“He’s not a kneazle, though. He can’t be. He’s built wrong for it.”

“But he looks a little like one,” said Ron. “And he seems smarter than just a cat. Maybe he’s half kneazle.”

Draco, looking ahead, gave a loud groan. “Hell.”

The others looked where he was pointing and groaned themselves. “Slytherins,” said Neville. “Why did it have to be Slytherins?”

“Who knows,” said Harry. “Don’t bother them, and they won’t bother us.”

“And if you believe that, I’ve got a self-spelling wand to sell you,” muttered Ron.

Hagrid was waiting outside his house for the class, Fang beside him, checking off names on a parchment scroll with a quill as long as Harry's arm. "Right then!" he called out as the Pride approached, rolling up the scroll. "Everyone's here, so let's get a move on! Follow me!"

He led them around the edge of the Forest to an empty paddock built of stone. "Now, then, yeh'll need ter open yer books – yeh all know ter stroke 'em?"

Most of the class nodded. There were a few blank faces, but two of them were Crabbe and Goyle. *And they always look blank.* Harry bit down on a snicker.

"Right, well, those who know, yeh show those who don't. Find page two hundred eighty-three, an' I'll go an' get the magical creatures we'll be studyin' today." Hagrid strode off into the Forest.

Page two hundred eighty-three, when found, proved to be none of the creatures Hermione had listed before class. Harry stared at the careful ink drawing of a creature with the back half of a horse and the front half of an eagle, which pranced and reared on the page.

"Hippogriffs?" said Draco, reading a few lines rapidly. "But they're really hard to handle – it says here only experts should try it unless they're already tame..."

"So maybe these are already tame," suggested Neville in a voice which shook a little. "Maybe they're used to people."

"If they were used to people, Hagrid probably wouldn't have them on chains like that," said Ron in a tone of dread.

Everyone turned to look. The chains Hagrid held in his hand were indeed stout, and the leather collars around the hippogriffs' necks sturdy, but the hippogriffs themselves were what attracted the eye. Their feathers and fur coats were the same color all over, and seemed to be based more on horse coloration than eagle. Their talons and beaks looked quite deadly, and Harry knew from experience that wings that size could strike hard if they needed to. He'd seen Letha bowl Padfoot over more than once, not to mention the night she'd battered down the Head of the Auror Office, Rufus Scrimgeour.

"Now listen sharp," said Hagrid, wrapping the chains around a hook on the fence. "Mos' important thing abou' hippogriffs is, they're proud beasts. Take offense like that." He snapped his fingers ringingly, making two or three of the hippogriffs prance in place. "Don't never insult a hippogriff. Might just be the last thing yeh ever do."

Most of the class backed up several steps at this.

"Don't start like that," said Hagrid impatiently. "They won' hurt yeh if yer polite to 'em. Yeh walk forward, keep eye contact, don' blink too much – they won' trust yeh if yeh do – an' then yeh bow. If he bows, then yeh can touch him. If not, then yeh get away from him right quick, wait a minute or two, an' try again. So who'll go first?"

Harry looked around. Neville seemed to be seriously considering turning himself invisible. Hermione was frowning, running her hand along the spine of her *Monster Book*, which was making a sound a lot like a purr. Ron was rocking back and forth on his feet, staring at the hippogriffs. Draco was watching Theodore Nott, who had been whispering with Crabbe and Goyle all through Hagrid's talk, out of the corner of his eye.

Harry took a step forward. "I'll do it, Hagrid," he said.

"That's the way, Harry!" said Hagrid happily. "Here, let's start yeh off with Buckbeak!"

He uncollared the gray hippogriff and clucked to it, drawing it away from the others. "Make eye contact, an' try not ter blink," he instructed Harry quietly. "Then come forward an' bow."

Harry met fierce orange eyes, swallowed hard instead of blinking, and bowed to Buckbeak as Padfoot had taught them pureblood boys bowed to their elders. He took advantage of being down to shut his eyes for a moment, then looked back up. Buckbeak was still staring at him arrogantly.

"Back away, Harry," said Hagrid, sounding a little worried for the first time. "Slowly, now..."

But even as Hagrid spoke, the hippogriff bent its bird-like legs and lowered its front half in an unmistakable bow.

"Right, then!" said Hagrid, grinning all over his face. "Go on, Harry, he'll let yeh touch him now! He likes his beak patted, right where it joins his face, go ahead!"

Harry would have liked backing away better, but he'd come this far. He stepped closer to Buckbeak, who was now watching him in a more friendly way, and stretched out his hand, laying it on the enormous beak and patting it several times. When he stopped, Buckbeak made a low crooning sound in his throat and blinked appealingly at him. Harry smiled and patted the beak a few more times as the class applauded him.

"Yeh know, Harry," said Hagrid speculatively, "he migh' even let yeh ride him. How'd yeh like that, eh?"

Harry didn't quite know what to say, but Hagrid saved him the trouble. "Ah, I know yeh love flyin'. So climb right up there – behind the wing, like – an' don' go pullin' out any feathers, hippogriffs don' like pain..."

Don't like experiencing it, but I bet they like causing it, Harry thought dizzily. He stepped onto Buckbeak's wing and pulled himself onto the hippogriff's back. *Where do I hold on?*

"Round his neck," said Hagrid in a business-like tone. "Gee up!" He slapped Buckbeak's hindquarters.

Buckbeak screeched and opened his wings, each easily twelve feet long. Harry seized hold of Buckbeak's neck and held on as the hippogriff pumped its wings for altitude. It was like riding Letha in her horse form, except that the feathers made it harder to hold on. Harry had to use all his

experience from broomstick flying to keep his balance without hurting his mount.

Still, he was enjoying it, and half-hoped Buckbeak would take a long flight, but the hippogriff showed no inclination to go outside the paddock, flying around it once before heading for the ground. Harry leaned back, praying he didn't go sliding off over Buckbeak's head, and just managed to stay astride as two hooved and two taloned feet struck the ground. The class cheered as Harry slid off Buckbeak and stood beside him for a moment with one hand on his back before walking to the fence.

"What were you doing standing there, posing for a Chocolate Frog card?" Draco asked as the rest of the class climbed into the paddock.

"Trying not to show everyone how badly my knees are shaking," said Harry, collapsing on the stone fence. "You go give it a try."

Draco approached Buckbeak and bowed to him. Buckbeak bowed back, and Draco moved up and patted his beak. Ron and Hermione had a chestnut hippogriff to themselves. Neville was scooting backwards from a red roan.

"You're a handsome boy, you are," said Draco, turning as Buckbeak danced a little, then sliding his hand under the hippogriff's facial feathers and scratching. Buckbeak closed his eyes, crooning softly. "I knew if Harry could do this, it couldn't be too hard, and it's not – you're just like Hagrid, you only look big and mean, isn't that right?"

"Where are you hanging out tonight again?" inquired Harry.

Draco stopped scratching Buckbeak to turn to him and use both hands to make a rude gesture, complete with a smacking sound.

Suddenly, Buckbeak screamed, rearing up. Draco staggered back a pace, shielding his head with an arm, but he was still within range of those wicked talons – Harry dived at him, knocking him to the ground, as Buckbeak swiped viciously at where Draco had been just a moment before, catching a clawful of Harry's robes. Harry heard the cloth rip.

He hit the ground hard and yelped as pain shot up his arm. There was blood seeping out through the tears Buckbeak's talons had made – it seemed cloth wasn't the only thing they'd caught.

"Harry! Draco!" Hagrid rushed over from collaring Buckbeak and bent over the boys anxiously. "Are yeh all right?"

"Fine," said Draco, sitting up. "A little winded is all. Harry saved me from worse – I don't even know what I did. I don't think I was insulting."

"Maybe he thought you meant him," said Harry, cradling his arm. "When you... you know."

"Maybe." Draco peered at his arm. "Is that bad?"

“Yer bleedin’,” said Hagrid, his face white. “Gotta get yeh ter the hospital wing...”

“I’ll be fine,” said Harry. “I’ve been hurt worse playing Quidditch.”

“You’re not kidding,” muttered Draco.

“I can go up to the hospital wing myself,” said Harry, trying to fend off Hagrid’s attempts to pick him up like an oversized baby. “You don’t need to stop class just for me.” Class had stopped, though, he noticed, since everyone was now gathered around staring at him. He made sure to give Hermione and Ron the proper signal that he was all right.

“Yer sure?”

“Some of us can go with him,” said Draco. “Just to make sure.”

Hagrid sighed. “All right.” He looked around and noticed Neville, still jogging backwards around the paddock as his hippogriff stalked him. “Here, stop that,” he said severely to the roan, grabbing its collar. “Neville, go on up ter the hospital wing with Harry an’ Draco, make sure they get there all right.”

“Yes, Professor,” panted Neville, gratefully climbing out of the paddock.

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“Can’t you stay out of trouble for one day?” asked Meghan in a tone which Harry was positive she’d learned from Danger.

“No,” answered Draco for him. “Never.”

“I didn’t ask you.” Meghan flicked her fingers at him, spattering him with the salve she was using on Harry’s cuts. “Does that feel better?”

“Much,” said Harry, smiling at her. “It doesn’t hurt at all now.”

“All right, let’s see if you can do it, Meghan,” said Madam Pomfrey, coming over to the bed.

“Do what?” asked Neville.

Meghan produced her wand. “Madam Pomfrey taught me a healing spell,” she said. “I may not be very good at it yet, Harry, so tell me if anything hurts or doesn’t feel right.”

Harry nodded, and Meghan touched her wand to the first of the three shallow gashes on his arm. “*Sanatio*,” she said firmly.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Harry saw new skin beginning to form over the cut, and within a moment or two, it looked as if he’d hurt his arm several days before, instead of just a few minutes.

“Very good,” said Madam Pomfrey. “Mr. Potter?”

“It felt just like when you do it,” said Harry truthfully. Madam Pomfrey had patched him up several times before, and the sensation he’d felt was a slowed-down version of her quick healing spell. “Only slower.”

“Well, that’s only to be expected, Meghan’s young yet – but not many could do this spell so young, I’ll tell you that.”

“Has anyone else ever learned it before they even started school?” asked Neville.

“Not that I can think of offhand, Mr. Longbottom.”

Neville winked at Meghan, who beamed. “Shall I do the others?” she asked.

“Yes, go ahead, and now that you know you can do it, try it a little faster.”

Meghan nodded eagerly and bent over her work.

A few moments later, when Madam Pomfrey was putting the finishing touches on Harry’s healing, hurried footsteps sounded in the hallway, and Danger came running into the hospital wing. “Hippogriffs?” she asked Draco, whom Madam Pomfrey had pronounced “perfectly all right, if a bit dirty.”

Draco nodded. “I messed up,” he admitted, “but Harry got hurt for it.”

“Don’t make it a pattern,” Danger said, untying his cloak strings as she passed. “Harry?”

“It was just a couple of cuts,” protested Harry. “I got worse every day at home.”

Madam Pomfrey looked highly disapproving. Danger laughed. “What a wonderful household you must think we are,” she said. “But you know boys. They will wrestle, and climb trees and fly on their brooms, no matter what we tell them, and their fathers are no help, they just encourage them.”

Harry stifled a laugh at the look on Moony’s face. His Pack-father had appeared in the doorway just in time to hear the end of this.

“So true,” said Madam Pomfrey with a sigh. “Oh, Professor Lupin, I didn’t see you.”

Danger stiffened and turned. “Professor,” she said politely.

“Professor,” answered Moony.

Draco had turned around, probably so the Pack-parents wouldn’t see him laughing, Harry thought. Meghan whispered something to Neville which made him grin.

Moony's eyes went to Harry. "You're all right?"

"Yes, Professor."

"Draco?"

"I wasn't hurt at all."

"Good. Professor Granger-Lupin, would you mind coming with me? I think we have something we need to discuss."

"I think we do," said Danger. "Madam Pomfrey. Meghan. Boys."

They left the hospital wing together.

"They looked like a dog and a cat," said Draco, staring after them.

"Which?" asked Meghan.

"What?"

"Which of them was the dog and which the cat?"

"How should I know?"

"You thought it up," said Neville in a reasonable tone.

"Oh, shut up. We should get back, class won't be over for another half-hour at least..."

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Danger perched on a desk as Remus shut the door of the classroom behind them. *I'll say it fast and get it over with. It hurts less that way.*

Remus turned to face her.

"I'm sorry," said Danger quickly.

Remus frowned. "You're not supposed to say that."

"What?"

"It isn't fair."

Danger stared at Remus for a moment, then began to smile. Her dignified love was pouting and kicking at the floor like a small boy. "What isn't fair?"

"I wanted to apologize first."

Danger laughed aloud.

“It isn’t funny either,” protested Remus, but he was smiling too. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have shouted at you. You were right. It was stupid of me to hit Snape.

Stupid, yes, but awfully nice to think about. Did I mention half the reason I was mad was because I was jealous?

You were jealous? How do you think Sirius will feel?

Danger laughed again. **It didn’t feel right, being at odds with you. It was like being angry at a part of myself.** She frowned. **But that’s the problem, isn’t it? Me seeing you as part of me, not as yourself?**

No, not really. I was angry, I was just saying that to try to hurt you.

But you had a point. Neither of us is just part of the other. We’re two separate people... well, not as separate as we once were, but I’m not you, and you’re not me.

Remus shook his head, slowly. **I think it’s a combination,** he said. **We are part of each other now. We belong to each other. And the only reason that it’s anything more than slavery or infatuation is that the belonging goes both ways. You belong to me exactly as much as I belong to you, and vice versa. In good conscience, I can only ask you to do something for me if I’d be willing to do the same for you.**

Danger slid off her desk and crossed the room to him. **You know all you ever have to do is ask.**

All right, I’m asking. Forgive me for what I said, and don’t ever let me do anything that stupid again.

Only if you’ll forgive me for what I said, and promise never to hit Snape again...

Finish that sentence.

Unless I’m there to watch.

That’s more like it.

The embrace was no less glorious for being inevitable.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 7: Look to the Future (Year 3)

Chapter 7: Look to the Future

“Hermione?”

“Yes?” Hermione looked up from her book. Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown were both standing beside her chair, looking very solemn.

“We wanted to tell you something,” said Parvati. “Something important. Without anyone else around.”

“It’s about something Professor Trelawney told us in Divination today,” added Lavender, sitting down in a chair near Hermione’s.

Hermione restrained a snort and only nodded.

“She said that a teacher and a student who had the same name would suffer great tragedy this year,” said Parvati, sitting in the chair next to Lavender’s. “And you’re the only student with the same name as a professor right now.”

“We thought we should tell you.” Lavender’s face was anxious. “Maybe knowing it could help you avoid it.”

“Er, thank you,” said Hermione, fighting not to let herself laugh. “That’s very kind.”

“Are they your parents?” asked Lavender. “Professor Lupin and Professor Granger-Lupin, I mean. You look a lot like them. Professor Granger-Lupin, especially.”

Why is it any of your business? “Well, they’re not my parents, exactly. I don’t remember my real parents.”

“You don’t?” Parvati was leaning forward, entranced. “Why not?”

“They... died. When I was only a baby.” Both girls’ eyes were boring into Hermione now, making her feel horribly like a freak on display.

“Then what’s Professor Granger-Lupin to you?” asked Lavender, looking baffled.

“She’s my older sister. She married Professor Lupin not too long after our parents died.” *And the worst of it is, they don’t mean to do it. They’re just curious, they can’t know how it feels to me...*

“However did you end up living in the same house as Harry Potter and Draco Black, then?” asked Parvati. “An older sister taking care of a younger one, I can understand, but how did they get mixed up in it?”

“It’s... complicated.” Hermione stood up abruptly. “Excuse me, I have to... brush Crookshanks. He always gets burrs in his tail, and they drive him mad, and then he bites them out and leaves them on my pillow, I really have to get to him before he does that...”

Babbling, she made her escape up the girls’ stairs and into the quiet of the dormitory, where she collapsed on her bed. Crookshanks, without a trace of a burr anywhere on him, leapt up on the bed, nuzzled her face, and began to purr.

“Why do they think they’re entitled to know everything about my life and my Pack?” she asked Crookshanks. “Why can’t they just leave me alone?”

In a funny way, I almost wish they were worse. Then I could cry and get it over with. As it is, I don’t even know what I feel, so I have no way to release it, and it just keeps piling up and getting worse...

“Hermione?” Meghan appeared at the door of the dormitory. “Parvati and Lavender said you were up here. Are you coming?”

“Coming where?”

“Den-night, silly. Remember?”

“Oh.” Hermione looked out the window at the gathering dusk. “Right.”

“So pull your curtains and come on. Neville’s whispered us all invisible already, no one’s going to see us.”

Hermione pulled her bedcurtains shut, got her pajamas from her wardrobe, and followed Meghan down the stairs, Crookshanks at her heels. To Hermione’s surprise, the cat leapt into the tube with her, ensconcing himself in her lap.

Harry used to bring Siss. There’s no reason I can’t bring Crookshanks.

“Thank you, Godric,” she said, shutting the tube behind her, and pushed off. Halfway down, it occurred to her that Crookshanks might not care for the end of the ride. A sudden drop onto a bed was fine if you knew it was coming, but not if you didn’t...

“We’re going to fall in a minute,” she told the cat. “But it’s all right, we won’t get hurt – please don’t claw me, there’s no reason to. Don’t cats always land on their feet, anyway?”

The floor of the tube vanished beneath them. Hermione crossed her hands over her stomach just in time, as she landed on the bed and sixteen pounds of yowling ginger cat landed on her. Before she could do more than try to get back the breath that had been knocked out of her by the double impact, Crookshanks rocketed off her to the top of the chest of drawers, where he began to furiously wash a paw.

“Well, I did try to tell you,” said Hermione, standing up. Crookshanks ignored her with injured

dignity.

“Lo, Neenie,” Harry greeted her as she came through the door of the red bedroom. Hermione made a face at him, but no more – it was her den name, after all, and to tell the truth, it didn’t bother her as it once had. She might not even mind if the Pride sometimes called her by it in public.

A quick look around confirmed that she was the last one in. She set her pajamas in a corner and dropped down beside Ginny, who was lying on her stomach on the padded floor, scowling at a book. “Homework?” she asked.

Ginny nodded. “I used to think the first day of the year would be the easiest,” she said. “If this is the easiest, I don’t want to know what the rest of the year is going to be like.”

Hermione peered over her friend’s shoulder. “Oh, I remember that lesson. It’s not too hard, once you get the trick. Do you have your wand with you?”

Ginny produced it.

“Show me how you’re doing the movement.”

Ginny obliged. Hermione watched critically. “That’s almost right, but you’re twisting your wrist too much. It should only be about a quarter-turn. Here.” She pulled out her own wand. “Watch me.”

Her bad mood had vanished without her even noticing.

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Around eight o’clock, a loud crack signaled the arrival of several house-elves with mugs of hot chocolate and plates and bowls of treats for the denners. Ron reached eagerly for an éclair. Kady smacked his wrist sharply. “Bad,” she scolded. “Sir knows he must be in his pajamas before he eats his bedtime snack.”

Ron groaned. “Do I have a big sign on me that says ‘Boss Me Around’?” he demanded of the rest of the Pride. “Don’t answer that,” he added, seeing the grins on the other boys’ faces. “Let’s just get changed.” He picked up his pajamas from their own corner and vanished into the red bedroom. The rest of the Pride split up and found places to change their clothing, and reemerged dressed for bed, to claim their snacks and drinks.

“Little master is not needing to thank the house-elves,” said an elf called Mitsy, wiggling her ears at Neville in embarrassment after he’d accepted a plate of biscuits with thanks. “Hogwarts house-elves is always serving people well, and the people who use this place very well.”

“That’s no surprise, if the Founders made this place for themselves,” said Ginny.

“But we like thanking you,” Hermione told the house-elves. “Do you want to make us happy?”

All the house-elves nodded hard.

“You can make us the most happy by just letting us say thank you, then. All right?”

The house-elves looked around at each other. “All right, miss,” said Kady, who seemed to be the spokes-elf for the group. She took a deep breath. “You is welcome, little sirs and misses. We hopes you is having a good night.”

“You too,” said Harry as the house-elves disappeared all at once with a series of loud bangs.

“Funny little things,” said Ron, seizing the éclair he’d been after earlier.

“Hold on a second,” said Harry, forestalling Ron’s first bite. “We should start first.”

Ron looked disgusted. “I’ll never get to eat at this rate.”

“And we all know what a disaster that would be,” said Draco dryly. “Ron Weasley stops eating, and Britain suddenly suffers an enormous food surplus.”

Neville rescued Ron’s mug of hot chocolate as Ron threw a hard biscuit at Draco.

“Stop it, you two,” said Hermione. “Draco?”

Draco cleared his throat ostentatiously. “Be welcome, all, to this den-night.” He pointedly did not look at Ron. “We are Pride now. Pride together.”

“Pride forever,” answered everyone else.

“Can I eat *now* ?” asked Ron with forced patience.

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Some time later, when the contents of the plates and bowls were nearly gone, Hermione sat up. “Who will tell a story?” she asked. “Who will remind us of what it is to be Pride?” It was the ritual that had formed the heart of den-nights as long as they had existed. Knowing the past was essential to shaping the present and preparing for the future.

“I have a question,” said Luna. “It’s not really a story, but if everyone answers it, it could be.”

“Go on, then,” said Harry.

“What did everyone hear when the dementor came into our compartment?”

There was a long moment of silence. “Luna, that’s not a good idea,” muttered Draco. “No one’s going to want to talk about that...”

“No, she’s right,” said Meghan. “That’s why we have den-night stories, to talk about scary things

in a safe place. I'll go first. If that's okay," she added, looking at Harry. He nodded.

Meghan looked at her hands, then lifted her head and set her shoulders. "I heard the day the Pack got arrested, the day before Dadfoot's trial. When I had to go away from the Den without looking back, and I didn't know if I would ever see anybody again."

"Is that why you were crying?" asked Neville.

Meghan nodded. "What did you hear?" she asked him.

"I don't really know." Neville closed his eyes, thinking. "It was a lot of shouting and screaming. People shouting, 'Tell us where he is, tell us where he is!' and other people screaming, without words. I didn't understand it."

Hermione did, but as long as Neville didn't, or said he didn't, she wasn't about to burst out with it, even in-den as they were. It was something that should only be told in private.

"Luna?" Neville said, looking at her. "Your idea. You should go next."

"The day my mum died," said Luna, looking grave. "I heard her voice say something, and then a sound like something exploding. It was her bowl, that gave me my scar." She ran her fingers along it. "But after that I heard something else, something I didn't remember from before. Someone talking to me, telling me things."

"Things like what?" asked Ron.

"I don't remember," said Luna. "I think I'm only supposed to remember when the time comes. But I had to listen very hard then, so I wouldn't forget them between now and that time, even though I can't remember them now."

This made no sense to Hermione, but then, Luna hardly ever made sense. Especially not now.

Why is she looking at me?

"Hermione?"

Oh. I'm next. "The basilisk," she said. "I heard Padfoot shout out '*Conjunctivus Occuli!*' and then make a funny sound, like he was gasping only it got cut off in the middle – that was when he got Petrified..."

"He got Petrified before you?" asked Draco. "Why didn't you run away?"

"Because I couldn't. He was holding me when he got Petrified, so I was caught. And even if I'd gotten loose, the basilisk would have followed me and eaten me. But it wouldn't eat me if I was Petrified, I thought, so I looked at it."

"Her," said Harry.

“Sorry. At her.” *There, that’s out. Who should go next?* Hermione looked around her friends. “Ginny?”

“Being in the Chamber of Secrets,” said Ginny flatly. “Ron?”

“Waiting in that bathroom for you to come *out* of the Chamber of Secrets,” said Ron. “With Moaning Myrtle floating around saying things like how she hoped you’d stick around if you died, Harry, and if you didn’t how she was going to go around the castle toilets looking for you. I think she likes you.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “I’ll never go to the loo again,” he said, making everyone laugh.

“So what was yours, then?” asked Ron.

“Mine? Oh, right.” Harry shrugged. “I’m like Neville. I don’t know. It was someone shouting. A woman, I think. But I don’t remember what she said.” He looked over at Draco. “You’re last, fox. What’d you hear?”

“I don’t know either,” said Draco casually. “Someone talking was all.”

“It scared you pretty bad for just someone talking,” said Ron. “If you’d been any farther back in the corner, you’d’ve been outside the train.”

“That’s rich from you, Mr. Scared-of-waiting-in-a-bathroom.”

“Oi, let’s just see how happy you are when it’s your sister’s life we’re talking about!”

“It was my brother’s life that night, too, in case you’ve forgotten!”

Harry let loose a piercing, two-fingered whistle. “Stop it,” he said when everyone had recovered their hearing somewhat. “Den’s not for fighting. And everyone’s had a go now, so let’s do something else. Who’s for Exploding Snap?”

Ron, Neville, Ginny, Meghan, and Luna put their hands up. Harry stood up. “Round table and six chairs, please,” he said to the air. “Draco, Neenie?”

“Not now,” said Draco. “Maybe next game.” He went over to the Quidditch pitch and opened the door. Hermione shook her head at Harry, got up, and followed Draco.

He was leaning against one of the goal posts, staring across the pitch. Hermione looked down as fur brushed her ankles. Crookshanks trotted past her and over to Draco, where he stropped around the boy’s legs, purring. Draco absently bent to stroke him. Hermione shut the door.

“Just someone talking?” she said quietly.

“Not just someone,” said Draco, seemingly to the cat. “My father. I don’t know if you know this, but I dreamed of him in first year, and Danger says it was true. It was really him, we shared the

dream. So I know he meant what he said.”

“What did he say?”

“He talked about reclaiming me. Taking me back, and making me his again.” He turned to look at her. “He doesn’t want me dead, Neenie. He wants me alive.”

His eyes were fearful in a way she hadn’t seen for years. She was so used to both her brothers being totally fearless and confident about everything that it took her a moment to find the comparison she wanted. Draco looked now as he had looked when he was very small, at the London Den, and he had just had a nightmare.

And I know those nightmares were all about his father...

“But he won’t get you,” she said, trying to project certainty into her voice. “How could he? Hogwarts is the safest place in the magical world, isn’t it? He can’t Apparate here, and there’s no way he could Floo, not with people all over the country looking for him. Besides, how would he hide inside the school, with all the teachers and ghosts around? Someone would be sure to see him.”

The fear was fading from Draco’s eyes. Hermione pressed onward. “He can’t make a Portkey without a wand, and where would he get one? And not even Wormtail could get onto the grounds with all the wards up, and the dementors. The only people allowed onto Hogwarts grounds are students, teachers, and invited guests, and he isn’t any of those, so he isn’t going to get in. It’s just that simple.”

The fear had been replaced by a much more normal expression for Draco – exasperation. “If there was an award for Most Annoying Logic of the Year, you’d win it,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

“I know.” Hermione walked over to him and bent down to pick up Crookshanks. She met Draco’s eyes again as she straightened. “If he does come after you,” she told him, “he’ll have to come through me first.”

“What are you going to do? Throw books at him?” Draco began to laugh. “Or Crookshanks! You could call him to fight for you! Maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll eat Wormtail for us!”

Hermione laughed with him, picturing her cat cornering the small, fat, balding man she recalled. “But I do mean it,” she said when she’d caught her breath.

“I know.” Draco gave her a quick scent-touch and a smile, telling her all the things his stupid thirteen-year-old male pride wouldn’t let him say in so many words. Things like “thank you,” and “I love you.”

I should be grateful we have ways he can say them. And that he knows he needs to. If he was like Ron, he wouldn't even realize that. She watched Draco open the door and head out to the main room. Ron is such an idiot when it comes to emotional things. Ron is such an idiot, generally.

But he's a nice idiot. And funny. The littlest things make him happy, like one good score on homework or the Quidditch team practicing well. It's actually cute, the way he's always hungry, and always a little clueless. And when you know a lot of answers, it's nice to have someone around who asks a lot of questions...

She shook her head. What is wrong with me? I sound like someone out of Padfoot's books!

No, it's worse. I sound like Parvati and Lavender. Eurgh.

She set Crookshanks down. "Ron is my friend," she told the cat. "My Pride-mate and my friend. Nothing less, but nothing more."

Crookshanks twisted himself around and began to wash beneath his tail.

xXxXx

In an office elsewhere in the castle, two wolves lay contentedly twisted together.

If there was some way to do it without blowing my cover, this would be a great assignment for some of my students, said Remus. Identify the werewolf and the true wolf, and tell me how you know.

Would you be covering werewolves this early in the year? That's fairly advanced, isn't it?

True. We probably wouldn't get there until sometime in the winter.

After Christmas, you think?

Offhand, yes. Why?

Because we'll be home for Christmas, and you can get Sirius or Letha to take a picture of us on full moon. Then reproduce it and give the kids that. A good-quality picture ought to give them enough of the pertinent anatomical detail.

I thought you didn't want anyone else knowing about my pertinent anatomical detail.

Danger's response to this was non-verbal, consisting first of puzzlement, then the rising heat that meant embarrassment, coupled with the under-the-breath mutter that meant Remus had better watch his back.

He let his tongue hang out of his mouth in a grin, utterly content. *My wife is plotting against me. Life is good.*

Excuse me. Danger untwined herself. **I'm going to go raid my stash. You want anything?**

No, I'm fine. Thank you, though.

You're welcome. Danger trotted into the bedroom. Remus listened to the sounds of her opening their trunk, digging through clothes and books until she came to her own personal store of junk food, separate from his large collection of chocolate, which he had amassed partly for his own consumption and partly when he had heard there was a possibility of dementors around the castle.

Dementors . Nasty things. Good thing it's not Sirius here this year, he probably would have had a much worse reaction to that dementor on the train than I did... but Letha would have been able to deal with it, they would have been fine...

A sudden bang broke him out of his reverie. **Danger!**

I'm fine, she answered quickly, and truthfully. There was nothing worse in her mind than shock, no pain or fear. **Fine, except... what in the world?**

What?

You tell me. Danger, human once more, reappeared in the hallway which led to their bedroom.

Remus stared. His wife's hair was piled on top of her head in an intricate arrangement, and if he wasn't mistaken, it was darker than it had been. Canine eyes were better for night-sight, but had limitations in the color vision area. **Has it changed color?** he asked.

Danger hurried to the mirror and squealed in outrage. **Hell yes! It's blue!**

Blue?

Blue. You've heard of it, I'm sure. More usual color for eyes than for hair. And now I have a blue beehive. How nice.

Your food was pranked?

I have to assume, since this happened as soon as I opened the bag. You didn't do this?

No, this one isn't mine. And a prank used to be Sirius' idea of a fine send-off, but strange as it seems, I think he's grown out of that. Besides, if he was going to prank anyone, he'd prank me. So that leaves the cubs.

Danger retransformed and shook her wolf-head in distaste at the feeling of the topknot of fur she now wore. **Let's have a sniff.**

Remus joined her in the bedroom. Their own scents were clear on the trunk, but there were baffling hints of others, hard to pick out and follow clearly. Finally, though, they both had a verdict.

He must have worn gloves. But he brushed the trunk at some point with his knee or elbow. That's why we can only get a faint trace.

Is there a magical way to confirm that?

We don't need one. We just need to handle him the right way, and he'll confess all by himself.

If you think I'm going to breakfast like this, you're crazy.

I never said you should go to breakfast like this. I'll fix it as soon as I can use my wand.

Are you sure you can?

Danger, he's thirteen. I'm thirty-five. If I can't undo what he did, I'm obviously not fit to be a teacher here. Remus decided to tease her. **You wouldn't consider coming down for just a little bit like this, to make him happy?**

Remus!

I'm joking, love. Back to normal, first thing in the morning.

xXxXx

Neville had just poured milk onto his porridge the next morning when Meghan suddenly pulled the bowl away from him. "What—" he had just time to say before a letter fell precisely where the bowl had been. "Thank you," he said instead.

"You're welcome." Meghan handed back the porridge and returned to her own cereal.

Just as Neville was about to unseal the letter, it caught fire. He yelled and dropped it into his porridge anyway, where it went out with a loud, milky sizzle.

"Danger says wait here," said Harry, who was looking at the High Table. "I mean, Professor Granger-Lupin says, wait here."

"And she also says don't open that yet," added Hermione.

Neville fished the letter out of his porridge. "I wish she had some other way to tell people things," he said, wiping it with his napkin.

"That looks really official," remarked Ron from the other side of the table. "Big seal on it and everything. Does it say where it's from?"

Neville turned the envelope over in his hands, looking for some indicator.

"Seals sometimes have imprints on them," said Luna.

Neville looked at the red wax seal. It wasn't just a blob – it had a form to it. A crossed wand and bone.

Crossed wand and bone...

His heart began to pound. There was only one reason St. Mungo's Hospital would be sending him a letter. Well, two reasons, but they amounted to the same thing.

Oh no, oh no, please don't let them be dead...

“Mr. Longbottom.” He jumped and looked up. Professor McGonagall was standing beside him. “Have you had enough to eat?”

“No, ma'am. I haven't had anything yet.”

“I see. Well, eat quickly, then come to my office.” Neville's worry must have shown on his face, because Professor McGonagall softened and added, “You're in no trouble, Longbottom. In fact, this may be good news. But you need to eat first. And I'll take that.” She plucked the letter out of his hand.

“But it's mine!”

“In my office, Longbottom.” Professor McGonagall swept away.

“At least it's good news, not bad,” said Ginny. “Neville, really, you have to eat something, or you're never going to make it until lunch.”

But Neville's throat seemed to have closed up. He could barely swallow. After a few spoonfuls of porridge from a new bowlful and a few bites of toast, he jumped up from the table and hurried out of the Great Hall.

He wasn't surprised to hear quick footsteps behind him, or to find a small hand in his halfway up the marble staircase. As always, she comforted him just by being there – he never asked her to come with him, because he never had to ask. She simply assumed she was welcome to go wherever he did.

And I didn't have to tell her about my parents. She already knew.

He raised his free hand and knocked on Professor McGonagall's door.

“Come in!” she called.

Meghan squealed happily when the door was open. “Mama Letha! Dadfoot!” She sprinted across the room to hug her parents.

“Hello,” said Neville, giving the Blacks a small bow and a smile. He liked them – they had been very kind and encouraging to him, first as teachers, then as hosts for the month of July. He was

eager to see how Professor Lupin's classes were different than ones taught by Professors Black and Freeman-Black.

Professor McGonagall sighed. "I should have specified that you were to come alone," she said, but without rancor. "I suppose she is part of this as well, though."

"I'm afraid so," said Mrs. Letha (as Neville had settled on calling her after two weeks of feeling rather silly and out-of-place, addressing an adult by her first name). "We're just waiting for one other person, Neville, and then we'll explain this."

The fire flared green, and the spinning form within it solidified into –

"Gran?" Neville hurried across the room to help his grandmother out of the fireplace.

"I'm all right, stop fussing at me, boy," she said irritably, brushing soot off her cloak. "Well, Minerva, what in the world is so important that you dragged me away from my breakfast to see?"

"Have you had an owl this morning, Augusta?"

"Yes, actually, but I haven't opened the letter. I have it here." His gran produced it from her handbag. "I was wondering where it came from, and what it was all about..."

"That's what we're here to explain," said Mr. Padfoot (which had taken Neville even longer to get used to saying than 'Mrs. Letha'). "Why don't we all sit down?"

They all sat, and the discussion began. Within a few moments, Neville started to get excited. There had been a Healer working on a way to help his parents?

Then his hopes were dashed, as Mr. Padfoot revealed that she was dead. He did recall hearing about a Healer dying, being killed, near the end of the summer, but he'd had no idea that it had such a direct meaning for him.

And then Mrs. Letha gave him hope again, all within the space of a minute.

"Apparently, since I'm an older student and I already have some field experience, plus expertise in potion-making, they've decided to forgo some of the traditional training in favor of a special project for me," she said. "I'm going to be working with Andromeda's notes, seeing what I can decipher of them. As far as I can tell right now, she had the beginnings of something which she thought would work very well, but she never got a chance to finish it or test it. That's my job right now."

"And I'm running security for her," said Mr. Padfoot. "I pointed out to the Auror Office that another Auror would need time off, time to go home and relax. When I'm with Letha, I am home. And I have motivation to protect her that no one else has. Of course, I'm not doing it alone – my partner, Kingsley Shacklebolt, will be helping me out – but still, that's my main duty for right now."

Neville felt excitement rising higher and higher in him. Mrs. Letha would be safe, safe as the other Healer – he recalled her faintly from a Christmas party at the Den – had not been safe. That was sad for her and her family, but it meant his family still had a chance...

“But why the fool hospital thought they had to notify a thirteen-year-old of something that’s as far from sure as possible...” grumbled his gran. “Get the boy’s hopes up – what if it doesn’t work?”

“Oh, but I think it will,” said Mrs. Letha, her eyes sliding to Neville and one of them closing ever so briefly. “Andromeda Tonks was a fine Healer. All I need to do is follow where she led, and I have no doubt I’ll be able to succeed.”

“So that’s what’s in this letter, Longbottom,” said Professor McGonagall, handing it to him. “Official notification that your parents’ care is being changed, and that there is a possibility – just a possibility, mind – that they might be healed, or substantially improved.”

Neville accepted the letter back. His mind raced. What if it didn’t work? What if it killed them, or made them worse? What if it made them dangerous, so that he could never go to see them again? What if it did work, but they didn’t understand that it had been a long time, and they refused to believe he was their son? What if –

“You’re being silly,” whispered Meghan in his ear. “I can see it on your face.”

“Sorry,” Neville whispered back. Of course, he was being silly. Mrs. Letha was gentle and smart and good with a wand and a cauldron, and she was Meghan’s mum. She would never do anything that would hurt his parents.

Deep in his heart, a tiny hope that had sat there for many years unchanged, except for one brief flare in the winter of his first year at Hogwarts, was suddenly beginning to grow.

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Back in the Great Hall, Danger had come down to the Gryffindor table. “You are not to pester Neville,” she said sternly to the Pride, passing one hand over Draco’s pumpkin juice while he wasn’t looking at it. “Or Meghan,” she added, noticing who else was missing. “They’ll tell you what’s going on when they’re ready to, and not before.” **Well, I think that’s pretty definite,** she added silently.

Even Sirius can’t miss it for much longer. Have you set it?

Yes. I’m coming back now. I just hope he doesn’t drink it quite yet...

Danger’s hope was granted. She had been back at the High Table for nearly a minute before Draco lifted his goblet of pumpkin juice and drained it. His setting the goblet back on the table triggered the spell. There was a sound like a toilet flushing, and as everyone turned to look, his hair twisted into the shape commonly known as a swirly.

Draco sat very still for a moment with his eyes shut. Finally, he opened them. Danger watched

him turn to Luna and ask a question, watched her answer, watched him reply to her, then turn to Ron and Harry and say something irritable-sounding which the teachers couldn't quite hear, but which set most of the Hall laughing uproariously.

“That'll teach him to prank his elders and betters,” said Remus, grinning at Danger.

They clinked goblets, then drank to success.

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“How bad is it?” Draco asked Luna.

She studied his head. “It looks as if someone dipped your head in a toilet and flushed it,” she observed. “Except it's not wet.”

“That is the point.” Draco whipped around at the sound of strangled laughter and saw Ron and Harry attempting to suffocate themselves with their napkins. “Oh, go on and laugh,” he said crossly. “Maybe I'll get lucky and one of you will snort bacon through your nose or something.”

It was only when most of the Gryffindor table, and most of the other three Houses, took him at his word that Draco realized just how loudly he'd spoken, and just how quiet the Hall had become when the toilet flush sound effect had occurred. The house-elves could probably fry eggs on his face, he thought.

“What did you *do* to her?” Harry choked out.

“Blue beehive,” said Draco resignedly. “I put the charm on her snack food bag, geared to the next person who opened it. I guess she found it last night.”

“Haven't you learned yet not to prank the Pack-parents?” asked Hermione, wiping her eyes. “They always get you back so much better.”

“I didn't think they'd know it was me! I wore gloves and everything!”

“Obviously, you were wrong,” said Ginny, still snickering. “A magical swirly. I love it.”

“Yeah, well, your crazy brother better watch out, or I'll give him a non-magical one,” threatened Draco.

“Go ahead and try, runt,” said Ron, getting himself under nominal control, though his lips were still twitching every time he looked at Draco's hair. “You couldn't even pick me up, much less turn me upside down.”

“Sure I could.” Draco drew his wand.

“*Not in front of the teachers,*” said Harry, Hermione, and Ginny in a three-way chorus.

“Besides, if you use your wand, it isn’t non-magical anymore,” said Ginny.

“What if I use my wand for levitating Ron but a real toilet for the hair bit?”

“Do we hear the word ‘toilet’ in conjunction with our lovely younger brother?” asked a voice behind Draco.

“We’d be delighted to help you out,” said an identical voice.

“There,” said Draco, spreading his hands to indicate the twins. “Now it won’t be magical at all.”

Ron glowered at them.

xXxXx

Draco found Danger after the meal. “I’m sorry I put a charm on your snack food to turn your hair into a blue beehive when you opened it next,” he said all in one breath. “Now will you please take this off me?”

Danger waved her wand in a circle over his head, and his hair collapsed from its cone shape to lie flat again. “Now, are you going to prank my things anymore?” she asked, hands on hips.

“No. Or if I do, I’ll be more careful to make it look like Harry.”

Danger bit her lip. “That will do,” she said. “Go on, get to class. And stick with pranking your Pride from now on.”

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After classes were over, the Pride went down to see Hagrid. They found him in the paddock where they’d had class on Monday, tending to the gray hippogriff who had injured Harry. When he saw them coming, though, he quickly tethered the hippogriff and climbed out of the paddock to greet them all, especially Harry.

“Yer sure yer all right?” he asked at least a dozen times.

“Positive,” said Harry each time. “Meghan and Madam Pomfrey fixed it right away.”

Finally, Draco decided to step in. “Hagrid?” he said, distracting the gamekeeper just as he looked to be about to ask Harry the question again. “Could I try over with him? I think I know what I did wrong the first time, and I won’t do it this time.”

“Ah, yeh didn’ do anythin’,” said Hagrid grimly. “Yeh were sabotaged, Draco. I was comin’ up ter the castle after I were done here ter tell yeh.”

“Sabotaged?” Draco frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Look here.” Hagrid leaned over the paddock wall and tugged on the hippogriff’s chain, bringing it closer to him. “Here, on his left flank. Look close, it’s hard ter see...”

The Pride peered through the fur. “Can I touch him?” asked Meghan, and when Hagrid nodded, extended a hand and laid it on the hippogriff’s flank, then gasped. “He’s hurt! There’s a bruise there! Look, right here, it’s like someone hit him!”

Draco looked closer. Sure enough, there was a dark, discolored spot under the gray fur.

“Looks more like a stone bruise ter me,” said Hagrid. “Would’ve bin easy fer anyone in that class, I wasn’ watchin’ yer side – anyone could’ve tossed a rock at him, and they’re smart fer beasts, but not smart enough ter realize yeh couldn’t’ve hurt him from the side if yer standin’ in front’a him – so he assumed yeh’d done it ter him, an’ he reacted like any beast would.”

“Then I want to make it up to him,” said Draco. “Try to show him I’m not really like that. Can I?”

Hagrid frowned. “I dunno... he might have a grudge against yeh... but if yeh really want ter try. Jus’ be ready ter run if he bristles up, like...”

“I will.” Draco climbed into the paddock. Hagrid uncollared the hippogriff – Buckbeak, Draco recalled now, Buckbeak was the creature’s name. Draco made eye contact, then bowed low. Buckbeak screeched and clawed the ground.

“Now, yeh great lump, that’s no way ter treat a friend o’mine,” said Hagrid sternly. “Behave yerself, or it’s back in the collar fer yeh.”

Draco stayed bowed, keeping an eye on Buckbeak’s talons. If they got closer to him, or left his range of vision, he was going to get out of the way fast. He had no desire to repeat Harry’s experience, or to go his brother one better, or in this case one worse.

The talons stayed where they were, flexing. Open, closed, open... and then there was more leg visible than there had been a moment before.

Draco risked a peek and felt his heart lift – Buckbeak had bowed to him.

After he was finished petting the hippogriff, Neville unexpectedly volunteered to try again, and it only took him three tries this time before Buckbeak made a sound like a chortle in his throat and returned Neville’s trembling bow. Of course, Ginny and Luna and Meghan then wanted to try it as well, and Hagrid let them, keeping a close eye on Buckbeak. But the hippogriff behaved himself perfectly well, even preening Meghan’s hair after she used her wand to speed the healing of the bruise on his flank.

“But who would throw a rock at the hippogriff I was working with?” asked Draco while the Pride walked back to Hagrid’s house with him.

Hagrid shook his head. “Dunno. Got any enemies in the class?”

Harry snickered. “You’re kidding, right? We have Care of Magical Creatures with the Slytherins, Hagrid. Draco once put every one of them in the hospital wing.”

“As if we didn’t have anything to do with it?” interjected Hermione.

Harry acknowledged this. “It’s more like, who’s *not* our enemy.”

“Could’ve bin anyone, then,” said Hagrid with a sigh as he opened the door of his house and Fang charged out, mad with joy to see the Pride. “Any o’the Slytherins.”

“Yeah.” Draco shrugged. “I’ll just be careful from now on.”

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Remus surveyed his class. Third year Gryffindors, perhaps the most difficult class he’d teach, not because the subject matter was too taxing for him, but because of the three students sitting in a row in the back of the classroom. He’d have to be careful not to favor them, but not to be seen exhibiting disfavor to them either – he’d have to treat them like any other student...

How hard can that be?

Hard enough.

“You can put your books away,” he told the class. “And take your wands out. We’re going to have a practical lesson today.” A murmur of excitement greeted this. Apparently almost everyone had enjoyed Sirius and Aletha’s practical lessons. Neville looked a little worried, and shy Colleen Lamb swallowed hard, but everyone else was happily stowing away books, even Hermione.

Damn it, I wish I didn’t have to do this, but I do...

“Mr. Black, may I see you a moment, please?”

Draco hurried to the front of the classroom. “Did I do something?”

“No, but I need to ask you a question, and I need you to answer, even if you don’t want to.”

Draco looked briefly reluctant, then nodded. “All right.”

“What did you hear when the dementor came into our compartment on the train?”

Draco flinched.

“Is it the obvious?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“All right.” Remus made sure his back was to the class. “Fox, I’m sorry, but I can’t let you face

the boggart. I know you can beat one – you could beat one in your first year – so that’s not the issue. I’d rather not have Lucius Malfoy materialize in the Hogwarts staffroom, is all. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” muttered Draco.

“Don’t feel too bad. Harry can’t do it either.”

Draco smiled. “Because it would be a lot worse to have Voldemort show up?”

“Precisely. Go cheer each other up.” Remus watched Draco jog back to his place.

And wait until you see what I have in mind...

xXxXx

He sat alone in an empty classroom, alone with his books. Books were more reliable friends than people. Books wouldn’t stab you in the back. Books wouldn’t change when you weren’t looking. And books didn’t die.

Suddenly he heard gales of laughter in the hall. Curious, he went to the door and peered out.

The third year Gryffindors were stumbling along the hallway, all of them laughing as if they’d eaten Alihotsy leaves. His eyes were drawn to a tall, brown-haired girl near the back of the group. She was smiling widely, blushing as red as the Gryffindor shield, and blinking her eyes very hard, all at the same time.

Why have I never seen her before?

“I can’t decide which one was better,” said Harry Potter, stopping to wipe tears of laughter from his eyes, “Neville’s or Colleen’s.”

“I liked them both,” said Draco Black, leaning weakly against the wall. “Snape in that dress...”

He had to cover his mouth to avoid betraying himself. He’d never particularly cared for his Head of House, and thinking of him in a dress was quite amusing.

Of course. They’ve come from Defense Against the Dark Arts.

“But Colleen...” Hermione Granger-Lupin waved to the tall girl. “I’d never imagined seeing all of Slytherin House in their underwear before.”

“I’m not sure I ever wanted to imagine it,” quipped one of the other girls, making them all laugh again.

She fears Slytherins? He took another look at her. She was still smiling, but resisting efforts to draw her forward. She was obviously shy.

My housemates have probably bullied her. Picked on her as the easy mark in Gryffindor. She wouldn't have been Sorted there if she weren't brave, though. Maybe her courage is just buried.

He decided right then that he was going to do something about the girl – Colleen – and about her fear of Slytherins. It wasn't right. No one should fear an entire House because of the actions of a few people.

It didn't hurt, of course, that she was a pretty girl. But no more than pretty, which was perfectly fine with him.

I do not trust beautiful women. As who would, with a mother like mine?

He returned to his seat, to begin thinking. He would lay his plots carefully, but without malice. He did not want to hurt this girl, this Colleen. He would simply show her that craft and guile did not always have to be used to bad ends.

I wonder what sort of flowers she likes best?

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 8: Hiding and Seeking (Year 3)

Chapter 8: Hiding and Seeking

Harry set down his Potions knife and covered a yawn with his hand before returning to coarsely chopping tulip leaves. He'd been up late the night before, working on his Animagus spells. After nearly a month at Hogwarts, he thought he might be getting close to finishing his list, but he wasn't yet sure. Moony had promised to look over the Pride's lists tonight.

He scooped up his tulip leaves in a double handful and walked over to the cauldron. Ron was stirring it constantly, counting under his breath. "...thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty..."

He changed direction, now stirring clockwise instead of counter-clockwise, and Harry began to drop the tulip leaves in, one piece for every count. "One, two, three, four..."

They were working on a Sealing Solution, something Healers used to close wounds that were too large to be healed quickly or had a magical prohibition against it worked into them. A lot of curses and hexes had such a prohibition, to make healing the victim more difficult. Snape had told the class this, with positive pleasure in his voice, and added that there was no point in inflicting damage if it could be healed by any half-trained child with a wand.

It's not enough to be mean to us. He has to go after Meghan, too, doesn't he?

Of course, the Sealing Solution's properties meant they also had to be careful not to get it on themselves. If it got on their eyelids, their eyes would seal shut. If on their hands, their fingers would stick together. And if they got it on their noses or mouths, they had better pray that someone noticed quickly, because otherwise they would suffocate. Snape had enjoyed telling them this more, if anything, than telling them about Dark magic.

And now he's just waiting for Neville to mess up.

Well, he was going to have a long wait. The Pride was on to him, and they weren't about to let Snape's vindictiveness make trouble for one of their own. As soon as they had realized what Snape was doing, they had rearranged partners for today, so that Draco could work with Neville and keep him from suffocating on his own potion fumes.

Of course, he could always start assigning partners. That would make trouble almost certain. Neville's a million times better than he used to be, but he's still not ready to work on his own, and he knows it...

The last piece of tulip leaf fell from Harry's hands into the cauldron. Ron changed stirring directions again and began his count over.

Harry had a quick look around the room. Everything on the Gryffindor side seemed normal –

Hermione was coaching Colleen through the final steps of thickening the solution, and Dean was starting to drop his own tulip leaves into the cauldron Seamus was stirring. Neville was scraping aloe vera leaves while Draco watched their solution bubble. Behind them, Lavender and Parvati were carefully sprinkling unicorn fur into their cauldron with Snape eyeing them critically, his back to Harry.

The Slytherins didn't interest him very much, but he glanced at them anyway, seeing without great interest how they had partnered up, how they were working, what was going on. He was just turning away when a flash of movement caught his eye.

Something was soaring through the air, headed directly for Neville and Draco's cauldron.

Harry's hand was in his robes, yanking out his wand – he tracked the thing along a short portion of its arc, then shouted, "*Protego!*" before his brain could catch up with his voice and hand.

His spell struck the falling object straight on, blasting it out of its path and across the classroom, directly towards Snape –

Oh no –

It disappeared under Snape's robes, and Harry prayed that he'd somehow gotten it wrong, that it wasn't what it had looked like – he hadn't seen it for very long, his eyes could have been fooled –

Snape turned, his black eyes glittering menace. "Ten points from Gryffindor, Potter, for doing magic in class without permission—"

There was an explosion between Snape's feet. The Potions Master appeared to levitate three feet off the floor as his robes billowed outward in all directions.

Harry gulped. He hadn't been wrong. The thing in the air had been a lit firework.

I'm going to die.

He was aware of eyes on him – nine pairs of sympathetic, horrified eyes from the Gryffindor side of the room, and nine pairs of gleeful, delighted ones from the Slytherin, as Snape bore down on him, his robes singed and smoking and his face twisted in lines of rage.

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"Really, Severus, I think you're jumping to conclusions," said Professor McGonagall in her office. "Mr. Potter's story seems reasonable enough, and if he were responsible for the firework, why on earth would he use a spell which you could hear – which you did hear – to move it towards you, when simply throwing it would have worked as well and left you unaware of his intentions?"

"I refuse to believe that one of my students would be foolish enough to throw a lit firework in class, Minerva," sneered Snape. "Particularly while working on a potion as potentially dangerous as this one."

Professor McGonagall was on her feet. “And you believe my students *would* be so foolish?”

“It is well-established that Gryffindor bravery often includes a certain amount of blindness to consequences—”

“And Slytherin ruthlessness does not?”

“Professors?” said Harry timidly, not sure getting their undivided attention was a good thing, but not knowing what else to do. Both of them turned to glare at him, and he had a sudden wish to sink through the floor.

“What is it, Potter?” asked Professor McGonagall sharply.

“May I go to lunch, please?”

“Go on,” she said dismissively, waving a hand, her attention already back on Snape. “If you are so blind that you cannot see possible misdeeds in your House simply because it *is* your House...”

Harry shut the office door behind him and headed for the Great Hall gladly. Between two dueling Professors was not his favorite place to be.

xXxXx

At lunch, of course, the rest of the Pride wanted to know what had happened, and what was happening now, and what was likely to happen in the future. The general consensus was that it was a shame they hadn't thought of slipping a lit firework under Snape's robes before this, and that it was a fine thing to have happened even by accident. Fred and George were in awe, although they refused to believe Harry hadn't done it on purpose.

“Don't worry, we understand,” said Fred in a pacifying tone as Harry tried to explain, for the seventh time, that he didn't even *own* any fireworks. “You have to keep up appearances.”

“But we can congratulate you all the same,” said George. “A keen mind you have, young Harry. Genius, to think of using the spell, then claiming you didn't because it would give you away. Sheer genius.”

“Speaking of genius,” added Fred. “Our beloved Quidditch captain has scheduled our first practice at long last. This Saturday, eight in the morning, though knowing Wood we won't be on the pitch until ten.”

“What about tryouts?” asked Ginny. “Aren't you having them this year?”

“Wood doesn't feel we need them,” said George. “But then, if we hadn't had them last year, we wouldn't have had Draco ready to fly when Alicia got ill... we'll talk to him. You want to fly with us, ickle Ginnikins?”

Ginny bared her teeth. “Call me that again and I'll hex you. Yes, of course I want to fly with you. I

always fly with you at home – why should Hogwarts be any different?”

“I suppose we’re just not used to thinking of you as old enough to play Quidditch,” said George, taken aback. “I mean, real Quidditch, not the pick-up games we have at home. It’s a rough game, Ginny. You could get hurt.”

“I could get hurt doing anything,” retorted Ginny. “I’m a good Chaser. I want to play.”

“Well, it can’t hurt to have another reserve player,” said Fred. “You know you might not get into a game for at least a year? It’s Wood’s decision, and then next year whoever’s captain after he leaves school will decide who plays each game.”

“I know. I just want to be part of the team.”

“Well, he can’t stop you coming to practice,” said George. “So do that. Just come along with Harry and Draco and Ron. Saturday at eight.”

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Humming under her breath, Aletha opened the freezer and pulled out a foil-wrapped package, peering at the label written in Danger’s semi-tidy handwriting.

Roast beef with potatoes and carrots. Excellent. She turned on the oven and slid the package inside, pulling off the parchment label so it didn’t scorch, then started laying the table. By the time Sirius finished what he was doing upstairs and she was done with her music practice, dinner would be ready.

Reheating is my best cooking skill. And Sirius isn’t even very good at that. That hadn’t mattered during their years in hiding, not with Danger around, and when they’d gone to teach at Hogwarts, they’d eaten in the Great Hall with everyone else. But now Danger was gone, off at Hogwarts herself, and the Blacks were home by themselves.

She didn’t leave us helpless, though. Before she’d left, Danger had made up several dinners’ worth of food and frozen it all in packages the right size for two people to share. The portions might have been considered overly generous by some, but not to anyone who knew how much Sirius could eat once he got started.

Molly’s given us a standing invitation to dinner as well. We try to give her at least a day’s warning before we take her up on it, of course, but that’s always pleasant. There had been friendly argument for years over whether Molly or Danger cooked better. Both women were inclined to give the laurel to the other, but the children of each family defended their mother vigorously. It had never actually come to blows as far as Aletha knew, but she also knew her Pack-sons, and Molly’s brood, and it was almost inevitable that an argument between them would lead to physical violence.

But as long as they don’t seriously injure each other, who cares?

And Danger's scheduled a day or two every month to come home and replenish our supplies. Along with just visiting, of course. Danger and Remus had been there only two days before, in fact, the previous Sunday, with all the latest news from Hogwarts, like Ginny Weasley joining the Quidditch team as a reserve Chaser, and Severus Snape trying to pin the burgling of his office on the cubs, until Remus worked a spell proving none of them had been anywhere near there. In return, Sirius and Aletha had shared the news from the Ministry and St. Mungo's.

Ministry news is almost uniformly bad. There's still been no sign of Malfoy or Wormtail. It's as if they don't exist. But then there's my news, which is exactly the opposite – my work's going very well. Andromeda was so careful about note-taking. Thank heaven the forensic Aurors were able to clean up her notes, and thank heaven whoever killed her didn't have time to burn them or steal them. Though I would have preferred losing the notes and saving her...

Aletha's throat tightened. Part of the bad news from the Ministry involved Tonks, who was moving through her apprenticeship at a rate that frightened some of her instructors. She seemed to have sealed off her grief for her mother, or to be expressing it only in violence towards the targets and objectives on the courses the apprentices were set.

I hope she doesn't think she'll be put on the case when she's qualified. Not even Sirius is allowed, and he's far more distantly related than she is. But I suppose this is something she can do, to make up for all she can't...

At least she's not alone. Charlie Weasley had gotten a transfer to one of the dragon preserves in Wales, and he and Tonks were sharing a flat in London, since with Apparition and the well-maintained British Floo network he didn't exactly have to live on top of his work. He wasn't there all the time, since the dragon keepers took it in turns to be "on call" at the preserve, ready to respond to an emergency at any time, but when he wasn't, Tonks could either work late herself or stay with her father.

Ted Tonks had come out of his private grief and was back at work. He, too, was living in a flat in London now, slowly going through the home he had shared with Andromeda and boxing things up, some to keep, some to sell, some to give away. When he was finished, he planned to sell the house.

I don't know what I'd do if I lost Sirius like that. If that was me, looking through what was left of our lives together, choosing what to keep and what to discard, cleaning out the Den to get it ready for someone else to live here...

But it wouldn't be like that for me. Even if I lost Sirius, I have Remus and Danger still. They'd be there with me, to help me through the worst of it. I might still leave here, but I wouldn't do it alone.

Thank God for the Pack.

Aletha's thoughts cycled back to the work she was doing, the work Andromeda had begun, which was going so well. *She did all the preliminary things, determining the ingredients it will need,*

even what order to add them in. All I have to do is figure out proportions.

The only problem is, this looks like a long-term potion, something that needs a month or more to brew, and that's not a problem exactly, just an inconvenience, and a nuisance. The childish part of me wants answers now. Am I doing this right? Will I be able to help Frank and Alice, finally, after all this time?

And what will happen if I do?

Even if she could actually bring the Longbottoms back from madness, would it be right, or kind, of her to do so? Their last coherent memories were twelve years old. They knew nothing of what had happened between now and then. Neville, to them, would still be a baby barely able to talk. They would never have met Danger, and would recall Remus wrapped in grief, Aletha likewise, and Sirius –

That could be a problem. We'll have to make sure he's nowhere around until we can explain things to them. As far as the Longbottoms had known when they had been attacked, Sirius had been the traitor who was responsible for James and Lily Potter's deaths. Seeing him as a respectable (more or less) member of society, a husband and father, might take some work on their part. And when they found out how Neville and Meghan seemed to feel about each other...

Aletha laughed. Aren't I thinking far ahead, then! Assuming I can do this, assuming it's going to work, and worrying about explaining things to them! Stop borrowing trouble, Letha, you have enough as it is.

For as flippant as Sirius might be about his "light duty" bodyguarding her, the truth was that the last Healer who had worked on this project had been murdered. There was no telling if it had been this her killer was after, but there had been no sign that any other notes had been destroyed, altered, or removed.

Though if they'd been removed thoroughly enough, how would we know?

She shook her head. *Enough of that. Time for music.*

She sat down at the piano, shaking her hands to loosen the muscles, and listened absently to the clacking coming from upstairs.

Isn't it funny that we both have hobbies that require pressing down keys?

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The door of her office crashed open. Athena looked up, feigning shock and offense. "How dare you barge in here that way?" she demanded. "Who are you?"

Of course, she knew him. Everyone knew Marcus Thovine. But asking the question would throw him off balance for the few moments that were all she would need.

“I – I–” Thovine stammered.

Athena rose, staring at him with her best angry-elder look. “I assume you have a name?”

“I – yes, of course I do!”

“Then I suggest you tell it to me immediately, so that I may inform the police who it is that I wish escorted from my office.”

“Police?” sputtered Thovine. “Why? I’ve broken no law, I’m perfectly within my rights–”

“You are uninvited and unwelcome here, young man, and unless you are one of my students, which I highly doubt, you have no business with me. Unless...” This would have to be played perfectly if it was to work at all. “Unless you have come for this?” She slid open her desk drawer and held up the small item she had found in the girls’ dressing room two nights before with her left hand, letting her right remain in the drawer.

Thovine went dead white. “I – I’ve never seen that before,” he blustered. “I have no idea what you’re talking about – but I do have business with you. I want to see one of your students. The Collins girl, Agnes Collins. I have reason to believe she stole something valuable from me–”

“Poppycock,” said Athena bluntly. “Mr. Thovine, you are becoming not only unwelcome but boring. Remove yourself immediately, or I shall be forced to send for the police.”

“You’ll send for no one, you old bag!” Thovine’s hand went to his pocket.

“Sirius!” called Aletha’s voice from downstairs. “Dinner!”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Every time,” he complained aloud to the typewriter, standing up to stretch his back. “She never catches me in the middle of a boring passage, oh no. It’s always the action scenes, the ones that really ought to be written start to finish in one go if they’re to be any good...”

“You can come or not, but it’s just going to get cold if you don’t!”

“All right, I’m coming!” Sirius shouted back. “You be good, now, Mr. Thovine,” he said to the typewriter. “Don’t try shooting Athena till I get back. Of course, you wouldn’t manage it anyway – she’s got a pistol in that desk drawer, and she’s a faster draw than you are...”

He had a feeling Minerva McGonagall would either love him or hate him forever for this book. Possibly both, depending on if and when he told her the true identity of the author Valentina Jett.

But worry about that another time. Right now, I smell food.

He descended the stairs two at a time.

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“Three, three, five,” Harry chanted under his breath. “Three, three, five.”

“Three, three, five, what?” said Draco from the other side of the table.

“It’s a general unlocking sequence,” Harry explained, looking up from his Arithmancy book. “In case you’re up against a locking spell you don’t know the counter for.”

“So you say those numbers, and the door just comes open?” asked Ron skeptically.

“No, it’s not like that,” said Hermione. “You have to use your wand. But you perform actions in those numbers. Things like tapping the doorknob, or waving your wand in a circle, or up and down, or side to side. You do three of one thing, three of another, then five of a third, concentrating on unlocking, and if you do it right, it opens.”

“That sounds really complicated,” said Ron. “Think I’ll stick with *Alohomora*, thanks.”

“But a lot of things are charmed against that, Ron,” said Hermione. “What if you run into one of those?”

“I’ll make sure never to go on an adventure without you along,” said Ron. “And then you can do it for me.”

“Are there other sequences like that?” asked Draco over Ron and Hermione’s squabbling. “Like one for locking?”

Harry nodded. “Basic locking is seven, ten. There’s other ones, but that’s the simplest.”

“Wouldn’t be much good if you were in a hurry.”

“Arithmancy’s not really for being in a hurry. You need Charms or Transfiguration for that. It’s more like Potions. You don’t usually use a potion in a battle, but before or after, it might be just what you need.”

Draco nodded. “Like a healing potion after, or one to give you extra strength before. It’s the same way with Ancient Runes. You wouldn’t stop in the middle of fighting to write something in runes, but if you want to set a charm or a curse on an object permanently, writing it in runes is the best way to do it.”

“Exactly. Professor Vector called Arithmancy a building block for a lot of the more complicated magics – she said the Gringotts goblins use something a lot like it to safeguard their vaults.”

“They take pride in customizing the security on each vault to the vault number,” said Hermione, breaking off her argument with Ron. “The really high-security vaults have especially magical numbers, like seven or thirteen, in them.”

“I didn’t know that.” Ron looked interested in spite of himself. “So vault number seven hundred thirteen would be higher security than vault number six hundred twenty, maybe?”

“Definitely.”

“Say, where’s Neville?” asked Harry, realizing who was absent from their group. Ginny and Luna were at class, and Meghan had her duties in the hospital wing, but Neville took most of the same classes they did. He should be here.

“He’s in the library with Meghan, helping her with something,” said Hermione absently, tapping her quill on her parchment. “Some secret project or other, they’re being very mysterious about it. I don’t really know what it’s all about.”

Percy climbed through the portrait hole, a roll of parchment under his arm, which he proceeded to tack up on the notice board with his wand.

“What’s that?” asked Draco, looking over his shoulder.

“Don’t know.” Harry put his book aside. “Let’s go find out.”

The four crossed the room to the notice board. “Come to see about the latest school club?” Percy asked them. “It looks very interesting – fine way to build inter-House cooperation, if you ask me...”

“A fighting club?” said Ron, staring enthralled at the poster. “Wicked!”

“Four teams, one from each House,” Hermione read from the poster rapidly. “Practices twice a week, competitions once a month. For each competition, the Houses will be randomly paired up, each pair acting as allies. Styles of competition will vary.” She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Like we did over the summer,” said Harry. “Sometimes it’d be fighting to the last man, sometimes we’d have to capture a place and hold it, or find a thing and bring it back.”

“Houses randomly paired up?” Draco frowned. “We could end up with Slytherin. They’re as likely to sabotage us as they are to fight our enemies.”

“That sort of comment is precisely the reason this club is such a good idea,” said Percy. “We all need to learn to be a little more tolerant of the other Houses in this school. We’re all Hogwarts students, there’s no reason for this ridiculous infighting.”

“Are you planning on joining, then?” asked Ron.

“Yes, I think I will. I see no reason not to, it shouldn’t interfere too much with studying for N.E.W.T.s, and it will give me a change of pace. Not to mention looking quite good on a resume.”

“Everything with Percy comes back to that,” said Ron under his breath as his brother walked away. “His job, his career, his future. Doesn’t he ever think about how much fun things might be?”

“Well, he has to think about fun a little, at least,” said Draco. “Otherwise he wouldn’t be going out with Penelope Clearwater.”

“Even that might be about where he wants to go,” said Hermione. “If he’s thinking about what will impress people, having a pretty girlfriend – or fiancée, or wife – might be important for him.”

Ron shook his head. “I think he’s really interested in her,” he said. “They don’t act like it’s just business or whatever.”

“I didn’t really think that,” said Hermione. “I was just pointing out that it could be.”

“And maybe saying it’ll be a change of pace is Percy’s way of saying he thinks it would be fun,” said Harry. “I guess it’s against the rules for the Head Boy to actually enjoy anything.”

“Tomorrow night at eight,” said Draco, reading from the poster. “We don’t have practice that night, do we, Harry?”

“No, it’s tonight...” Harry swore, looking at his watch. “I’ve got to finish those problems before dinner, I won’t have time after.”

“And I should get that translation done,” said Draco, leading the way back to the table around which they had been doing their homework.

“I have to write up something about how I use Divination in everyday life,” said Ron, making a face. “I don’t use Divination in everyday life. I always thought what you did with tea leaves was chuck them in the bin, and normal people don’t trace out lines on other people’s hands and tell them they’re going to die next Tuesday from a hippogriff attack.”

“Make something up, then,” advised Harry, opening his Arithmancy book again. “If you’re right about Trelawney, she’ll never know the difference.”

“Good point.” Ron dipped his quill. “I use Divination all the time in everyday life,” he muttered, scribbling. “In the morning, I look for patterns in my porridge to tell me how my day will go...”

“Faker,” said Hermione without any real rancor in her voice.

“You try it,” said Ron.

“No, thanks. There’s a reason I’m not taking Divination.”

“Because Moony told you you wouldn’t like it?” suggested Draco.

“Shut up.”

A contented silence fell over the four.

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Ginny pressed herself against the stone of the archway she hid within, her heart pounding. She held her wand against her chest, ready to bring it down at a moment’s notice, as soon as the person

she could hear around the corner got into range –

“Ha!” she shouted, leaping out and swinging her wand down hard. A spray of red-orange dye shot from the tip, coating Colin Creevey.

“Aww,” Colin complained. “How was I supposed to know you were there?”

“You weren’t,” said Professor Granger-Lupin, coming around the corner. “But you should have been more aware of your surroundings, and walking more quietly. If Ginny hadn’t heard you coming, you might have passed her by.”

Colin frowned, but nodded.

“Switch roles,” Professor Granger-Lupin instructed. “Colin hide, Ginny seek.”

Ginny hid her eyes and began to count. The first practices of the Combat Club were just this – glorified hide-and-go-seek through the halls of Hogwarts, with both sides armed with fake wands. Fred and George had constructed them to Professor Lupin’s specifications, so that the students who had joined the Combat Club wouldn’t be tempted to use illegal spells against one another.

There’s dye everywhere, all over the place – Filch is going to hate us, unless the teachers clean it all up afterwards...

But that didn’t matter right now. What mattered was finding Colin and taking him out before he had a chance to do the same.

One-on-one at first. Next week, pairs. Then threes and fours, then groups of six or eight. By the time of the first competition, we’ll be ready.

She set off, taking care to set her feet down softly, and listening to every rustle and breeze as though Colin might be behind it. That was how one survived.

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With the Combat Club taking up most of his evenings that weren’t full of Quidditch practice, homework occupying his free afternoons and weekends, and finishing his list of Animagus spells any time he had a spare minute, it didn’t really surprise Harry that Halloween was on him before he knew it. He had an extra reason to be excited about the holiday this year – his first ever Hogsmeade day would be on Halloween. Even though only he and Draco had to stay with a chaperone, still, that was better than not being allowed to go at all.

And if they had to have a chaperone, Moony was probably the best one they could have wanted. His lessons were certainly proving to be as interesting as Harry had hoped. They were studying Dark magical creatures, like Red Caps and kappas, and grindylows were next on the schedule.

Harry had lingered after one class, widened his eyes appealingly, and asked in a whisper if it was true they’d be studying *werewolves* near the end of the year. Moony had tapped him lightly on the

head with what Harry had thought at the time was his wand, then shooed him out of the room. It wasn't until he got back to the common room and Draco asked if he wanted to be Ron's brother these days that he realized it had been one of the Gryffindor Combat Club wands, and his hair was covered with red-orange dye.

It was a good thing that Danger's taming power not only kept Moony safe during his transformation, but cut down on the ill effects before and after, Harry thought as he got dressed on Halloween morning. Otherwise, Moony would have been too tired and achy now, two days before the full moon, to go anywhere other than his office, much less escort six excited children through Hogsmeade.

Six, because no one had been able to come up with a good reason why Meghan shouldn't go. She wasn't a student, so the third year rule didn't apply to her. Madam Pomfrey might have been able to forbid it, but by the time anyone thought to apply to her, she had already charged Meghan with some errands in the village. And Padfoot and Letha, when asked, had given their permission, so to Hogsmeade Meghan would go. Ginny was highly disgruntled about this, Luna her usual philosophical self, asking only that Draco bring her back a levitating sherbet ball or two.

When Harry finished his breakfast and joined the rest of the Pride, Moony, and Danger in the entrance hall, Filch was walking up and down the line of students peering at them suspiciously. He gave Meghan a thoroughly nasty look, but said nothing other than, "Well, as they're with you, Professors."

As they approached the gates of Hogwarts grounds, Harry felt a familiar and unpleasant sensation in the pit of his stomach. He had forgotten that to leave the grounds, he would have to pass by the dementors. Draco, too, looked uncomfortable, swallowing several times in a way that didn't seem to have anything to do with breakfast. Ron was shifting his weight from one foot to the other, seemingly impatient with the slow pace of the line. Hermione twisted a handful of her cloak. Meghan made an unhappy sound in her throat. Neville put a hand on her shoulder, and she laid hers on top of his.

Moony drew his wand and murmured something. A silver mist flowed from the tip of his wand and surrounded the group, and Harry felt the chill inside him ease. The dementors drew a little back from their group as they walked out the gates, and before they were very many steps down the path, Harry felt entirely better.

Nothing else is going to go wrong today, he decided. Nothing else at all.

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Danger split off from the main group as they entered Hogsmeade. She had her own errands to run, most of which were purely personal.

Some supplies for my handicrafts. That used bookstore I've heard about. And some presents – Christmas is coming, faster than we like to realize...

“All righ’, there, Danger?” asked a voice she knew well.

“All right, Hagrid,” she said, turning. “You?”

“All righ’. Which’s more’n I kin say fer one’o my poor little knarls. I didn’ think ter bring ‘em in last night, an’ he’s gone an’ caught a chill – an’ I can’ dose him the normal way, yeh know how knarls are.”

“Yes, I know.” Knarls were almost indistinguishable from hedgehogs, the only difference being that knarls were paranoid and would see a bowl of milk not as a gift, but as an attempt to poison them. Hagrid’s usual tactics of leaving sweet potions or syrups where the sick creatures would find them obviously wouldn’t work with a sick knarl.

“Madam Pomfrey tol’ me Meghan migh’ be able ter help, an’ that she was down here in the village. Yeh wouldn’ know where, by any chance?”

“Let me think about it a moment.” Danger closed her eyes, supposedly thinking, in reality tapping Remus’ mind and asking, wordlessly, if she might come in. He allowed it, and she looked out through his eyes at shelves filled with sweet treats and delights.

“Honeydukes,” she said, opening her eyes. “That’s where they said they were going first.”

“All righ’, I’ll try there. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. We’ll see you at the feast, won’t we?”

“I migh’ be a little late, but I’ll be there.” Hagrid strode off down the main street of Hogsmeade, scattering the crowds of students by his mere presence.

Danger smiled, then turned to be off on her own errands.

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“A sick knarl?” Meghan repeated. “I think maybe I can help. Madam Pomfrey taught me one of the spells she uses to give people potions when they’re too sick to wake up. Maybe I could use that on the knarl. May I, Professor, please?” she asked Remus.

“Down at your house?” Remus asked Hagrid. The gamekeeper nodded. “All right, Pearl, but as soon as we get back, no later, and come straight back up to the castle afterwards. I don’t want you wandering around on the grounds after dark, understand?”

Meghan nodded. “I will.”

“Yer a good girl, Meghan,” said Hagrid, stroking her braids gently with one massive finger. “Run along, now.”

Meghan giggled and squeezed between a large third year and a small fifth year in search of her

Pride-mates.

“Don’t tell any of the others that,” advised Remus. “‘Run along,’ that is. They see it as talking down to them.”

“I wouldn’ say it ter them,” protested Hagrid. “On’y said it ter Meghan ‘cause she knows how I mean it. Friendly, like.”

“I know.” Remus smiled up at his friend. “They like you a lot, Hagrid. Harry says your lessons are interesting. What do you have them studying now, besides knarls? Mokes, was it?”

Hagrid nodded. “Af’er Halloween, I think we’ll start mooncalves. Not sure if I kin get one, but we kin talk about ‘em, learn what Muggles think about where they dance – flyin’ saucers an’ aliens an’ all. No need ter look ter other planets fer answers when they’re all righ’ here.”

Remus laughed. “Yes, but the Muggles don’t know that.”

A crash from elsewhere in the shop made both wizards start. “I’d better see what that is,” said Remus, already moving. “I’ll see you at the Feast, Hagrid.”

“See yeh at the Feast!”

The source of the sound had been a Slytherin fourth year trying to climb shelves without making sure they were fully fastened down first. The proprietor of Honeydukes was scolding him shrilly. The Pride looked quite happy to see Remus.

“We’ve bought all we want here,” said Harry over the lecture the witch was giving the embarrassed student. “Can we go to Zonko’s now?”

“Is there any way I can stop you?”

“No,” said Draco and Ron together. They looked at each other and grinned. Ron went on. “I don’t have to stay with you, sir, so I took orders. If you won’t let Harry and Draco go, I’ll just go for them.”

Remus nodded, satisfied. “As it should be. Follow me, then, Zonko’s it is.”

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At Zonko’s, while the boys browsed the shelves happily, Hermione suddenly realized something.

Hagrid! He was right there – I could have asked him my question!

One of the textbooks the class had been using for Care of Magical Creatures claimed hippogriffs had no sense of smell. The other text said that they did, that in fact their capacity to detect and identify scent was quite good. Hermione didn’t like contradictory information. She wanted to know the answers, pure and simple.

And I could have asked Hagrid while he was talking with Moony and Meghan about... whatever they were talking about. I didn't hear.

Maybe I can slip down to his house before the feast. I know I won't be allowed out after, that'll be bedtime, but beforehand I should be allowed.

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Unseen by anyone, a third year stepped into an alley. He took parchment from his satchel and an ever-loaded quill from a pocket, held the parchment against the wall with one hand, and scribbled a note on it with the other. He scratched his head with his quill-holding hand once or twice while he wrote, and when he was done, he laid the note on the ground and dusted his hands off over it. Then he folded it into an irregular shape, dropped it to the ground and stepped on it a few times, and weighted it down with a rock before walking away.

There. Now he owes me. He's supposed to do things like that, I saw the letter myself. He grinned meanly. After I stole it from him.

But he didn't hear them talking. I did. So I did this for him, and now he owes me.

He liked having people owe him. It made life much more interesting.

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Meghan slipped out of Hagrid's house, smiling. The sleeping knarl had responded beautifully to her spell, opening its mouth for the potion it needed without ever waking up in the least. She wished Healing could always be that easy – a simple spell, a simple potion, and the patient would get better, with no more pain or mess or trouble.

But if everything was that easy, then there wouldn't be any challenges. And I love challenges.

She set off up the lawn towards the castle. It was getting dark, and the feast would start soon. Hagrid had offered to walk up with her, but she didn't want to wait for him and possibly be late. Rumor had it that Nearly Headless Nick would be singing a song this year, a song he'd written himself to celebrate his five hundred and first deathday, and reenacting his botched beheading for everyone's entertainment pleasure. She didn't want to miss that.

She had no warning, nothing to upset her or anger her, no emotion that would register on her pendants. All that she could ever recall was a vague confusion – why was the ground suddenly rising up to meet her?

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Hermione hurried down the stairs, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* and *The Monster Book of Monsters* firmly clutched in her arms. She had been thinking of putting this off until tomorrow – it wasn't that urgent, it could wait – but Luna, of all people, had seen her looking at the books, figured out what she wanted, and urged her to go.

“I’ll tell everyone where you went,” she said. “So no one worries. Harry and Draco do that a lot, don’t they?”

“I think they have to,” Hermione replied. “It’s part of being who they are.”

Luna nodded. “They should know by now worrying doesn’t change anything,” she said. “But I suppose if it makes them feel better, it’s all right.” She’d smiled. “But if I tell them, then they can’t worry, so they’ll be unhappy.”

“Perfect,” said Hermione, grinning. “Make them miserable. Just what I love.”

Luna nodded again, smiling widely. “Me too. They’re funny when they’re miserable like that.”

Hermione smiled herself, recalling the conversation, as Hagrid’s hut drew nearer and nearer.

I like Luna. She’s a little funny sometimes, and she believes all kinds of strange things, but she’s a good friend, and she’ll always listen to you, whether you think she’s listening or not. And she doesn’t care what other people think. We could learn from her...

A low cry made Hermione jump nearly a foot. “What in – Crookshanks!” She saw with relief the bushy orange fur of her cat in the growing twilight. “You frightened me! Don’t do that!”

Crookshanks ignored her, circling around a spot and yowling uneasily. Hermione, curious, came to see what he was looking at and frowned. Some crushed grass was all, as if someone had lain down here. But most people didn’t lie out on the grass anymore, now that it was October, nearly November, and likely to be cold and damp.

She sniffed. The odor of freshly broken grass stems came to her. *This just happened. Within a few minutes, or I wouldn’t be able to smell it like this from so small a patch. What’s going on here?*

Crookshanks turned slowly, towards the Forest, and hissed, the hair on his back standing up. Hermione peered in the direction he was looking and felt the hair on her own back prickle. Was that a moving shadow, on the fringe of the Forest – or something else?

She shifted her books to her left arm and drew her wand.

“*Lumos !*”

The light-giving spell illuminated a figure all in black. A man, it was a short, plump man, clothed in black and masked in the same color, as Hermione saw as he turned to face the light –

And draped over his shoulder was an unconscious Meghan.

Hermione shrieked in anger and ran forward, the heat of battle rising in her chest, and felt an answering rumble against her arm –

The Monster Book!

She dropped *Fantastic Beasts* without a qualm, it couldn't help her now. The *Monster Book* was large, but she thought she could manage it, even with just one arm.

Throw it like a Frisbee –

The man seemed to be frozen in shock, but she couldn't count on that lasting long, she had to act now.

“Get him!” she shouted, and flung the *Monster Book* at his head. It flew from her hands, snapping, and attacked the man's face. He yelped in surprise, dropped Meghan to the ground, and vanished –

No, he hadn't vanished – for where he had been, there was something small and gray –

“*Crookshanks !*” Hermione screamed at the top of her lungs, and the cat bolted past her, chasing the tiny creature, which had disappeared into the Forest.

Nothing I can do about him now – Crookshanks will either catch him or not – I just hope he comes back all right – Crookshanks, that is, not him –

Hermione's body moved independently of her babbling mind, running to Meghan's side, first making sure she was alive, then touching her wand to her sister's chest. “*Ennervate !*”

Meghan breathed in sharply and opened her eyes. “Hermione? What's going on?”

“No time, get up, we have to run...” Hermione pulled Meghan to her feet and half-dragged the smaller girl along the edge of the Forest towards Hagrid's house, ignoring the books that lay in the grass. Books could be replaced. Lives couldn't.

It only took a moment or two to reach Hagrid's hut, but it was too long for Hermione's taste. She pounded on the door when she got there, holding Meghan up with her other arm, and dashed inside as soon as Hagrid opened the door. “Close it, quick,” she panted, falling into a chair. “It's not safe.”

“What's wrong?” Hagrid shut the door and crossed quickly to her. “What happened?”

“My head hurts,” said Meghan in a small voice. “And I don't remember anything between starting up to the castle and seeing Hermione.”

Hagrid lifted her gently off her feet with one hand and laid her in his armchair, draping a handmade blanket over her. “Lie still there fer a while,” he told her. “What happened?” he asked Hermione again, more urgently.

Hermione pressed a hand to her chest, where her pendants were still uncomfortably warm. Meghan was pulling hers out of her robes. “He tried to kidnap Meghan – he must have Stunned her from behind – he was trying to get away with her – I don't know how he got onto the grounds in the first place...”

“*Who?*” Hagrid demanded.

Hermione took a deep, trembling breath. “Wormtail,” she said. “It was Wormtail.”

Meghan made a little mew of fear and hid her face in her hands.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 9: Anger and Fear (Year 3)

Chapter 9: Anger and Fear

Sirius closed the door of the training room behind him, grateful now that he had returned to the Auror Office when he did. Active Aurors were given the counter-charms to the security spells at the Ministry, since they might need to be there at any time. Which meant that now, at about nine o'clock at night, he could come here, to the Auror training center, without setting off alarms.

He pointed his wand at the practice dummy in the middle of the room and worked one spell on it that wouldn't be part of a normal training session, then walked over to it and tapped it three times to activate it. "Level three," he told it.

The dummy whirred to life, bringing its false wand into starting position. Sirius took his own stance without bothering to use any of the calming exercises he usually performed when he was about to duel. Level three was well below where he usually worked out, and he didn't particularly want to be calm right now. Instead, he looked at the face he had cast on the dummy and let that face work him into a rage.

You double-crossing, slimy, sneaky rat-bastard, he thought, blocking the dummy's pathetically weak strikes and striking back at it with all his magic and all his anger. *I gave you your life – I stood up and asked that jury to let you live – and this is how you pay me back? Trying to kidnap my daughter? You don't dare face me, or Letha, or Remus and Danger – you have to go after a little girl who's not even in school yet?*

"Too scared to go after someone who might fight back," he growled, blasting a good portion of the dummy's shoulder away. "You don't even dare show your face, you work masked, and shoot from behind. And a teenage witch chased you off with a school book! Why the hell did we ever put up with you? Why didn't we see what you were from the beginning?"

Someone cleared their throat from the doorway. Sirius shut off the dummy and turned around, trying to keep his face from turning too red. "Lo, Tonks," he said.

"Wotcher, Sirius." Tonks leaned against the doorframe as if too tired to stand up straight, her hair a muddy brown. "I heard about Meghan. She'll be all right, then?"

"She should be, she wasn't hurt, just scared, and Letha's with her now..." Sirius frowned. "Wait a second. How did you hear about her?"

"I was looking for you, but you weren't home. I called the Weasleys, and Molly told me you'd gone to Hogwarts. So I headed there, and Letha told me what'd happened, and that you'd gone off to the Ministry. I thought you might be here."

Sirius nodded. "Looking for me specifically, or just for us?"

“You. I found something I think you might want to see.” Tonks held up a slip of parchment with a gloved hand. “I would have given it straight to Letha, but I wasn’t sure if it might be dangerous or something. I know parchment holds poison well, but I don’t know how to check for it. I wanted to run it past you first.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Sirius conjured gloves for himself, pulled them on, and crossed to Tonks’ side to take the parchment from her. Two or three spells confirmed that it was nothing more than it seemed, just a scrap of parchment which seemed to have been torn from a larger piece.

“It’s all right,” he said, leading the way out of the training room, turning back at the last moment to remove Wormtail’s face from the practice dummy. He didn’t want to have to explain that little detail in the morning when the other apprentices showed up. “You think Letha might want to see it?”

“It was Mum’s,” said Tonks quietly, running her finger along the lines of ink. “I found it in the hall, just before I found her. I forgot about it until tonight. Found it in the pocket of the robes I was wearing that day.”

“May I see it?” Sirius made it a request, rather than the order he, as a full Auror, was entitled to give an apprentice. Tonks was not just an apprentice, she was his cousin, and a grieving daughter who had just found something that had belonged to her mother. He shouldn’t take it from her without asking.

Tonks handed it to him, and Sirius sat down on one of the benches in the dressing room outside the practice arena. For the first time, he read what was written on the parchment rather than treating it as a potentially dangerous object. It seemed to have been torn from the left side of a scroll or page.

*I have looked over the notes of Vilius’ last few ap
Minister was not entirely well beginning around t
were noticing it near the end of this past winter, but
and Rufus Scrimgeour, on the other hand, were per
Yet the same unusual compound was found in all
is never found in a normal witch or wizard, ill or heal
from these facts – all three of the subjects were delib
and Bones suddenly, but only Vilius succumbed com*

Sirius felt a prickling along the back of his neck, a shivery feeling he hadn’t experienced in years. It meant something was happening, or had happened, that he needed to pay attention to.

“You’ve looked at this?” he asked Tonks.

“Only a little.” She sat down across from him. “Just enough to know that Mum wrote it. Why?”

“These words.” Sirius tapped the jagged right edge of the scrap. “If we can figure out what they were supposed to be, we’ll have a better idea of what this means. I’ll be right back, I’m going to

grab some parchment and a couple of quills.”

“Aren’t you supposed to send the apprentice to do that?”

“The apprentice doesn’t know the password to turn off the office security charms,” Sirius reminded her. “For that matter, how did you get in here without setting everything off?”

“You turned it all off when you came in.”

Oh. “All right. I’ll be back in a second.” Sirius hurried down the hall to the cubicles, flicking off the security charms absently as he went, and turned unerringly into his own cubicle. He scooped up quills, an ink bottle, and some spare parchment from his desk with his right hand, holding his lit wand in his left. Somewhere between battling the dummy and this new enigma Tonks had provided, his fear-fueled anger had drained out of him, leaving only interest and excitement.

This scrap of parchment was going to be important, he knew it.

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“Important is an understatement,” said Aletha, shaking her head. “How the hell did I forget? How did we all forget? Andy was working on *two* projects. Not just the Longbottoms, but on Vilias and Bones and Scrimgeour. And the notes on the Longbottoms were covered in potion, but the other notes were just gone. Gone so thoroughly, no one even thought to look for them.”

“Tonks found this in the hall,” said Sirius, tapping the small piece of parchment, which lay between them on the table. “And she remembers hearing a loud noise just after she called out. I think that might have been whoever killed Andy, Apparating out.”

“And taking the notes they didn’t want us to have. Except that they dropped a piece.” Aletha’s smile had a touch of the sardonic about it. “Not the most informative piece, but informative enough. This line with the letters *delib*. You came up with *deliberate*, or *deliberately*. *All three of the subjects were deliberately ... something.* Put that together with *unusual compound and never found in a normal witch or wizard, ill or healthy*, and what do you get?”

“Poison.” Sirius nodded grimly. “They were poisoned.”

“And here, these top lines.” Aletha pointed to them. “She seems to be saying that the reason Vilias died from it was because he hadn’t been well previously.”

“That’s right, I remember Arthur noticing he wasn’t coming to work as much,” Sirius recalled.

“But Bones and Scrimgeour were healthy to begin with, so it just made them ill.” Aletha scowled. “It makes too much sense for my liking. This goes to work with me on Monday, I’ll give it to their primary Healers. Knowing they were deliberately poisoned might help speed their recovery.”

“Unfortunately, it tells me nothing new,” said Sirius. “Nothing about *who* might have done this, or *why*.”

“That seems obvious enough,” said Aletha. “Who would want Fudge back in power? Other than Fudge himself, of course?”

Sirius growled softly. “The man Fudge once insisted was innocent. The man who could probably still manipulate Fudge, if he had enough money.”

“That’s what I think.” Aletha grinned. “Good thing he doesn’t have enough money. He only has whatever he pulled out that first time.”

“Remind me to thank Amy,” said Sirius. “If she hadn’t thought of that, who knows what Lucius would’ve done with that money?”

“Nothing good,” said Aletha quietly. “That’s all we can be sure of.”

As if that weren’t enough.

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Even Neville avoided the hospital wing for a few days after Halloween. After Meghan’s initial and understandable reaction of fear to her near-kidnapping, she progressed, in some way known only to herself, to irritability with the entire world. No one could say even the most innocuous thing to her without her snapping back at them, and it was only Madam Pomfrey’s threat to stop her lessons until her bedside manner improved that started calming her down.

The first Combat Club competition brought Meghan back to normal entirely. No one saw any reason to bar her from the club, since real wands were never used, and she could swing the false ones around as well as anyone. She was her father’s daughter, after all, and it seemed that mock violence was just what she needed to work off some of her emotions.

For purposes of play, Meghan was designated an honorary Gryffindor. Two Hufflepuffs who had thought she would be an easy “kill” found out the hard way that she was both fast on the draw and never far from Neville, who came charging in at her scream and “killed” the Hufflepuff who had just “killed” her.

The rest of the Pride also acquitted themselves well, forming a small unit of their own within the larger “army” of the combined Houses they fought for. Hermione, Ron, and Ginny were “killed,” Ron and Ginny while running a mission into enemy territory, Hermione, to her chagrin, because she’d forgotten that if she could see the enemy, the enemy could see her. The “last man standing” battle was a narrow victory for Gryffindor and Ravenclaw over Slytherin and Hufflepuff.

Harry, Ron, Draco, and Ginny had a different sort of battle on their minds. Wood was being deliberately cagy about who he planned to field for the first Quidditch match, against Hufflepuff, so the three reserves were flying just as hard as the first-string team. Finally, two days before the match, Wood made his announcement. Ginny and Ron, but not Draco, would take the field.

“It’s not because you’re no good, Black,” he told Draco after practice. “It’s the other way around.

You're good enough that I don't have to season you. Weasley still freezes up if he makes a mistake. The only way to correct that is to let him play."

"He's trying to help, but it doesn't help," Draco said in frustration the night before the match, kicking at the leg of the bed from where he lay on the blue carpet. "And I know it's stupid and babyish and everything, but I want to play! I want to be out there and score points for the team, not sit in the stands and watch and not be able to do anything!"

"You can't help wanting what you want," said Hermione from the bed. "And you're not yelling at him, or demanding he let you play. I think you're doing right."

"Knowing it's right doesn't make it any easier."

"No?"

Draco grumbled. "Maybe a little."

"Good for you, then."

Draco reached up to where several brown tendrils stuck over the edge of the bed and batted at one. Hermione squeaked. "Stop that!"

"Wasn't me," said Draco with a straight face. "Crookshanks did it."

"No, he didn't."

"Yes, he did."

"No, he didn't, because he isn't even here. He's asleep on my bed in the dormitory, so there!"

Crookshanks had returned from the Forest on Halloween alive and well but covered in burrs and scratches. The girls had petted him for hours, gently pulling the seeds from his fur, and treated his scratches with an ointment Madam Pomfrey had given them. He was still on edge, though, looking here and there vigilantly as if Wormtail might suddenly appear out of a hole in the wall and allow himself to be chased down and caught.

There had been no further sign of Wormtail, or of Lucius Malfoy, and no one could figure out how Wormtail had gotten onto Hogwarts grounds. The wards, specially designed to keep out even something as small as a rat, showed no signs of tampering, and Filch swore up and down that no one but authorized students and teachers had entered or left the grounds all day. Students were now forbidden to leave the castle after dark unless in the company of a teacher.

"Going to be stormy tomorrow," said Draco thoughtfully, squirming around until his feet were under the bed. "Lots of rain and wind, even lightning. Maybe it's just as well I'm not flying."

"You still don't like storms, do you?"

“No.”

“I think they’re interesting.”

“I know you do. You’ll probably be watching the storm as much as the match.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Draco groaned. “*Girls*,” he said to the ceiling, which disdained to reply.

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Harry looked up at the ceiling of the Great Hall, which was a morass of swirling gray. “Lovely day,” he remarked to Ron.

“Worse for you than me,” said Ron, taking another bite of toast. “The Snitch’ll be near impossible to see in this weather. And Diggory’s bigger than you, so he won’t get blown around near as much.”

“I’ve got a good broom, and I’m good,” said Harry with as much confidence as he could muster. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’ve got glasses, too,” said Luna from across the table.

“You’re only noticing this now?” inquired Ron.

“Glasses get all smeary in the rain. Harry might have trouble seeing through them.”

“I didn’t think of that,” said Harry, taking off his glasses to look at them. “She’s right.”

“She’s almost always right,” said Draco. “You just have to get past the obvious bits.”

“I have an idea,” said Hermione from down the table. “Harry, can I see your glasses?”

Harry passed them to the red-topped blur which was Ron and watched him turn to the brown-topped one which was Hermione. A few blurry movements and an “*Impervius!*” later, Hermione handed them back to Ron. “Try pouring something on them,” she directed him. “Pumpkin juice is fine.”

Ron set the glasses carefully on the table and was about to upend his goblet over them when Ginny held her hand out to stop him. “Hold on,” she said, picking the glasses up and setting them on a clean plate. “Just because we don’t do the laundry is no reason to make more work for the house-elves.”

“Girls,” Ron muttered to Harry. “Shall I?”

“Be my guest.”

Ron dumped his pumpkin juice out over Harry's glasses. The juice flowed around the glasses as though they had a shield spell on them. Harry picked them up – they were completely dry. He put them back on and grinned down at Hermione. "You're a lifesaver, Neenie."

"Thanks," said Hermione, her cheeks turning pink.

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Playing Quidditch in the rain wasn't high on Harry's list of favorite things to do – he was soaked through, and his hands were starting to go numb – but thanks to Hermione's spell, at least he could see. He could hear only scraps and snatches of the commentary, and didn't bother trying to keep track of it, instead watching the game.

Fred Weasley and a Hufflepuff Beater sent a Bludger steadily back and forth between them for nearly three minutes straight, until Ginny flew past with the Quaffle and the Bludger detoured to chase her. George intercepted it and slammed it towards the Hufflepuff Keeper, allowing Ginny to score, and the Gryffindors cheered, their voices almost drowned out by a huge clap of thunder. Harry joined them, pumping his fist in the air as Ginny flew past him, then resuming his high circles, searching the pitch for any sign of a tiny, golden, winged ball.

Gryffindor scored twice more and Hufflepuff once before Harry found himself hovering near the teachers' seats. Danger and Moony waved to him, and he waved back. After one more quick look for the Snitch, he turned back to them and opened his right hand, one finger at a time, then mimed a questioning shrug.

What's the score?

Moony tapped himself on the chest, pointed upwards, then held up his right hand with all the fingers extended.

We're up by fifty, Harry interpreted. He tossed a thanks in their direction, then turned his broom to keep looking. Katie had the Quaffle; she was being ganged up on by two Hufflepuff Chasers, but Alicia and Ginny were coming in at two different angles, so she'd be able to pass to one of them soon. Ron was watching the tangle anxiously, with one of the twins hovering beside him and the other flying beside Ginny.

A flash of yellow caught Harry's eye – Diggory, flying up the field as though his broom-tail were on fire...

He must have seen the Snitch!

Harry leaned so far forward on his Nimbus he was practically lying on the handle, urging it to greater and greater speed. "Come on, come on," he whispered to it. "Come on, you can do it..."

He was catching up to Diggory, but something had changed. Something was unreal about this moment, this place, this action. His hands were still stiff with cold, his face lashed by rain, but the

screams of the crowd and the roar of the wind were gone, replaced by an uncanny silence.

Harry gasped as a wave of cold worse than any he had felt before this rushed suddenly over him and into him, chilling him from the inside out. He couldn't move, he couldn't even think. All he could do was cling to his broom handle and try to breathe as his chest constricted, his muscles seizing up in the cold...

And then the screaming started.

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Dripping water and a whining little-girl voice echoing in his ears, Ron sped up the pitch, headed for a motionless red-robed figure high above him. He was shivering, whether from the dementors' chill or his pendants' he couldn't tell. It didn't matter.

Harry passed out the last time, and that was just with one – there's got to be a hundred of them down there. He'll fall for sure.

I sat there and let him almost die last year. I'm not going to do it again!

He leaned forward more, silently begging his old, broken-down broomstick for more speed, his eyes fixed on Harry's unmoving form. But no, he wasn't unmoving – he was starting to tilt to one side with the limp motion that meant he couldn't be conscious –

Ron altered course, swerving to one side and down, and released his broom handle with one hand. As he came level with Harry's falling body, he caught his friend's wrist and pulled him onto the broomstick, then carefully eased out of the steep dive and headed back towards the ground.

His landing was not all that could have been desired. A charitable person would have described it as "not very gentle" or "a little rocky," while someone less polite but more accurate would have said that Ron crashed into the middle of the Ravenclaw stands.

But a good landing is one you walk away from, he thought dizzily as the Ravenclaws helped him up and a seventh year conjured a stretcher for Harry. *And a great landing is one where you can reuse the broom.*

By that standard, his landing had definitely been good. The jury was still out on whether or not it had been great.

But I need a new broom anyway.

xXxXx

"Lucky you remembered what happened on the train."

"What were those things doing on the grounds anyway?"

“Are they why it got so dark, so fast?”

Dark, he remembered dark. Dark, with only the one source of light, and even that mostly blocked by the shape of a person. The screaming was coming from the person, and it was aimed at him, and he hated it. But as much as he hated it, he wanted it to keep going, because as soon as it was over, the light would be gone too, and he would be alone, trapped in the dark.

His hands quested outward, but found no confining bars, nothing but the edge of a bed, and empty space beyond. That was good, or at least he thought it was.

“Look! He’s moving... Harry? Harry, are you awake?”

“Er...” Harry gave the question serious consideration. “Yeah. I think.” Another moment’s thought reminded him of how his eyes opened. He put that knowledge into use and felt a rush of relief at the light surrounding him. Once he could see it past all the people, that was. Almost the entire Gryffindor Quidditch team was standing around his bed, plus the Pride and the Pack, which added up to...

Wood’s not here, so the team minus him and me is five. Pride without me is seven, Pack-parents are four. Five, seven, twelve, sixteen.

Something about the simple addition calmed him, and the screaming and the darkness faded further into his memory. “What happened?” he asked, sitting up.

“Dementors happened,” said Padfoot grimly. “Every single one of them left their posts to come feed off the match. Lucky Ron thought fast enough to fly up and catch you when you passed out – we were all so busy trying to fend them off, we might not have noticed you were falling until too late to do anything.”

“I knew Quidditch was a high-injury sport, but you seem to take it to new levels, Harry,” added Danger. “This is what, the third time you’ve ended up in hospital after a Quidditch game, out of a grand total of five you’ve ever played in?”

“This wasn’t actually related to the game, though,” Harry objected. “Why do they do that to me?”

“We’re not sure,” said Moony, moving forward a little so that Harry could see his hands, carefully placed in the signal for *Later*. “We’ll be looking into it.”

“I’m double glad I wasn’t flying,” added Draco. “One incapacitated player is enough.”

Harry dredged up a little smile at this, since it was obviously meant to be humorous. “What happened with the match, then? Did they call it off, or are we going to continue later?”

Everyone suddenly found somewhere else to look. Harry’s insides chilled again, and added twisting to their repertoire. Diggory had been going after the Snitch when the dementors had showed up...

“Did we – lose?” He hated his voice. It sounded so weak, so timid, like a little kid unwilling to believe that because of one bad shot, all his best Gobstones suddenly belong to his friend.

Ginny nodded. “Diggory got the Snitch right before Madam Hooch called time-out,” she said, then tried a smile which didn’t quite work. “What she called it for was actually Ron leaving the goal area, not for the dementors. She hadn’t noticed them yet. So she was about to give Hufflepuff a penalty shot.”

“But they didn’t need one,” said George. “They won by a hundred.”

Angelina sighed at the look on Harry’s face. “This wasn’t your fault,” she said, pushing him lightly on the shoulder. “You can’t help what those things do to you. And we’re not out of the running yet – if Ravenclaw beats Hufflepuff, and then we beat Ravenclaw...”

“But Ravenclaw’d have to win by a huge margin,” said Alicia. “At least two hundred.”

“That’s not so big,” said Katie. “That’s just fifty up, and then the Snitch, we’ve done that before.”

“But I don’t think Ravenclaw’s going to be thinking about our chances when they play...”

“No, but they’ll be thinking about theirs. The more points they get, the better for them. It just happens to be better for us, too.”

Harry wasn’t really listening to this, it was just falling into his ears. They had lost. He had lost. He’d fallen down on the job, literally, and now Gryffindor’s chances of winning the Quidditch Cup were all but gone. Wood would never hold the Cup high as was the winning captain’s right...

“Where’s Wood, anyway?” he asked.

“Showers,” said Fred. “We’ll have to check on him, make sure he hasn’t drowned... come on, Harry, don’t do this to yourself. We had to lose sometime.”

“And we still have a chance,” added George. “We’ll come back from this, you watch. No trouble at all.”

Harry nodded a little without really paying attention to what had been said, and lay down on the bed again, closing his eyes. He didn’t want to think, because thinking would mean acknowledging what had happened. Acknowledging loss, and his own weakness... what must the team think of him, fainting when dementors came near? At least only the Pride had been there to see his collapse on the train. This one had been in front of the whole school, and there was no good trying to hide it, not when it had decided the Quidditch game.

When he next looked up, the room was clearer than it had been. The team, except for Ginny and Ron, had left. The Pack-parents were at the other end of the room talking with Madam Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore. The Pride was spread out over the beds immediately next to Harry’s own, talking quietly or watching him.

Harry looked at Ron. “Thanks,” he said, brushing two fingers against his cheek and holding out his hand.

“You’re welcome.” Ron started to grasp Harry’s hand, then, remembering, brushed his own fingers against his cheek before shaking hands.

“Same thing as before?” asked Draco.

“What?”

“Did you hear the same thing this time that you did before, on the train?”

Why do you want to know that? “I don’t remember. How come?”

Draco shrugged. “No reason. Just, I heard something different this time. I wondered if you did too.”

Harry made a noncommittal noise. In fact, he wasn’t sure if he’d heard the same thing. Both times had involved screaming, was all that he was sure of. He cast about for a different, safer conversational topic. “You didn’t grab my broom while you were up there, did you?” he asked Ron.

“Er, no, sorry,” said Ron, looking suddenly stricken. “Harry, about your broom...”

“It blew away when you fell off,” said Neville. “The wind carried it right out of the stadium. Right over to...” He squirmed a little. “To the Whomping Willow.”

“My broomstick blew into the Whomping Willow?” repeated Harry numbly. This was turning out to be the worst Quidditch match ever. He knew all about the Whomping Willow from stories of Marauder days at Hogwarts. Padfoot had avoided the tree religiously during his year as a teacher, claiming it remembered him and knew exactly where to hit. “Did it... is it bad?”

Hermione picked up a small bag sitting on the floor and handed it to Harry. “I’m sorry,” she said, gesturing to it. “That was all we could find.”

Harry emptied the bag onto the bedspread. There was no piece there longer than his hand, and all traces of the once smooth, glossy finish of the handle and the fine sheen of the twigs had vanished. The only thing his Nimbus Two Thousand could possibly be good for now was starting a fire.

For a moment or two, he wanted to cry. It was stupid, it was just a broomstick, but it was his broomstick, the one he’d had ever since he was a first year, the one he’d flown every Quidditch game on, and now it was just a pile of kindling.

Then something came to mind. A promise, made half in jest, before the year started. A promise owing from the Pack-parents to him.

“If you need a new broom while you’re in school...”

Harry sat up a little straighter. Maybe this wasn't such a total loss after all.

"You remember what Moony said at Diagon Alley?" he asked Draco. "When I was saying I never get anything new?"

"No – wait, yes." Draco grimaced. "You lucky little... did you know this was coming?"

"No! If I'd known, don't you think I would have tried to catch the Snitch before the dementors showed up?"

"I'm missing something here," said Ron.

"At Diagon Alley, when I got Morpheus, Harry was complaining about how he got the old owl, and the old broomstick," Draco explained. "Moony promised him that if he needed a new broom while he was still in school, he could get the very best and newest thing."

Ron's eyes widened. "No. No way. You're not getting..."

Harry nodded. "If they live up to it, I am."

"Can I have a go?"

"Of course. Once I get it. Probably for Christmas, we don't have a game until after then, and I can ride a school broom for practice."

"Maybe we should put a seat belt on it," said Draco. "Just in case the dementors crash the next match too."

Harry picked up the longest piece of his Nimbus and hit Draco on the head with it. "Try it. Just try it. I'll hex you so hard you can't even walk."

"I'll hex you back so you can't sit down."

"I'll hex you back so you can't eat."

"I'll hex you back so you can't see."

"I'll hex you both so you can't talk if you don't stop it!" snapped Hermione from the next bed over.

But Draco had a point, Harry thought. What if the dementors did come to the next Quidditch match? What if they came onto the grounds at some other time? He needed some way to defend himself against them, something he could do to ward them off, or keep himself protected from their effects.

He knew that the only charm effective against them was called a Patronus, and that it was tricky, advanced magic. He knew full well that Letha could do one – the story of the day she had chased

one away from Padfoot when it was just about to Kiss him was standard den-night material – and he assumed Moony could as well, since he had chased out the one which had entered their compartment on the Hogwarts Express. He didn't know about Padfoot or Danger.

He also didn't know what a Patronus really looked like, other than silvery and some kind of animal, or how to cast one. Was it the spell itself which was complicated, or was it just that it required so much power and concentration that it would be hard for a young wizard or witch to do?

I can at least try. Anything's better than just sitting there and letting them knock me flat on my arse.

I have to be mad. I've got classes, Quidditch, Combat Club, Animagus training, and now I want to add something else?

But this is important. I need it. What if this happens again?

I'll ask Moony about it tomorrow.

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“You want to learn to do a Patronus?” Moony repeated. “I suppose it's not a bad idea, but it's very difficult, Harry. You might not be able to get the hang of it for a long time. And even if you do, it's draining. Unless you can cast a corporeal Patronus – and most wizards can't – you have to keep feeding it energy to keep it alive.”

“Big word,” said Harry. “Corp... something.”

“Corporeal? Bodily, having a body. A corporeal Patronus is more than mist or vapor, it's a shape, detached from the wizard or witch who cast it. It is the most advanced stage of the spell.”

“Can you do one?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see?”

“If you like.” Moony drew his wand. “*Expecto Patronum !*”

Harry watched as silver mist fountained from the wand and formed itself into a life-sized silver wolf, which frisked once around the room, then sat down at Moony's feet and wagged its tail before fading away. “Would mine be a wolf?” he asked.

“I don't know. It's different for everyone, you see, depending on what or whom you see as protecting you. Sirius' was a dog when he was a young man, and even through our first years as the Pack, but these days it's a winged horse, and Aletha's is the dog.”

“Is yours a wolf for Danger, then?”

“You’re not to repeat this, but yes.”

Harry grinned to see Moony’s embarrassed flush. “I won’t. Is hers a lion?”

“It should be, if the pattern holds true. She’s never had occasion to try one out, and I’d rather she not. She’s never been easy with wand-using magic.”

“Can I try it?” Harry drew his own wand.

“The Patronus? No, Harry, not right now. I don’t have time today to show you how to do it properly – not that it’s hard, but I’d rather teach you right the first time. Spells improperly used can backfire and have all kinds of bad effects. Also, you’ll need to be sure you’re not under any spells that might interfere.”

“Under any spells? You mean, spells someone else put on me?”

“Yes.”

“Why would someone else put a spell on me?”

“Maybe because they wanted to keep track of you?”

“Keep track... do you have a spell on me?”

“Yes. Or rather, Danger has a spell on you. All eight of you.”

“What for?”

Moony gave him a penetrating look. “Considering your past history, we wanted to be absolutely sure you wouldn’t try any of the Animagus spells on your own. The spell lets us keep track of your progress magically, without interfering with any of your own magic. So it shouldn’t get in the way of you learning to do a Patronus, but you always need to ask around before you learn something new and powerful, just in case.”

“Just in case somebody’s spying on me,” muttered Harry.

“Nobody’s spying on you, Harry. The spell works below your conscious level, so there’s no way we could tap into any of your thoughts. It would only alert us if you tried magic you weren’t supposed to.”

Harry still didn’t like it, but he had to admit, the Pride did have a history of getting into places they weren’t supposed to be. So far, at least, they always got out again, but that might not last.

“What’s the spell?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Just so I can tell Hermione. She’ll want to know all about it.”

Moony chuckled. “She does like to know things. The incantation is actually sex-linked, so it had to be cast separately on the boys and the girls. *Expositium tiro* for the boys, and *tira* for the girls. You can tell her that.”

“*Expositium ira* ?” Harry repeated.

“No, *tira* . *Ira* would be something completely different...” Moony trailed off. Apparently he’d just had a riveting thought. Then he came back to the moment with a little shake of his head. “Speaking of Animagus, how are you all coming?”

“I really think we might be done this time,” said Harry. “Neville found the spell to give his form its magical properties at den-night, and everyone else was already finished.”

Moony raised an eyebrow, and Harry suddenly realized he’d said more than he meant to.

Did I just give away about the Hogwarts Den?

But all Moony said was, “I’ll arrange for a meeting Monday evening. Bring your lists, and we’ll double-check. If you really are all finished, then you can start actually doing the spells. One at a time, and you’re not to practice any of them on your own until we’ve seen you successfully do and undo the change. Understood?”

“Yes, *sir* .” Harry saluted briskly.

“Watch the attitude, Greeneyes,” Moony warned, and Harry ducked as a fireball zipped around his head. “You never know what your adversary may do.”

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Once Harry was gone, Remus sat back in his chair and checked in the back of his head. Danger’s mental tie hummed with quiet busyness. She was probably reading or knitting, or both. That was good. He didn’t want to be disturbed doing this.

We have been fighting more than could really be explained by just stress. Little things, but they keep flaring into actual fights rather than just smoothing down like they used to.

Might there be a reason?

Harry’s slip of the tongue had shown Remus just how easy such a slip could be. What if Danger had slipped in that way? What if she had, all unknowing, cast a misspoken spell on herself?

The spell as it stands means approximately “show the beginner.” Meaning, show me what the beginner is doing, tell me if the beginner does something inappropriate. But with a slip like Harry made, it would mean “show the anger.” And if Danger miscast it that way, it would have backfired, and taken effect on her instead – and she would likely have thought it just went away,

since she never studied magical theory.

And anything that affects her, affects me.

Remus got up and went to the mirror. Pointing his wand at it, he spoke the incantation which would turn it into a scrying tool for magic. It went black for a moment, as though it had been suddenly covered with crape, and then his image was in it again, but overlaid with sparkling traces. His bond with Danger, stretching off into the distance – the magic of his Animagus form, with him always thanks to the potion he'd drunk – the fading traces of the Patronus he'd cast to show Harry – a few other minor spells –

And, in the background and hard to see but definitely there, something which should not be. A twisted, misshapen spell, lying deep within his mind, subtly warping his responses to situations more towards anger than towards his normal polite conciliation. He could even see the faint track of it in their bond, where it had become stronger over the past few months.

At least I know it wasn't an enemy doing this to us. It was just an accident, a slip of the tongue.

And, thank goodness, easy enough to fix.

He removed the charm from the mirror and went in search of Danger.

Time to get things back to normal.

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"I doubt it was all the fault of the spell," said Danger, after it had been removed and the Lupins were sitting together. "You probably would have hit Snape for saying what he said even without it."

"And you would still have been angry with me for that, and rightfully so." Remus nodded. "But I wouldn't have overreacted afterwards the way I did."

"And I wouldn't have been so touchy when you asked me for what is really just common courtesy, asking before I come into your mind." Danger laid her head against his shoulder. "I'm so sorry. I never knew this would happen."

"Just... tell me from now on if a spell goes bad on you, all right? I'd rather not find out something like this is affecting us in the middle of a battle, or on a stake-out."

"Pack honor." Danger lifted her right hand. "Tell you the instant anything goes wrong."

Remus grinned. "Dear God, I'll never get any work done again."

Danger squealed with indignation and slapped him. Remus captured her hands between his own and took full advantage of the situation.

Letha was right. The best part of fighting is the making up.

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Aletha set down her quill with a satisfied sigh. She'd have to check her maths later, but for now, she rather thought she was finished. The proportions had all worked out, creating a potion which might not be entirely pleasant to drink, but wouldn't be actively harmful either. More to the point, it would begin to do what needed to be done.

If anything can. What kind of power will be needed to heal the effects of twelve years of madness?

She pushed that thought aside. Her job was to brew the potion, make sure it wouldn't harm the Longbottoms, then see if it would help them. After that...

Why don't we deal with "after that," after that.

The Floo chimed. Aletha got to her feet and went out into the music room to greet Sirius with a kiss. Her love looked somewhat annoyed, she noticed. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"You had to be all goody-goody-Healer and tell Scrimgeour's Healers he'd been poisoned, didn't you?" Sirius flopped down on the couch. "He's back, and he's a bloody pain to work with. Robards was a hell of a lot easier."

"Robards was so overworked, you never saw him."

"Exactly. Plus, Robards didn't have some kind of personal vendetta against me. I have no idea why Scrimgeour doesn't like me, but he doesn't. He keeps 'dropping by' and just standing in my doorway and staring at me. Three times today. It's starting to really bother me."

Aletha thought of everything she could say at this point and decided to go for the path of least resistance. "I have only one request."

"What?"

"Don't do anything he can trace to you."

Sirius snickered. "We really have corrupted you, haven't we?"

"You didn't do anything I didn't want you to."

"I know." Sirius moved in for a kiss of his own. "I know."

Having the Den to themselves had some definite perks, Aletha decided.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 10: Badger's Son (Year 3)

Chapter 10: Badger's Son

“You put a spell on yourself *by accident* ?” Aletha chuckled. “I don’t think even Sirius has ever managed that one.”

Danger stuck her tongue out briefly at her sister. “Well, I’m sure it wasn’t the only reason we’ve been squabbling more than usual. Stress has something to do with it, and the fact that we’re both working hard now. The spell was just an extra irritant.”

“At a time when you really didn’t need one.” Aletha nodded. “I know how that can be. It’s the little things that really pile up and get you, isn’t it?”

“You know it.” Danger leaned back in her chair with a sigh. “Lord, I am so glad I can come home for a few hours every so often. Not that I don’t love it at Hogwarts, I do, but...”

“It’s like you told me last year. Hogwarts is such a busy place that it can wear you out. So you come home to the Den for a little while and recharge yourself, and then head back and beat some sense into those troublesome brats we raised.”

Danger chuckled. “As if I could. As if anyone could. At least they have plenty to keep them busy.”

“Yes, how are their... private lessons coming?”

“Very well, actually. Harry and Hermione both have one of the spells down pat. Ron’s almost got one, Ginny had one work for her once but then couldn’t do it again. The others are coming along, making the same mistakes they always make, but that’s what Remus is good at. He really is a fine teacher.”

Aletha sighed a little, swaying on her feet as she looked out the kitchen window. “He’d make a fine father.”

“He does make a fine father,” Danger corrected mildly.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do. And let’s not get into it, please.”

“All right. But you have to pick a new topic of conversation, then.”

“Your work,” said Danger promptly. “How is it going?”

“Well, you know I finished my calculations last week. What you didn’t know is that I’m planning on starting the brewing soon. Possibly today, if that shipment of peanut papers comes in.”

“Good luck with that, then.”

“Thank you.”

“And there is something I wanted to ask you,” said Danger. “Not about your work, exactly, but about that scrap of parchment Tonks found, the one that told the Healers that Bones and Scrimgeour had been poisoned. Didn’t they suspect foul play back when it first happened? Why wouldn’t they know that already?”

“It was a very subtle poison, and very rare,” said Aletha. “Not even many Healers have heard of it. It disguises itself as things normally found in the body, and doesn’t show up on most poison tests. You have to test for one specific compound in order to find it. And it’s not supposed to cause death at all, especially not from heart failure, which is what Vilius died of, so the Healers ruled it out when they were testing. They couldn’t figure out why Bones and Scrimgeour weren’t recovering, but of course it was the poison. It keeps working unless you neutralize it with a highly specific spell and potion combination.”

“But when you do…”

Aletha shrugged. “The person’s back on their feet within a few days. That’s the oddest thing – it doesn’t cause any permanent damage. It just makes its victim ill, and keeps them ill, until they get the antidote. It’s like whoever poisoned them didn’t want them dead.”

“Except Vilius.”

“Except Vilius – but they might not have wanted him dead, either, only they didn’t know that he’d been ill for a long time, or they did but didn’t realize how much that would add to the poison’s effects. I don’t know. It probably doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Probably not.”

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Upstairs, Remus looked up from a packet of papers. “This is good,” he said. “This is really good.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Maybe a little. You’ve been blocked for quite a while.”

Sirius shrugged. “I think the Mandragora did it. When it un-rock-ified my body, it did the same thing to my brain.”

Remus shook his head. “It’d take more than Mandragora to do that,” he said with certainty. “More like a miracle.”

“I ignore you,” said Sirius with dignity. “Notice that I have heard nothing.”

“Mr. Moony submits that Mr. Padfoot always starts hearing nothing right about the time the conversation stops going his way.”

“Mr. Padfoot agrees, but reminds Mr. Moony of his tendency to do the same.”

“Mr. Moony would like to know if Mr. Padfoot would be amenable to having his manuscript thrown out the window.”

“Mr. Padfoot would force Mr. Moony to go out there and pick it all up again.”

“Mr. Moony would tell Mr. Padfoot to do it himself.”

“Mr. Padfoot would tell Madam Danger on Mr. Moony.”

“Cheater.”

Sirius grinned. “If it means I win...”

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“How goes the Combat Club?” asked Aletha over dinner.

“Oh, wonderfully. The next competition is in just about a week. Don’t tell anyone, but we’ve pulled the slips for it already – it’s Gryffindor and Hufflepuff versus Ravenclaw and Slytherin.”

“That’s twice you’ve been lucky,” said Sirius. “You know what’s going to happen when you pull Gryffindor and Slytherin, don’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” said Remus. “They’ll be so busy fighting each other that Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff will get an easy win, and Gryffindor and Slytherin will be horribly humiliated. Maybe it’ll teach them to work with their allies, no matter who those allies are.”

“We can only hope.” Danger rolled her eyes. “At least Snape won’t be able to claim favoritism, if our House – adopted House, for me – goes down with his.”

“And we’ve been very careful to stay officially neutral about the matches,” added Remus.

“Luckily, those wands we got from Fred and George make it easy to tell hits from misses. And the dye’s non-toxic and washes right out, so no one can claim we poisoned them or ruined their favorite robes.”

“You know, it almost makes me want to be back at school myself,” said Sirius. “Skulking around the hallways of Hogwarts, searching out my enemies, finding them and destroying them where they lair – say, can you control how much dye comes out of those wands?”

Danger chuckled. “Yes, but the students don’t know that. They’ve only been using them on the one level, because none of them have thought to ask if they’re adjustable or not. The twins are sworn to secrecy about it. The first person to ask gets the advantage for their House. I have some money

on a Ravenclaw asking first. Remus thinks Hermione will think of it.”

“So if you knew the right command, you could set your wand to bombard a room?”

Remus nodded. “You could even – I wouldn’t recommend it, but it’s possible – set your wand to explode and toss it in like a grenade. Come to think, that wouldn’t be a bad use for broken wands, if the war ever starts again.”

Sirius laughed. “I’ll have to bring that up at work.”

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Harry pressed himself against the wall, breathing as quietly as he could. This was a new type of match to him, because the Pride had never had enough people to pull it off – a “VIP” match, where the object of the game was to keep certain people on your own side safe and capture or kill those of your opponent, with more points assigned for a live capture than for a kill. The catch was that neither side could be sure they had complete or correct information about their opponent’s VIP’s.

Harry was almost certain the Slytherclaws would conflate the game with reality and go after him, whether they’d been told he was a VIP for the Gryfflepuff team or not. In truth, he wasn’t. Luna, of all people, had been selected as a Gryfflepuff VIP, along with a Gryffindor sixth year and a pair of Hufflepuff fifth years. Luna was being kept safely behind the lines, while the other three were spread out, with the people in their vicinity having orders to fight just a little harder for them. If their opponents didn’t already know about their VIP status, there was no reason to give it away.

There . Harry’s insides tightened with anticipation – footsteps on the stone, and whispering voices. They couldn’t be Gryfflepuffs, not unless they were scouts coming back from a mission, and there were too many of them to be that. Three, five, eight –

Harry backed up three careful steps and listened again. He wasn’t mistaken. What sounded like the main attack force was coming through here.

And I’m the farthest out – alone –

Part of him wanted to stay and fight it out, insisting that running would be cowardly. Harry wrestled that part to the ground and sat on it. *I’m one person. There’s at least twenty of them, probably more. I’m going to need backup. And I have to warn the main force.*

Well, that, at least, I can do without leaving.

His hand fell to his side, where he had tied the talisman he’d made the year before in Padfoot and Letha’s Defense class. It turned out that with a slight alteration, these talismans could be used as crude communicators, able to send a limited number of messages to one another. Harry lifted his from where it dangled on its string and whispered “Invasion” to it.

A rune on the talisman’s edge began to glow. Harry nodded with satisfaction – that meant the message had sent correctly – and started backing up again.

He was two steps from the corner when a Ravenclaw scout stuck her head into his hall. She spotted him, shouted, and shot all at the same time. Harry dodged, but couldn't quite avoid the spray of blue dye.

Damn. Arm wound.

He shot back, nailing the scout before she could duck, then pelted down the side corridor, dodging quickly into the first empty classroom he saw, and pulled out his kit. He wrapped a couple of lengths of white cloth around the spatters of dye on his arm, then tied it off and whispered, "Heal."

The cloth glowed for an instant before subsiding. He could keep fighting now, Harry knew. If he hadn't dealt with his "wound," the dye on his robes would have kept spreading until it reached his chest or head, at which point he would have been declared incapacitated and had to leave the combat. It was the Combat Club equivalent of bleeding to death.

Which is to say, stupid, if you can deal with it and don't.

He looked carefully around the door, using only one eye – the side of his head would scream "human" less obviously than the top, he knew. The hall was clear, but it wouldn't be for long, by the sound of things.

So, do I stay here and hope they don't check the room, or do I run?

A large Slytherin rounded the corner and solved the problem for him. "Oy! You there!"

Harry whipped his wand around the door and shot the Slytherin in the knee – *need to work on my aim, I think* – then took off running over the Slytherin's yells. He screeched to a halt at a cross-corridor.

Maybe I can make it back to our lines before they get me. Or should I play decoy, now that I know they've been warned?

Right takes me back to our lines. Left goes into no man's land.

A spray of green dye shot past his head.

Left it is.

He pounded off down the hall, leading the Slytherclaw invasion force astray, buying enough time for the Gryfflepuff forces to get there and ambush the Slytherclaws from the back, wiping them out. Harry himself had to leave the match when he was hit a second time and didn't have a chance, in the heat of battle, to stop the "wound" from spreading.

He watched as the Gryfflepuff main army stormed into Slytherclaw territory, taking some heavy losses but not stopping for anything, until they captured three of the Slytherclaw VIP's and "killed" the last. The only Gryfflepuff VIP casualty was one of the Hufflepuff fifth years, who'd been "killed" by a lone wolf Slytherin agent when she realized he'd summoned help and she was

surrounded. She'd then "killed" herself, so that the Gryfflepuffs wouldn't get the points for her capture.

"So, totaling points, it seems the Gryfflepuffs have won," announced Danger, causing widespread cheering at those two House tables in the Great Hall after the battle. "But—" She raised her hand to stop the cheering. "But. Points aren't everything. Let's have a look at the casualty rates." She flicked her wand at the blackboard she'd brought into the hall.

Harry gulped. He'd known the Gryfflepuff losses had been heavy, but he'd had no idea they'd been as heavy as that. They'd lost almost half their force, dead or badly wounded, with their direct invasion of Slytherclaw territory. If they hadn't captured those three VIP's alive, they would have lost the match.

"Frontal assault is almost never a good tactic, if you care about the lives of the people you're fighting with," said Moony from the front. "And you should care about those lives. You should want to do everything in your power to keep those lives going – even from a purely pragmatic standpoint, every person alive and on your side is another person who can help to keep *you* alive. So use as many tricks as you can. Be sneaky and stealthy and take your victories where you can get them."

"The Slytherclaws' tactic of sending a decent-sized but not huge invasion force was just fine," Danger added. "If the Gryfflepuffs hadn't had an alert sentry at the point where the Slytherclaws tried to get in, the Slytherclaws would have made it in, probably found the Gryfflepuff VIP's, and very possibly won."

"So, next time, refine that strategy," Moony said to the Slytherin and Ravenclaw tables. "Send out scouts beforehand, maybe. Or see if you can find some way to scout the area magically. And you," he said to the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. "Battles aren't like essays. Steal your neighbor's ideas, and feel no shame. It might keep you alive another day. Congratulations, Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. Fifty points to each of you, and twenty each to Ravenclaw and Slytherin for fighting so well. Dismissed."

"Remember, no practice on Tuesday!" called Danger over the sound of scraping benches and chattering voices. "We won't be meeting again until after Christmas, so enjoy your free time while you have it!"

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Scream. Beat head on wall. Repeat.

Draco was having no luck at all with his Animagus spells. If he got the pronunciation right, he did the movement wrong – if he nailed the movement, the words came out garbled. He'd almost had it once, but it had been late and Moony'd had to send them all back to the Tower. Even Meghan had successfully transformed her leg into a deer's delicate one and back by now, nearly three weeks after they'd begun work on the spells.

Why can't I get this?

“Draco?”

He swung his head around. “What d’you want, Neville?” he said grumpily.

“I think you’re not choking up on your wand enough,” said Neville diffidently. “Just a guess, but it worked for me.”

Draco looked down at his wand. He *was* holding it rather close to the end.

It’s worth a try. He shortened his grip until he felt the back end of the wand pressing against his wrist. Then he touched the tip to his left leg, stroked it three times along the thigh and once along the calf, and said carefully, “*Femur et sura vulpionis albatus.*”

With a strange tingling sensation, his leg shortened, changed shape, and sprouted a thick coat of white fur.

“Yes!” Draco punched the air triumphantly. “Got it!”

Moony hurried over. “Nice work,” he said, bending over Draco’s newly changed leg. “Wiggle your foot for me?”

Draco followed his Pack-father’s instructions, getting used to the different way this leg worked, even, carefully, putting a very little bit of his weight on it, just so he would know how it felt to use this sort of foot.

“Change it back, and you’re good to move on,” said Moony finally, sitting back.

“*Reditio femur et sura,*” recited Draco, waving his wand in a circle around his leg, which lengthened with another curious tingling sensation. The fur shrank and vanished, and the leg reshaped itself into human form.

“Good work,” said Moony after he’d checked to be sure Draco’s leg was the way it had been before he’d tried the spell. “Now, do it three more times just that way.”

Draco groaned for form’s sake, but he didn’t actually mind.

I got it. I really got it. I’m not hopeless, I’m not stupid. I just have to keep working.

And not be too proud to accept help.

“Thanks, Neville,” he said over his shoulder.

“You’re welcome.”

xXxXx

He stood up slowly, easing his back. He liked working here. Weeds never snapped off in the ground just below the surface, or grew back bigger than before from just the one tiny shoot you'd missed. Plants thrived where you wanted them to, or if they didn't, you knew why and could help them. There weren't any nasty blights or diseases to worry about.

And, of course, she was usually here with him. He watched her, busily setting in the last of the transplants they'd raised together in the greenhouse from seed. It never seemed to be winter here, but it was never too hot either.

He wondered a little why they were the only ones who came here on a regular basis. Wouldn't the rest want to come? They certainly seemed to like it during the parties they had in the summertime. And it was quiet here, unless you wanted it noisy. Very peaceful. A good place to rest and relax, and practice things.

"Come on," she said, standing up and brushing the last of the dirt off her hands. "Let's go try those spells again."

"All right." He started walking with her towards the castle. That was another nice thing – spells never rebounded or went wrong here. If you hadn't done them right, they just wouldn't work at all. And the others would watch and give them tips. It was how he'd known what to tell Draco, because Adam had told it to him the week before, and that was how he'd gotten the spell to work.

"Neville, come *on!*" Meghan repeated, laughing. "We have to wake up sometime, you know!"

Laughing with her, Neville let her pull him faster across the lawn, until they were both running, and then floating, just touching the surface of the grass with their toes. It felt like flying, or like dancing, or like both, dancing through the air, as though they were made of nothing heavier than feathers or thistledown.

He never wanted to stop.

xXxXx

"Who will tell a story?" said Hermione at the late November den-night. "Who will remind us of what it means to be Pride?"

Harry waved his hand. "Not a story," he said. "But I do have an announcement. We – that's us four," he indicated the cubs, "are staying here for the holidays."

"We are?"

"Since when?"

"How do you know?"

"Yes, since this afternoon, and Moony told me."

“Why?” asked Hermione.

“Don’t know. He wouldn’t say. But he did say Padfoot and Letha are coming to stay too.”

“That’s odd,” said Draco. “If it’s something we all need to do, why can’t we do it at the Den?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe it’s something magical, something they can only do here. I don’t know.”

“Well, if you’re staying, I might as well,” said Ron. “I’ll still get my presents, and it’ll be two weeks away from the twins. They’re being right prats these days.”

“Me too,” said Ginny. “Mum always invites all our oldest relatives for Christmas dinner, and they always make a huge fuss over me because I’m the first Weasley girl in generations. It had to happen sometime, there’s no need to make a big deal over me just because I’m it.”

“You think you have relatives?” said Neville, grinning a little. “If Gran’ll let me stay, I will.”

“Moony mentioned you, actually,” said Harry, frowning in thought. “He said he’d written to your gran, and she was going to write to you.”

Neville looked surprised. “I wonder why.”

“Maybe what they’re doing has something to do with you,” Luna offered. “I think I’ll stay too, if you all are. You might need me.”

Draco laughed. “I don’t know about need,” he said. “But I like having you around.”

“Thank you. I like having you around too.”

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Hermione hurried outside into a curtain of falling snow, tucking her red and gold scarf around her neck. “Wait for me!” she called after the boys, who were headed down to Hagrid’s for Care of Magical Creatures. “Wait up!”

“You hurry up,” Harry called back cheerfully. “Slowpoke!”

Hermione bent down and obtained a handful of snow without slowing, packed it just hard enough to stay together, and fired it off at the back of Harry’s head. It struck with a satisfying *piff*, making a neat white circle on his black hair.

“Oi!” Harry whirled around, snatched up a handful of snow of his own, and threw it at her. Hermione ducked, and it hit Pansy Parkinson, who had been just behind her. With a squeal of indignation, Pansy dropped her schoolbag and scooped up some snow.

Within a few seconds, Slytherins and Gryffindors alike had abandoned bags and books and were running about, firing missiles back and forth, shouting insults with them, only some of which were

meant – it was getting towards Christmas, after all. The fight only stopped when Hagrid came out to see what was keeping his class.

“Had a couple o’ the other professors set this up fer me,” he told them as he ushered them all inside a large tent, where Hermione gratefully shed her coat and scarf and set down her bag. “I’d planned on doin’ salamanders with yeh, but they won’ get here till next term, an’ I didn’ want anyone gettin’ sick so close ter the holidays. I’ll take yer homework now.”

Hermione rummaged in her bag and pulled out her essay – two feet on why it was important to preserve wild spaces for magical animals – and handed it to Hagrid, who collected the entire class’s scrolls in one hand, then set them aside. “Gather ‘round, now,” he said.

There was a large basin on the table near one end of the tent. The class approached it curiously. “Now don’t nobody make loud noises when yeh handle ‘em,” Hagrid warned. “They don’ like that.”

“What are they?” asked Dudley Dursley, staring with fascination at the ten or twelve gray-and-green mottled lobster-like creatures crawling about in the tub, which was filled with mossy rocks.

“Mackled Malaclaws,” proclaimed Hagrid, lifting one up for the class to look at. “Live down by the sea, on rocky beaches an’ the like. I’ve got their claws bound, but they might break the bindings – they do that if they’re startled – and if they give yeh a bite, or a pinch, yeh’ll have bad luck fer a week. So be careful with ‘em.”

Hermione moved forward and carefully slid her hands into the tub, picking up one of the Malaclaws. Its shell was hard and smooth and sleek, like fine china. It waved its antennae at her, but didn’t try to break the bands Hagrid had tied around its pincers.

Several other people were holding Malaclaws now. Hermione offered hers to Ron, who took it gingerly. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I’m not too keen to get a week’s bad luck.”

“That’s only if it pinches you,” said Hermione. “Just holding it won’t do anything. And it won’t pinch you unless it’s startled.”

“How do I know what startles an overgrown bug?”

“Hagrid said, Ron. Loud noises. And probably all the things that startle normal creatures, like getting hurt or being dropped.” Hermione looked around the tent. Harry and Neville were talking to Hagrid and watching the two Malaclaws that no one was holding scuttle over the rocks, Neville going so far as to stroke one of them gingerly. Lavender, Parvati, and Colleen were taking turns gingerly touching the shell of the one Dean was cradling as Draco handed his off to Seamus.

“How do I know if I’m hurting it?”

“Most things make a fuss if they’re being hurt.” Hermione looked at the Malaclaw, which was

holding perfectly still in Ron's hands. "I think you're fine."

"Yes, but what if—"

At the end of the tent, something exploded. Half the class shrieked as their Malaclaws suddenly thrashed in their hands, snapping the string tied around their pincers and lashing out. Ron roared in pain and let go of his Malaclaw, which dangled from his hand by one pincer. Hermione whipped out her wand. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The Malaclaw rose an inch or two, and Ron used his other hand to pry its claw off him. Hermione levitated it back to the tub of rocks and dropped it in. All around, the other students were following her example.

"Anyone who got bit, go on up ter the hospital wing," said Hagrid gloomily as the last Malaclaw dropped onto the rocks. "Class dismissed, no homework."

"Wait a second!" objected Theodore Nott. "We're just supposed to leave? After someone sabotaged our class?"

"An' what would yeh like me ter do?" asked Hagrid, rather sarcastically for him.

"At least have a look round! See what made that noise!"

The other Slytherins muttered agreement.

"If yeh insist," said Hagrid with dignity, and went down to the other end of the tent, where everyone's schoolbags lay in a pile. He bent down, then straightened and turned. "Here yeh are," he said, holding something out to Nott. "Fireworks. Same as happened in Professor Snape's class a month'r so ago."

"And we know who did that," said Nott, turning to stare at Harry. "Funny how Potter wasn't holding one of those things when they went off."

"I didn't do anything!" said Harry angrily.

Nott snatched the remains of the bundle of fireworks from Hagrid and examined it. "They were Spellotaped together," he said, showing them to the other Slytherins. "Probably spelled to go off at one end only, so they'd make more noise. And — look at this."

"What is it?" "What?" "Is it important?" The Gryffindors, forgetting House pride, crowded closer.

"It's a piece of parchment," said Nott, peering at it in his hands, shouldering the other Slytherins away when they tried to look. "Looks like it was torn off an essay."

Draco snorted. "You think someone tore the corner off their essay and stuck it under the Spellotape they put on the fireworks just so you could find it?" he asked sarcastically.

“How did you know it was a corner?” said Nott swiftly. “I never said it was a corner.”

“What else would it be?”

“It could have been an edge piece. Nothing said it had to be a corner. But you knew it was a corner.”

“What are you saying?”

Nott whirled and went to the table where Hagrid had set down the scrolls containing the class’s essays. He began to sort through them, unrolling them just far enough to see the names, then putting them aside. After about seven, he nodded and unrolled one all the way.

A piece was missing from the bottom corner of the scroll. Nott turned it around so that everyone could see the name signed at the top.

Draco Black.

Nott pulled the little corner of parchment free of the Spellotape and held it against the ripped corner of Draco’s essay. There was no doubt where it had come from.

“Very funny joke, Black,” he said coldly. “Getting half the class a week of bad luck. I notice you’d given yours to Finnegan just before these went off. And Potter and Granger-Lupin weren’t holding them, either. Did you tip them off before class, or did they take their chances with the rest of us?”

Draco stared at him, open-mouthed. Angry murmurs were running through the Slytherins. Even Seamus and Dean looked mad, Hermione noticed unhappily. Ron didn’t seem quite sure what to think.

“Get ter the hospital wing an’ get those bites seen ter,” rumbled Hagrid. “Go on, out. An’ don’t go spreadin’ gossip around the school. It spreads itself just fine.”

The class left in twos and threes, most of them glaring back at Draco as they went. Finally, the three cubs were alone with Hagrid.

“I didn’t do it,” said Draco fervently. “I swear I didn’t.”

“I never said yeh did,” said Hagrid, tucking the essays into his pocket and picking up the bin full of Malaclaws. “Someone run ahead an’ open the door fer me?”

Harry jogged out of the tent ahead of Hagrid. Hermione picked up her own schoolbag and his. “We know you didn’t,” she said to Draco. “Hagrid knows you didn’t. Don’t listen to Nott.”

“Easy for you to say. He’ll probably have told the whole school about it by dinner. And there’s nothing I can do.”

“There’s one thing,” said Hermione, leading the way out of the tent. “At least to the people who

know you and were here, like Dean and Seamus.”

“What’s that?”

“You could point out how fast Nott figured everything out. And how pat it all was. Like he’d practiced it beforehand.”

Draco groaned. “I’m such an idiot. He did this, didn’t he? Set it up, and framed it on me?”

“I can’t think of any other way it could have happened. Was your essay torn like that when you finished it?”

“I don’t have a perfect memory like you do, Neenie.”

Hermione flicked him on the ear. “Just try to remember.”

Draco squinted at Hagrid’s hut, looming up out of the falling snow. “No. I don’t think it was. I don’t remember it being ripped or messy when I rolled it up last night.”

“Maybe Nott got to it during the snowball fight, then,” Hermione suggested as Fang came bounding up to them. “Took it out, ripped off that corner, stuck it on, and put it away again... wait!”

“What?”

“I know a way we can find out!” Hermione sped up the steps and in through the door Harry was still holding open. “Hagrid, can I see Draco’s essay?”

“In my coat pocket,” said Hagrid, waving a hand at the moleskin overcoat draped across the big armchair. Hermione rummaged in the pockets, coming up with two broken quills, a small corked potion bottle, a few pebbles with scorch marks on them, and finally the parchment scrolls. She unrolled them as Nott had done and finally found Draco’s, unrolling it all the way.

“I was right,” she said, smiling with satisfaction. “Come here, look, quick.”

“What is it?” asked Harry, frowning at the tiny, circular blotches that covered the surface of the essay. “It almost looks like someone cried on it.”

“Maybe you cry over homework, but I don’t,” said Draco sarcastically.

“Stop it,” said Hermione. “You’re almost right, Harry. It’s wet spots, but not from tears. From snowflakes. Nott had it unrolled outside before class started, and it’s been snowing all day. Snowflakes landed on it and made these spots.”

“We should tell people,” said Harry. “This proves Nott did it, not you, Draco.”

“Don’t bother,” Draco said, turning away. “They won’t listen to you.”

“How do you know, if we haven’t even tried yet?”

“Trust me. They won’t listen. You’re my brother and sister, you’d defend me no matter what. So don’t even bother trying. Just let it run its course and die. Everyone’ll have the holidays to forget about it.”

The teakettle whistled. Hagrid took it off the fire and filled the teapot. “If yeh ask me,” he said casually, “someone seems ter have a grudge against yeh, Draco. What’s this now, the second time someone’s made trouble in class and yeh took the blame?”

“Third,” said Harry suddenly. “It’s the third time, Hagrid. That firework in Snape’s class, whoever threw it was aiming for Draco’s cauldron.”

“Why would I throw a firework in my own cauldron, though?” protested Draco as he sat down at the table and accepted a mug of tea. “No one would believe that.”

“Unless someone claimed you were trying to make people think you’d never do that,” said Hermione with a sigh, sitting down opposite her brother. “So that you’d done it in a way to make people think you hadn’t done it. That’s probably what they’d say if we pointed out how stupid it would be for you to have stuck a piece of your own essay to the fireworks, too.”

Harry groaned. “It’s as bad as iocaine powder,” he said, making Draco and Hermione both laugh.

“I’ll speak with Professor Dumbledore,” said Hagrid, bringing a plate of fudge and the sugar bowl to the table. “There won’ be trouble fer this, Draco, don’t yeh worry.”

“I won’t,” said Draco with a sigh. “Or at least I’ll try not to.”

“You will,” said Hermione with certainty.

“It would be a shame if he didn’t,” said Harry. “He’s so good at it.”

Draco dropped a piece of fudge into Harry’s tea.

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Remus did his part to quell the rumors which flew about Draco’s supposed sabotage of the Care of Magical Creatures class, quietly, of course, since the last thing they needed was a charge of nepotism. Luckily, both Ron and Neville were skeptical about the idea that Draco had set the fireworks and perfectly willing to be convinced by Hermione and Harry’s arguments. Both bore their week of bad luck stoically, rather more so than Dean and Seamus or the Slytherins who had been bitten. Remus was careful not to assign anything dangerous in Defense Against the Dark Arts for that week.

The rumors had almost died away by the last Saturday of term, which was another Hogsmeade day. Danger accompanied Remus and the Pride to Hogsmeade, so that everyone could get their Christmas shopping done. There were many cheerful shouts of “Don’t peek!” and “Nobody look!”

as small groups of people dashed in and out of aisles, clutching items to their chests.

Ron and Draco both took a little longer than the others, since they had Ginny's and Luna's lists respectively as well as their own. Draco ended up with a huge bundle of packages to carry, and finally handed them off to Hermione for a moment and asked Remus for permission to do a spell. When it was granted, he shot a bright blue streak of light from his wand towards the castle, dimly visible through the falling snow.

Within a few minutes, Morpheus was settling on his master's wrist. "Summoning Spell," said Draco happily as the rest of the Pride applauded him. "Here you go, boy. Leave 'em on my bed, please?"

The owl hooted, then fluttered down onto the string holding the bundles together and flapped his wings hard for takeoff. The packages weren't heavy, Remus knew, only bulky, or he would have gotten an owl or two from the post office to help Morpheus.

The Pride watched until the dark owl disappeared amid the swirling snow. Finally, Hermione shivered. "Let's have some hot butterbeer," she said. "I'm freezing."

This was decided to be a good idea, and the Pride and professors trooped into the Three Broomsticks. It was quite full. Several people called cheerful greetings to them as they entered, and a trio of Hufflepuffs vacated their table to make room for the group, moving over to sit with a pair of Ravenclaws.

"Here's to a good holiday," said Draco, raising his mug.

"To Dadfoot and Mama Letha coming to stay," added Meghan.

"To having the castle practically to ourselves," toasted Hermione.

"To Christmas presents," said Harry, grinning at Remus, who lifted his mug in reply. A deal was a deal, and it hadn't been Harry's fault he'd fallen from his broomstick, after all.

"To Ravenclaw beating Hufflepuff well enough to put us back in the running," was Ron's contribution.

"Here, here," chimed everyone, and drank to all the various toasts.

"Professor Lupin?" said Neville after taking a sip of his butterbeer.

"What's on your mind, Neville?"

"Is there some reason everyone is staying at Hogwarts for the holidays? Well, not everyone, but us?"

Remus looked at Danger. **Do you think we should tell them now?**

Danger checked her watch. **We're due back at the castle in half an hour. Why don't we wait until later, and tell them all at once, and in private?**

Sounds like a plan. "Yes, there is a reason," said Remus aloud. "But it's not something we should be talking about in public. When we get back to the castle, after dinner, we'll let you know."

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After dinner, the Pride gathered in the Defense teacher's office.

"You all know, I'm sure, what Mrs. Freeman-Black has been working on this fall," Remus began, leaning forward on his desk. Everyone nodded, Neville suddenly looking very interested indeed. "What you may not know is that she's successfully completed the potion. They've run the standard tests on it to be sure it's not toxic, and it checks out. They plan to administer it tonight."

Meghan made an excited sound and pressed Neville's hand. Neville had gone very pale, and was looking at Remus oddly.

"But we think there might be something else needed," said Danger from beside Remus. "Something besides just the potion, to effect a full recovery. Actually, we're almost sure of it." She took the sheet of parchment from her pocket where she had written the relevant lines from her dream at the beginning of the summer. "You all know about my dreams, and where they come from. This is from one of them."

Hermione took the parchment and read the lines aloud.

The badger's son, his lady bright,

Both wander now in endless night,

And from that night they must be freed.

The eagle's daughter help shall need;

From badger's younger son, whose heart

From hers shall ne'er be torn apart;

And from the other lions young,

The help of hand and voice and tongue.

"Young lions is the Pride," said Remus into the silence. "At least, so we assume. We know Meghan is the eagle's daughter. What we're not sure about is the badger's son. But we have a guess."

"Someone whose heart is joined to Meghan's," said Danger. "And someone who seems, from the

way the poetry is set up, to be related to the people we're trying to help."

Harry made a faintly disbelieving noise, and Draco rolled his eyes towards Neville. "Agreed," said Remus. "That in itself wasn't so hard. What made us doubt it was the way it was put. Meghan's been referred to in the poems before in other ways. Calling her 'eagle's daughter' seems to be meant to bring our attention to the fact that she's a blood Heir, and to suggest that the person referred to as 'badger's son' might also be a blood Heir."

Everyone looked at Neville. Neville looked shocked. "M-me? A b-blood Heir? Of who?"

"Being the badger's son would make you Hufflepuff's Heir," said Danger. "And I have to admit, it does seem to fit you. Your father was a Hufflepuff, wasn't he?"

Neville nodded dumbly.

"You love plants," said Harry. "You're the best in the year in Herbology."

"You're always worried about making sure everything is fair," said Hermione.

"And people look right past Hufflepuffs, like they aren't even there," said Draco. "Because they seem like the 'everybody else' House, without any really good qualities of their own. Maybe that's why you can disappear."

"You're going to be a demiguise Animagus," put in Ron. "Demiguises can go invisible, that's where Invisibility Cloaks come from."

Neville stared at his hands, then back up at Remus and Danger. "Would – does this – I mean, do I have to be a Hufflepuff now?"

"I doubt it," said Danger. "The Sorting Hat would have known, even if you didn't. And it put you in Gryffindor, nonetheless. You certainly seem to belong there, from the way you keep up with these lunatics." She waved at the cubs.

"There is something we can do to test it, though," said Remus, turning around to get the thing he'd brought to his office for just this purpose. "Here."

He set the potted plant on the table. Neville came over to it, looking at it closely. "Say hello to it," Remus instructed. "Like you would if it was yours, if you'd just bought it, or been given it as a gift."

Neville twined his fingers around the plant's stems, rubbed its leaves and sniffed his fingers, crumbled a little of the dirt it was planted in. The Pride drew around the desk to watch, sensing an event in the making.

"What is it?" asked Danger quietly.

"It's lavender," said Neville, frowning. "I think. It doesn't smell quite right. Is it a hybrid?"

Remus nodded. "A new type," he said. "It's just come out. Can you tell what it was cross-bred with?"

Neville sniffed the leaves again, then shook his head. "Not without smelling the flowers, no."

"Then why don't you smell the flowers?" asked Danger.

Neville looked at her in a way that would have been accompanied by a smart comment, had he been any of the other boys of the Pride. "There aren't any," he said, his tone halfway between respectful and worried for her sanity.

"Why not?"

"Because it's the wrong season. Lavender flowers in the summer, and it's coming on winter now."

"But this plant lives indoors. It could flower now, nothing bad would happen to it."

"Would you like to find out what it was bred with?" asked Remus before Neville could answer Danger.

"Yes, but..."

"No buts."

Neville looked from one of them to the other, then sighed and turned back to the plant. Meghan drew near and laid a hand on his wrist, pulling his sleeve back to do it.

Hermione and Ginny gasped as the lavender suddenly moved, straightening up, becoming a brighter shade of green. Neville had one hand gently clasped around the bush of the leaves at the bottom and was staring at the plant with an absent sort of concentration.

You were right, Remus told Danger as buds swelled at the top of the newly lengthened stems. **All he needed was some incentive.**

The buds burst open, revealing clusters of small purple flowers streaked with white. A sweet fragrance filled the room. Luna licked her lips. "Vanilla," she said.

"Vanilla," Neville repeated, looking up from the plant. "They cross-bred lavender with vanilla orchids?"

"Very experimental work," said Danger. "They weren't even sure it would turn out. But it did. I believe they're trying for a vanilla rose next."

Neville blinked, and seemed to see the lavender flowers for the first time. "Did I do that?"

"The hereditary power of the Hufflepuff line is with plants," said Remus. "I can't think of anyone else in this room who could have done it."

“But – I don’t even know what I did!”

“You wanted it,” said Danger. “You wanted the plant to bloom, and it did. Just like you want your garden to grow, and the plants you tend in Herbology to thrive. So they do.”

Neville looked astounded and thrilled. “I – I really am. I really am an Heir. Just like Meghan. We’re both...” He trailed off. “That’s why,” he said, as if to himself. “That’s why we go there.”

Remus felt a mild curiosity about this, but let it pass. “Congratulations,” he said instead, offering Neville his hand. “I’m sure your parents will be very proud of you.”

Neville shook his hand, beaming.

“Now, about that,” said Danger. “If we’re reading the poem correctly, the potion which Mrs. Freeman-Black made will help the Longbottoms. But Meghan is going to have to finish their healing herself. You lot are involved somehow, but how, I have no idea...”

Hermione put up her hand as if she were in class. “Meghan did something,” she said when Remus pointed to her. “When Neville was looking at the plant. She touched him, and just after she did, the plant started growing. It was like she gave him extra power.”

“But she’ll be the one who needs extra power when she’s healing,” said Ron. “Otherwise she’ll have to stay in bed for two months again.”

“So maybe they can do it the other way around,” said Draco. “Maybe Neville can help Meghan heal.”

“What do you think?” Remus asked the two in question. They looked at each other and shrugged.

“Can I see that?” said Harry, pointing to the parchment Hermione was still holding. She passed it over to Harry, who skimmed it. “*And from the other lions young, The help of hand and voice and tongue,*” he read out. “If Meghan’s going to go really deep into healing on purpose, maybe what we have to do is give her a way back.”

“A way back?” asked Ginny.

“You remember when Meghan first healed me, when I was hurt so badly at the Quidditch match? We were in a room that had a lot of corridors leading out of it, and we couldn’t tell which one led back to the real world, until we heard the music.”

“That’s right!” Draco sat up straighter. “When we sang for you! You said you heard us, and you felt stronger, and you followed our voices home!”

“So that’s what we’re supposed to do,” said Harry, slapping the parchment in triumph. “We’re supposed to keep Meghan strong, and show her the way home. With music, the way you did for us that first time.”

“Don’t celebrate yet,” said Danger over the sounds of impending cheers. “There’s still one important question to ask.” She looked at Meghan. “Are you willing to do this? The only thing we know about it for certain is that it’s not going to be easy. We have no idea what you’ll face, or if you can even do it at all. Are you willing to try?”

Meghan looked at the parchment in Harry’s hand, at Neville, whose hand she was still holding, then back at Danger, and nodded. “I’ll do it,” she said, lifting her head. “When can we start?”

“That depends on you,” said Remus. “And to some extent on all of you. Do you want to try this before Christmas Day, or after? I wouldn’t blame you for wanting to have Christmas first, since this may steal a lot of your energy – if you try it before Christmas, it’s entirely possible you’ll sleep through the day.”

“Our presents won’t go bad,” said Ginny firmly. “And the house-elves love making feasts, they won’t mind if they have to cook us a separate Christmas dinner. It would be wrong of us to make Neville wait to see his parents again just because we wanted to have our holiday first.”

Neville walked over to Ginny and hugged her tightly, tears starting to leak from his eyes.

Harry had been communing silently with the rest of the Pride. Now he looked at Remus. “How soon can we do it?” he asked.

Remus picked up Aletha’s letter and ran his eyes down through it, finding the paragraph he wanted. “The Healers want to wait three days after the potion’s administered to make sure the Longbottoms are stable,” he said. “After that, probably a day to bring them here and make sure they’re comfortable, and to get set up.”

Harry frowned in thought. “So Thursday’s the earliest day we could do it, if they give them the potion tonight.”

“Yes.”

Another quick poll by eye contact, and Harry nodded. “Thursday’s fine.”

He sounds like he’s setting up a lunch appointment, Danger noted.

Remus was able to keep his face straight until the Pride had left the office.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 11: In the Midst (Year 3)

Chapter 11: In the Midst

“Would you come sit down? You’re driving me crazy.”

“No.”

“No what?”

“No, I’m not driving you crazy. You already are crazy.”

“I am?”

“Yes, of course you are. Only a crazy person would be friends with me.”

“I think my brothers are rubbing off on you.”

“Why would you think that? We’ve only been friends for two and a half years, shared a dormitory, had adventures together. Why would you ever think that they’d rub off on me?”

“Maybe because it’s true?” Meghan got out of her chair and walked over to Neville, planting herself in the middle of his pacing path, arms crossed. “Stop,” she said firmly. “You’re just making it worse. I know you’re nervous about Thursday, but so am I. So are we all.”

“Not like me. You... none of you have as much riding on this. If it doesn’t work, then it just doesn’t work. For me...”

Meghan nodded. “I know. I understand.”

“Do you? Do you really? Have you ever been waiting to see what would happen to your parents, just having to wait and wait, and knowing that when you can do something, if you do anything wrong, you might never see them again?”

“Yes.”

Neville stopped, taken aback. “Y-you have?”

“The night before Dadfoot’s trial. We knew we had Wormtail, but we weren’t sure if we could convince anyone else we did. We weren’t even sure they’d let us into the courtroom. And I had to stay behind to keep Mrs. Weasley busy while everyone else went ahead. It was only because Aunt Amy came that I was able to be there at all.” She put a hand on Neville’s elbow and tugged him towards a chair. “It’s not quite the same, but I do understand a little bit.”

Neville let himself be tugged. “It’s... it’s just... what if we do something wrong? What if we

make them worse, or even *kill* them?” He shook his head, sitting down with a plop. “I don’t know what I’d do if we did.”

“So stop worrying about it. We won’t kill them, we won’t make them worse. We will make them better, and then we’ll get to use this. Give me a hand with it?”

Neville looked sidewise at Meghan. “Has anyone ever told you you’re much too cheerful about things?”

“All the time. Will you please help me with this?”

“Persistent, too.” Neville turned to the table. “What do you need help with?”

“We’ve got everything set up in the right order. Now we need to write about each one. Explain it, say who and when and where. You know that, I don’t.”

“All right.” Neville pulled a sheet of plastic towards him. “Let’s start at the beginning, then.”

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Hermione knew the signals which meant the boys had done as much homework as they could stand for the time being. Ron started to fidget, drumming his fingers on the table in complicated patterns. Draco whistled under his breath while he read. Harry doodled in his margins in between writing sentences for an essay, then stopped writing altogether in favor of the Quidditch scene taking shape under his quill.

“All right, that’s enough,” she finally said in exasperation. All three boys looked up at her with identical expressions. It was very much like Padfoot looking at food.

I think it must be genetic. Something on the Y chromosome.

“You’re not going to get any more work done today. Go do something else for a while.”

“Yessss,” hissed Harry, catapulting out of his chair. Ron rolled up his parchment and stuffed it into his bag, grinning, as Draco capped their inkbottles with his wand and swept them and the quills into his own bag. Within thirty seconds, Hermione was alone in the common room.

“Full time job, that, isn’t it?” asked a voice from the girls’ stairs.

“Oh, hello, Ginny. What is?”

“Keeping track of the boys like that. Getting them to do their work, making sure they don’t slack.” Ginny came down the rest of the stairs. “It looks like a lot of work for you. Why do you do it?”

Hermione sighed, closing her book. “I don’t know. They really should do it themselves, but we’ve just gotten into the habit of me helping them along.”

“It looks more like you pushing them along from here. Would they even do their work if you didn’t tell them to?”

“Oh, they’d do it. It’s just that they’d do it the night before it’s due, it’d be sloppy and not very good, and they wouldn’t understand half of it. At least this way they’re learning something, even if I do have to beat it into them.”

Ginny smiled. “Mum says the same thing about getting them to do their chores. I suppose that’s what girls are for, really. Beating sense into boys.”

Hermione nodded. “And boys are for annoying the life out of girls.”

“And we’re good at it, too,” said Draco, thumping down the stairs in his snow gear. “We’re going out to build snowmen. Want to come?”

“I’ll go get Luna,” said Ginny, hurrying back up the stairs.

Hermione hesitated a moment, looking at her full schoolbag, before the prospect of all that lovely snow won her over. “Let me get dressed.”

“We’ll wait for you.”

xXxXx

Remus stepped out of the fireplace in the kitchens, set down his two bags filled with packages, and turned back to the fire in time to catch Danger as she fell out of it. **I think we need to get your balance checked.**

My balance is fine. Or it would be if I hadn’t just been spinning like an insane top and inhaled a mouthful of ashes along the way. Danger coughed several times, took the glass of water a house-elf handed her, rinsed her mouth and spat into the bowl another house-elf held up. “Ugh,” she said aloud. “Thank you.”

The house-elves nodded and scurried away. Danger bent to pick up one of the bags. “So what’s on the agenda for the rest of today?”

“Getting these somewhere the cubs won’t find them, wrapping the ones we didn’t get wrapped at the stores, and getting ready for the Longbottoms. They’ll be here tomorrow morning.”

“Right.” Danger took a step toward the door out of the kitchens, then stopped. “Shouldn’t go out there right now, should I?”

“All these years it’s taken you to learn how to think strategically. Dobby!”

“Yes, sir?” The clothed house-elf appeared before Remus with a crack.

“Can you tell me where the children are, please?”

“Master Neville and Mistress Meghan is in the library, sir, and all the rest has gone out to play in the snow. Master Remus can take presents to his office safely, no one is watching.”

“Thank you, Dobby.” Remus picked up the remaining two bags. **I’m not sure I want to know how he does that.**

He’s a Hogwarts house-elf. The castle might have told him.

You think the castle is self-aware?

Possibly in some way. Magical people have been living and working here for over a thousand years. Albus told us there’s magic here that the Heirs can use. But there haven’t been any Heirs – at least not any that knew about themselves and used the magic – for a long time. What do you think all that magic would do, just sitting here?

Play solitaire?

Danger burst into laughter. **Remus John Lupin, you are terrible.**

You’re only figuring that out now?

xXxXx

Later that day, the flames in the kitchen fireplace turned green once more, and first Aletha, then Sirius stepped out of them, both carrying overnight bags in one hand and bags of presents in the other. Sirius set his bags down and shook his head, sending ashes flying everywhere. “Good to be back,” he said.

The door to the kitchen opened, and Danger flew in, running straight to Aletha and hugging her hard, then repeating the process with Sirius, squealing as he lifted her off the ground and spun her around once. “Sirius! Put me *down!* ”

“All right. You’re ugly, you’re stupid, and you can’t do magic to save your life.”

Danger boxed his right ear, Aletha his left.

“Ow.”

“You asked for it,” said Aletha, picking up her bags. “What news, Danger?”

“Remus is upstairs in the Owlery, waiting for a delivery. The cubs are various places, you’ll see them at dinner if not before. You?”

“We saw Gerald off at the station yesterday. He’ll be back before the New Year to spend some time with Luna, but he’s just as happy she’s spending Christmas with us. He wants to try and get photographs of the Welsh Christmas Fairy Dance.”

“Apparently, Welsh fairies have special dances for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day,” said Sirius as they emerged into the entrance hall. “Gerald would like to observe them and see how they differ. And he’s never been able to get away at the holidays before this. So this was actually a bit of a boon for him.”

“Molly and Arthur?”

“I think Molly’s got her hands full right now,” said Aletha. “Charlie and Tonks are there.”

“How is Tonks doing?”

“A little better, but still not good,” said Sirius. “I think it’s going to take a while.”

“I can’t imagine why,” said Danger with an excess of sarcasm in her tone.

“And just to add to the Christmas cheer, Percy’s not speaking to Fred and George,” said Aletha. “Something to do with a malfunctioning wand...”

“Oh, that.” Danger snickered. “It was our last Combat Club practice. Obviously, you can hurt yourself with a misfired spell just as badly as you can hurt someone else, so we still count it as a wound or a kill if it’s your own color you get covered in. Fred and George rigged Percy’s wand to backfire, so Percy killed himself the first time he tried to shoot at someone else.”

Sirius sighed. “I pray we never do really get into a war,” he said. “That kind of thing isn’t funny when it’s your life on the line, not just a little pride and a few House points.”

“They’re only fifteen,” said Aletha. “A lot of people do stupid things when they’re fifteen. Case in point.” She shoved her husband just a little harder than was necessary.

“Oy, I never did anything that stupid when I was fifteen.”

“No, you waited until you were sixteen,” said Danger, knocking in a pattern on a hallway door, which opened for her. “Here, this one’s yours. Three times on the upper left panel, twice on the lower right, once on the upper right.”

“Lay off, Danger, it’s bad enough Snivel – *Snape* hasn’t forgiven me for that. I did apologize.”

“And promptly started playing pranks on him every chance you got,” said Aletha, setting her bags on the bed.

“It’s not like you tried to stop me.”

“It’s not like you ever told me.”

“What, I need to tell you now? Take out an advert in the Daily Prophet – *I, Sirius Black, will now commence playing pranks?* ”

“Commence? When did you ever stop?”

“My point exactly.”

“His point?” Danger looked at Aletha. “He has a point?”

“Well, not much of one,” said Aletha, grinning wickedly. “And not often.”

Sirius turned the approximate color of the Gryffindor crest hanging on the wall.

xXxXx

Neville drew a deep breath with some difficulty. His bed felt odd. There was a cushiony wall on one side of him, his pillow was much harder than it usually was, and something warm and heavy was lying against him and partly on him, which accounted for the weight on his chest.

He opened his eyes. He wasn't in his bed – he was lying on a sofa in the Gryffindor common room, his head on the arm, his hand pressed against one side of it, and Meghan lying next to him, both of them still in their day robes.

A slight shock ran through him as he remembered. *Today. Today's the day it starts.*

His parents were being transferred from St. Mungo's to a special suite here at Hogwarts today. Tomorrow, if everything went all right – *please, please let it go all right*, he prayed to whoever might be listening – tomorrow, the Pride would have a chance to try healing them.

And I couldn't sleep last night because I was so nervous about seeing them today, after they took that potion Mrs. Letha made. I guess I fell asleep here and no one wanted to move me.

I have to get up. I need to see them. I have to see if they're all right.

Carefully, he slid over the back of the sofa, leaving Meghan alone on it, and climbed out through the portrait hole. A check of his watch told him it was just past nine-thirty.

I don't really know what time they were supposed to come, but I know they're coming so they get comfortable here before we... do whatever we're doing tomorrow. So the Healers would probably want them here early.

He trotted down a flight of stairs, stepping carefully over the vanishing one, and tapped three times on the wall at the bottom. It vanished, allowing him entrance into a secret passage which would bring him practically to the door of the suite where his parents would be staying.

Although he knew from past experience that the Pack-parents could see through his illusions, he began his litany anyway. If they weren't there, being unnoticeable would give him an opportunity to look around without being shooed away like an inconvenient bug. If they were there...

If they're there, they won't send me away. Or if they do, it won't be just because I'm a little boy

and I'm in the way.

That was one reason he liked the Blacks and the Lupins. They treated him like a person, an intelligent person. They did their best to explain things, and if there was something they couldn't tell him, or the rest of the Pride, they said so straight out, and gave a decent reason for it, rather than "you're too young" or "you'll understand someday."

That's part of the reason I was so happy to spend the summer at their house. Gran still treats me like a three-year-old a lot of the time. He made a face as he pushed aside the tapestry screening the exit to the passage. She talks about me like I'm not there, and when she does notice me, it's always something like "Oh, isn't that right, Neville dear?" Baby talk. But I'm not a baby anymore.

Someone coughed. Neville jumped and turned to his right. Mrs. Letha stood in the corridor outside the door of the suite he wanted, looking carefully over his head. "If I saw anyone here," she said quietly, "I'd tell them to come on in for a minute or two, but not to stay very long, and that it would probably be better if they stayed hidden for that time. The people in these rooms are very unsure of everything right now, and the fewer new things they have to deal with, the better."

Neville waited until her eyes flickered down and across him, then nodded. Mrs. Letha smiled slightly and pulled the door of the suite open. Neville ducked under her arm and slid inside the door.

The suite seemed to have at least three rooms, since Neville saw two separate doors leading from the room he was in. This first room that he had come into was fitted out like a living room, with a sofa and several armchairs.

One armchair and the sofa were occupied.

Neville felt the familiar twist in his insides that came whenever he looked at his parents. Guilt was part of it, and fear, but more and more it was anger that predominated. This should never have happened. It wasn't right. It wasn't *fair*.

But tomorrow, we get a chance to make it right again.

His mother lay on the sofa, asleep. Someone had combed her white hair and pulled it back from her face, and she was dressed in a simple robe with flowers printed on it. That alone made him feel a little better. He knew from pictures and stories that she had loved dressing up and making herself beautiful for dances and nights out with his father. It always hurt him to see her in the ugly hospital gowns.

She'll love Meghan. They can talk about clothes all night.

His father was sitting in the armchair, staring at the opposite wall. He wore a robe in a muted yellow, and his hair was likewise combed neatly. Neville wanted to get closer, even to touch the man, but knew it was a bad idea.

Mrs. Letha said to stay hidden so I don't frighten them. Someone touching him who he can't see would frighten him a lot!

But even as he thought that, Neville noticed a tickle inside his nose. *Uh-oh*. He couldn't remember if he'd done anything about sound or not – he didn't think he had – and there wasn't any time now, he was going to –

“Achoo !”

Frank jumped and fixated on the sound. Neville flinched. “Sorry,” he whispered to Mrs. Letha.

“No, it's all right,” she said calmly. “Let's see what happens.” She turned her attention to his father. “Hello, Frank,” she said, walking over to him. “Did that startle you? It certainly did me. Are you feeling all right?”

His father ignored her. He was looking toward Neville, as he so often did when Neville came to visit – but this time was different. Every time he'd seen his father before this, his father's eyes had been fixed on some point beyond him, as though he were transparent and something on the wall behind him was fascinating. But not this time.

This time, his father was looking directly at him.

But – he can't see me. He shouldn't be able to. I'm hidden.

But I think he can...

His father's hand was coming up from its place on the arm of the chair now – it was making a shape, index finger out, the rest of it curled up loosely –

He's pointing at me. He does see me!

“Do you see something over there you want?” Mrs. Letha asked quietly.

Frank Longbottom lowered his hand to the chair and began to rock slowly back and forth, his face tight in concentration, his lips pressed together. As the rocking increased in speed, sound began to escape from him. Every forward rock brought another muffled explosion. “B – b – b–”

Neville held his breath.

“Boy!”

Mrs. Letha was still facing his father, but the set of her shoulders seemed to indicate that she was feeling quite good. “Yes, there's a boy there. He's your boy, Neville.” Her hand rose behind her back and beckoned Neville closer. “He's here to see you.”

Neville walked slowly across the room. Every step seemed to take a year, but he didn't care. His father wanted to see him. His father *could* see him, and was watching him intently, tracking his

progress across the room, leaning forward a little in what looked like eagerness –

He stopped in front of the man. *What do I say?*

Mrs. Letha gave him a gentle nod, encouragement, he guessed. “Er, h-hi, Dad,” he said, holding out his hand. “It’s... good to see you.”

His father’s hand lifted again from where it had been resting, but bypassed Neville’s outstretched one, rising shakily higher and higher, until it landed firmly on Neville’s shoulder. A smile blossomed on his father’s face.

“Go on,” said Mrs. Letha softly, motioning Neville’s hand higher. “You do it back.”

Neville felt a smile begin on his own face to match his father’s as he put his hand carefully on the man’s shoulder. They stayed like that for several long moments before Frank pulled away, leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes.

“He gets tired easily,” said Mrs. Letha. “They both do. It’s a side effect of the potion. But you can see how well it’s worked so far, if I do say so myself.”

Neville nodded. The smile hadn’t found its way off his face yet. In fact, from the way he was feeling, it might well be there permanently.

“You’d best head back to the Tower before someone wakes up and gets worried because you’re not there,” Mrs. Letha said. “They’re settling in well here. We’ll have more news as the day goes on.”

“Can I just... maybe... could I say hi to Mum? I won’t wake her, I promise.”

“Go ahead.”

Neville turned to his mother, still asleep on the sofa, and extended his hand until it almost touched her, then suddenly thought better of it. He raised his hand to his own cheek and stroked two fingers down it, then touched them softly to her cheek.

“I can tell you what that’s called tomorrow,” he told her. “And what it means, and where I learned it, and everything. You’ll see. You’ll see, tomorrow.”

To his delight, his mum smiled in her sleep. Neville felt his own smile widening and becoming shaky at the same time.

I can’t cry. Not now, not here. It won’t make tomorrow come any faster.

But he knew, deep down inside him, that today was going to be the longest day in the history of the world.

xXxXx

“I’m telling you, they responded to his presence,” Aletha repeated, wishing, for more reasons than one, that Andromeda could be there.

This was her work first. She deserves to see how well it came out. But she would also be a friendly face here. Completely without meaning to, I’ve managed to alienate at least half the senior Healing staff at St. Mungo’s...

Well, not completely without meaning to. I couldn’t live with Sirius so long and not be good at deflating egos, and a few of these were overdue...

“That’s impossible,” said the senior Healer in charge of the Longbottoms’ case flatly. “I personally worked on these cases for six months, and they responded in the same way to all stimuli of a certain kind – that is, they could not differentiate between people. It is hardly likely that one treatment could change that.”

If it’s the right treatment, it can. And just how long ago were these six months of yours, I wonder? “Be that as it may, Healer Young, the patients did respond positively to their son’s presence. Frank actually spoke – he didn’t identify the boy by name, but he did notice that there was a boy in the room, and he reached out to make contact with him. And Alice smiled in her sleep when Neville spoke to her.”

“We’ll pass over for the moment what you claim the patients did, Trainee...”

Is there any way you could make that “Trainee” sound more like “wet-behind-the-ears fumbler”?

“And focus just a little on how their son gained access to them, when I distinctly understood that all the students had gone home for the holidays.”

“Not all the students, sir. Most of them have gone home, but Neville has special permission from his grandmother to stay here for the holidays, and several of his friends have decided to bear him company.”

“I see. And why, exactly, would the boy want to stay here for the holidays instead of going home?”

“Because he had been informed by St. Mungo’s that his parents’ treatment had been altered, and because I felt he deserved to be nearby if the new treatments bore fruit. Not to mention that he’s probably the first person Frank and Alice would want to see if they did recover.”

You’d probably have a litter of kittens if I told you the real reason he has to be here – that he’s going to be instrumental in the treatment, second only to my ten-year-old daughter...

Healer Albertus Young nodded, his expression still a little sour. “I see. Very well. Keep me informed, then, Trainee.”

He swept out of the room. Aletha counted a slow twenty before falling onto her chair and succumbing to helpless laughter.

It's better than having a screaming fit, which was the other option available to me at the moment.

xXxXx

“What are we actually going to do?” Neville asked Meghan that night, sitting by the fire with her. “I mean, when you heal them?”

Meghan shook her head. “I don't know. I know what it was like when I healed Harry, but you know that too. It might be like that, but it might be different.”

“But you think it will be like that, like going to another place?”

Meghan shrugged. “I really don't know. But I guess it might.” She reached over and laid her hand over his. “We'll do it, Neville. We'll get them back. I promise.”

Neville smiled at her and turned his hand over to hold hers. “I believe you.”

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The next morning, they gathered, preparing.

The Longbottoms were still sleeping, natural sleep instead of magically induced, since Aletha didn't want any other magic interfering with what Meghan would be trying to do. Experiments over the year Meghan had known about her power showed that she and the person she was healing both often fell into a trance-like state – the greater the injury, the deeper the trance.

So by the time we start making our music, the Longbottoms will be in trance, so we won't wake them up. Harry looked around the room. Draco held his flute, and Ron and Hermione carried small hand drums. Luna and Ginny were beside the piano someone had conjured in the bedroom. Neville was leaning against the wall, his eyes fixed on his parents, and Meghan was walking around the room, looking at the walls, the ceiling and floor, and the twin bed where the Longbottoms lay side by side.

Finally Meghan turned to Letha, the only adult currently in the room. The other Pack-parents had wished them well over breakfast before Moony escorted them up here. “We need eight chairs,” she said quietly. “One here, where I am, and one on the other side of the bed in the same place. Then the other six in a half-circle around the bottom of the bed like this.” She swept her hand in an arc.

“Hold on, then,” said Letha, and began to flick her wand towards the places Meghan had indicated, conjuring chairs there. “Correct?”

Meghan nodded.

“Well, then, good luck to you.” Letha shook hands with Ron and Neville, embraced Ginny and Luna briefly, and gave all four of the cubs full hugs. “I love you all.”

She left the room, closing the door behind her. Harry swallowed, and felt his ears pop. *This is it. This is where we show what we've got.*

“Everybody come sit down,” Meghan said quietly. “Harry, you’re over here with me. Ginny, next to him, then Ron, then Hermione and Draco, and Luna, you’re behind Neville.”

The Pride took their indicated seats quietly. The feeling of pressure in the room was increasing, Harry noticed, swallowing again. It was as if a whole crowd of people were watching them, waiting for them to do something, for them to start something.

And thanks to Luna, I know what to do to get it started... He dug in his pocket and pulled out the parchment Luna had given him that morning. Hermione made a little sound and did the same.

“In the name of the Pride, I convene this gathering,” Harry said, half-reading from the parchment. “Pride together.”

“Pride forever,” answered the group quietly in unison.

“Many things bind us together as a Pride. By our own words and our own wishes are we bound. By blood and friendship are we bound. By our own magic and others’ magic are we bound.” That had surprised him a little the first time he’d read it. What magic bound the Pride other than their own? But he wasn’t about to mess this up just for his own curiosity. He could ask later.

“By all these and more are we bound,” said Hermione, taking up the thread of the magic. “As alpha female of this Pride, I summon those bonds to appear, to show themselves to us, so that we may use them for this work that lies before us.”

Almost before she was finished speaking, lines of colored light silently appeared, connecting and cross-connecting the members of the Pride. Harry looked down at himself. Seven golden lines disappeared into his chest, one extending to each member of his Pride. Almost everyone else was bound by gold, although there were a few exceptions. Ron and Ginny were connected by a red line, as were Draco and Meghan, though theirs was a lighter color than the Weasleys’, and Harry couldn’t be sure, but he seemed to see a faint, ghostly line of blue connecting Draco and Luna, and another running from Neville to Meghan...

Hermione hissed at him. Belatedly, Harry looked at his parchment and began to read again. “As alpha male of this Pride, I call on these bonds to become active, to send magic among us, so that those who need it may use it and those who do not may add to it.”

He looked once around the room, meeting everyone’s eyes, beginning with Neville and ending with Meghan, who turned half around to do it. Then he nodded to Hermione. She took a deep breath and began to speak with him. “So we speak. So we intend.”

“And so let it be done!” said the Pride in unison.

With an almost audible throb, the lines of light came to life. Harry jumped, and he wasn’t the only

one. He could *feel* the power flowing through the lines, into him and out again, pushing and pulling at the other lines, the other people, pulsing in rhythm with something in himself...

It's my heart. My heartbeat. It's not the same as everyone else's. But I think it needs to be.

He looked at Ginny, sitting next to him, and focused on her. To his surprise, he could feel the pulse of her power against his own, warm and soft, red and scented faintly of flowers. Their magics bumped together, partly resisting, partly meshing.

We need to mesh all the way. He reached out and touched her through the power, and she jumped and turned to face him. **Together**, he sent in a way that wasn't exactly the thought-speech they'd shared through the pendants before, but was related. **We need to be together.**

Yes, she agreed. **Together.**

They began to synchronize their power. It was surprisingly easy – after a few fumbles, suddenly he gave a little and she gave a little, and their power pulsed together, two hearts beating as one. **Thank you**, he sent to her.

No, thank you. She smiled at him. **I think Meghan is ready.**

Harry turned to see Meghan watching him. **Together?** he asked her.

Yes. Their magic met and meshed with barely a hesitation. Meghan's power was different from Ginny's, Harry noticed. Pearl's was a rich violet and smelled of salt water and clean wind, and felt soft and strong at the same time, like a friendly handshake. It carried with it Neville's power, which took a moment longer to agree with Harry's but finally settled in. Neville was gold and firmly solid and mint-smelling.

Draco caught Harry's eye next. **We're ready**, he said.

Harry stared into his brother's eyes, and felt a sudden twinge of uncertainty – the gray pools around Draco's pupils seemed to be moving, like storm clouds in the ceiling of the Great Hall the instant before a lightning strike...

Draco and Luna's power met his, and it was a little like being struck by a mild form of lightning. Part of that was Luna's power, Harry recognized dimly. It was a bright and vibrant white, and stung a little at first touch, leaving behind a crisp scent that wasn't quite like smoke or quite like fresh air, but was a little like both. Draco's, meshed with it in perfect harmony, held both the color and scent of fresh pine needles, the spicy, prickly green that Harry had always associated with Christmas, and felt like a branch of them, soft if you stroked them the right way, sharp if you didn't.

Right time of year for it, then.

Dimly, he was aware of the other powers he now held making their peace with these newcomers. *We're almost all together. Just need Ron and Neenie now...*

And then they were there. Ginny had melded with Ron while Harry was busy with the others, and now Ron and Hermione's joined power filled the links between them and the others. Ron's magic was the same color as his hair, smooth and warm, and had a spicy-sweet scent, like hot pumpkin juice. Hermione's was a creamy white and soft as a kitten's fur or the feathery end of a quill, but with the prickles of the kitten's claws or the quill's writing end, and she smelled of new parchment and a spice that Harry reminded himself to identify in the kitchen later.

What about me? he asked his Pridemates, and a moment later was bombarded with sense images. His magic was a fiery red, brighter than Ginny's soft tones, a bit bluer (if red could be blue) than Ron's more orange color. He smelled of spices as well, cloves and cinnamon and ginger, and with that he knew that Hermione's scent was nutmeg, because it was the fourth in Danger's spice cookies. The only way he could think to put the touch sense into words was "knobbly, but nice," because he seemed to have little bumps all over, but they didn't hurt to touch.

The Pride spent a few moments settling into these new understandings, making sure they had them straight. Harry felt the knowledge of everyone else's magic lodging itself deep in his brain, where it might someday be very useful...

Or not.

But that didn't matter now. The links were open, power was flowing. It was time. A thought brought Hermione alert and ready.

As alpha male and female, we give you this power, Harry and Hermione said together, addressing Neville and Meghan. **In the name of the Pride, do now what was decided, doing all for good and nothing for evil. So we speak, so we intend.**

And so let it be done, chorused the rest of the Pride.

So you speak, and so speak we, said Neville and Meghan together. They clasped hands over the Longbottoms' heads. **So you intend, and so intend we. And so we shall now do!**

Together, they lowered their free hands to the Longbottoms, Meghan laying her hand on Frank's arm, Neville on Alice's shoulder.

The Pride shuddered together as they felt magic being drawn from them, funneling through Neville and Meghan, and going... going away, as far as any of them could tell. It wasn't recirculating, the way it had up till now, but simply draining away.

I think that means it's working right...

As well, Neville's and Meghan's presences in the link were slowly becoming farther away than they had been. Not inaccessible, but harder to feel and find. The feel of eight hearts beating as one was threatening to fracture and slide away...

Oh, no, you don't, said a voice, and Ron began to drum, reinforcing the heartbeat rhythm. The

magic solidified again, settling back into place.

Ginny began to hum a Christmas carol. Other voices joined hers, adding harmony lines, keeping it quiet and gentle and paced around the rhythm Ron was keeping, and as they sang, more power flowed from them, reinforcing the circuit before it was pulled away by the Healing team.

This is right, Harry thought. This is how it's supposed to work. I'm not sure how long we can keep it up...

As long as we need to, answered the Pride in many voices. **As long as we must.**

Harry smiled. *Well, as long as they're sure.*

He joined the song, adding his voice to the harmony and his magic to the power pool.

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They stood side by side, still holding hands, but the contrast between the places their feet touched could not have been greater. Meghan stood in the midst of a vast jungle, and Neville on the broad flat plain of a desert.

“There’s something wrong here,” said Meghan aloud.

“Very wrong,” Neville agreed. He shaded his eyes and squinted into the distance. “I think I see something over there.”

“Shh.” Meghan turned her head. “I hear something. Over that way.” She pointed deeper into the jungle.

They looked at each other. Neither wanted to say it first. Finally Neville did. “We’ll have to split up.”

“Is that safe?” Meghan asked doubtfully.

Neville shrugged. “I’ve never been here before. You have.”

“I knew what I had to do last time. Now I don’t. Not really. I just wish there was some way we could keep track of each other.”

“We need a rope or something,” said Neville. “To hold us together. Something strong, and long, that won’t get in our way...” He stopped.

“What?”

“I think I know what we can use.” He slid his pendants over his head and looked at them for a moment. One of his Hufflepuff gems flashed with bright yellow light, then faded. He wrapped a loop of the chain around Meghan’s waist and another around his own, and secured them both by

pressing them together. "It should go through things you want it to, just like yours do," he said. "And it will get as long as we need it to, but keep us together."

Meghan smiled. "Then I'll always have part of you with me."

"But that's not fair, then. I don't have anything of yours."

Meghan dug in her pocket and pulled out the first thing she found, her handkerchief. "Here," she said, handing it to him. "Now you do."

Neville tucked it into his sleeve. "My lady's colors," he said.

"Stop it." Meghan pushed him. "I'll tug on it when I'm coming back here."

"So will I. Good luck."

"You too."

They squeezed each other's hands, then separated, Neville setting out across the desert, Meghan forging into the jungle.

xXxXx

It was hard going through the tangles of plants. Not only were they horribly overgrown, blocking anything that might ever have been a path, but something was wrong with them. They weren't dying, but it was somehow related to that. As if...

They should be dying? That doesn't make any sense. Things aren't supposed to die.

But wait. Sometimes they are. "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven." The beautiful, ancient words came to her in her Dadfoot's voice, mellow and strong and sweet, reminding her of what she'd forgotten. "A time to live, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which was planted..."

And as she thought of that, she was there, where she wanted to be.

It was a tiny clearing in the center of the jungle, hardly big enough to lie down in, but someone was lying there now. A man with hair mostly gray and white, but she could tell it had once been brown, and a lined, worried face.

She bent down and shook him gently, and he opened his eyes. "Hello," he said, sounding a bit puzzled. "Who might you be?"

"My name is Meghan. Are you Mr. Longbottom?"

"Yes, that's me. However did you come here?" Mr. Longbottom sat up, looking around. "I don't see any paths. Heaven knows I've looked."

“I came that way,” said Meghan, pointing behind her, and then turned and looked.

There was no sign of her passage. The wall of plants surrounding the clearing was unbroken. Only the fine gold chain vanishing through the tangled vines gave any indication that she had ever come that way.

“It must have grown up behind you,” said Mr. Longbottom, sounding resigned. “It does that. If you knew the times I’ve tried to get out of here, to find some way through these plants... I love plants, I always have, but these are particularly difficult to love.”

“Because they keep you here.”

“Yes. And I’ve been here quite a long time, I know. I haven’t seen another human in all that time... not clearly, anyway. Sometimes I think I see forms out there, but by the time I get to them they’re always gone.” He shook his head. “It’s very frustrating. I tend to sleep a lot, because if I’m asleep I can’t see things that look like old friends. Or like someone I love.”

“Someone you love?”

“You have a mother and father, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Do they love each other?”

“Very much.”

Mr. Longbottom nodded. “I love my wife just that much,” he said. “And in just that way. And I haven’t seen her in all the time I’ve been here. Sometimes I think I see a boy. A boy with her face, her smile. But by the time I get to him, he’s always gone.”

He was turning in a slow circle, looking at the plants surrounding him. “I almost got to him yesterday,” he said, his back to Meghan. “I saw him clearly, and I think this time he saw me as well. But I’d worn myself out so much getting to him that I fell asleep right in front of him, before I could say anything to him. Before I could ask him who he was.”

Meghan licked her lips. She could smell magic here, feel and almost taste it, all around her, magic very like Neville’s own, like the solid strong gold she knew so well, but different somehow, changed, distorted...

Twisted, she finally decided. The magic had been twisted out of shape by something, and it was shaping what was around them here, this cage of plants. But how?

She reached with her own power, the blue-violet healing touch, and sucked in her breath at the pain around her. Pain, and despair, and longing, incredible longing –

For what?

Death, clamored a thousand million voices in her mind. **End our pain! Let us die!**

Wait, Meghan protested. **I don't even know what you are!**

We are thoughts, the voices told her. **Every thought that this man has ever had, every wish or desire or worry or fear, we are all trapped here, all of equal importance, and his magic, twisted by his pain, keeps us here and will not let us die. So we twist and twine and trap him – we do not want to do it, we are as trapped as he. Help us. Let some of us die, so that the rest can live.**

Meghan pulled herself out of the communication with a shiver. She knew of the Healer's Oaths, though she had not yet sworn them. Healers promised to "first, do no harm."

But would it be harm? They're supposed to die, and they can't. And they're in pain, and unhappy. Would it be harm to let them die, the way they should?

I'm not making them die, she realized. They'd die naturally. It's the twisted magic that's keeping them alive. If I straighten it out, then everything will work the way it should. Then he'll be healed.

It's not wrong. It's right.

"Excuse me?" she said quietly.

"Yes?" Mr. Longbottom turned to face her.

"I think I can help you get away from here. If you'll let me."

"Let you? Child – Meghan – I've dreamed of being free of this place for years. If you can help me, please, do it."

"I have to touch you, then."

Mr. Longbottom held out his hand without hesitation. Meghan took a deep breath and took it in hers, closing her eyes.

Let what is wrong, be made right, she whispered in her mind, touching the golden strength that was Neville, and reaching into that and past it to the rush of color and scent and touch that was the magic of her Pride. *Let death come to this place of life...*

xXxXx

Neville felt as if he'd been walking for hours. His feet burned in their shoes, his eyes hurt from glare, and he was sure he was sunburned on every exposed piece of skin, and possibly a few that weren't. It would be so easy to turn around now...

But I have work to do.

He lifted his shoulders and kept walking.

Finally, in the distance, he saw a small form. He headed toward it. As he drew closer, he saw that it was another person – a woman –

Mum!

But I can't call her that. She won't know me. She'd only remember me as a baby.

“Excuse me,” he said politely as he drew close to her.

His mum jumped as if she'd been shot. “Who are you?” she demanded, staring at him with suspicion. “How did you get here?”

“My name's Neville. I just came here.”

“Neville?” his mum breathed, her eyes wide. “Neville?” She stared at him for a moment, open speculation in her face, then turned away. “No. I don't believe you.”

Neville frowned, confused. “What don't you believe?”

“I don't believe in you. You're just another mirage. There are hundreds of them, thousands, always here, always taunting me. I've seen you before. You come often. You're usually with someone, though. You're alone this time.”

“Usually Gran's with me when I come to see you. But this is different. This time I came a different way.”

“Obviously. You look different than you usually do. You look...” She turned to have another look at him. “Solid. As if you were real.”

“I am real. Here, feel.” Neville held out his hand.

Distrustfully, his mother reached out and touched him.

She jerked back with a gasp. “You – you are...”

Neville didn't move. After a moment, she touched him again, letting her hand rest on his a little longer this time. Then a little longer, and then she was holding his hand, and then suddenly she embraced him and held on. He hugged her back, hard, holding her tightly. He had always wondered what it would be like to be hugged by his mother.

“I had a son named Neville,” she said when she let him go. “He was just a baby, though. He's dead now.”

“Dead!”

“Yes, dead,” she continued, mistaking his surprise for a wish to hear more. “Death Eaters killed him, after they finished with us. They hurt us, over and over, until it was too much. I ran from them, and I found this place. They can’t hurt me here, because they can’t reach me. Anything that tries to cross this desert dies.”

“I didn’t.”

“No, that’s true.” She looked at him thoughtfully. “You didn’t. You’re here, alive. How did you do it?”

“I thought about you,” said Neville truthfully. “You and... Mr. Longbottom.”

She looked away. “You know who I am, then?”

“Yes’m.”

“I haven’t seen Frank in so long... dear God, I’d give anything to see him again. Anything at all.”

“Then come back with me,” said Neville, seizing his opportunity. “Come back the way I came. He’s there. At least I think he is. We can try to find him at any rate. Come on, it’s this way...”

“No.”

“What?”

“No. I’m not coming.”

“Why not?”

She looked around at him. “This desert. It kills everything it touches. And I’m part of it now, after all this time. Or it’s part of me, I’m not sure which. I won’t risk Frank that way. I don’t want to find him just to lose him again.”

“You’re wrong,” said Neville in some desperation. “You’re wrong. You don’t kill everything. You didn’t kill me.”

She shook her head. “No. I’m sorry, but I can’t believe this. Not after so long. If I could see something else, something else alive – something that stayed alive here, even though I was here – maybe then I could believe you.”

“All right,” said Neville, kneeling down. “I’ll make something alive, then. I’ll make something grow. I can do that.”

“Really?” His mother looked interested, kneeling beside him. “You can make things grow?”

Neville nodded. “I only found out about it a little while ago,” he said, cupping his hands over a place on the sand. “But I really can. I make plants grow better and stronger, and I know if things

are wrong with them, and how to make them right. I think I can even get one to grow here.”

I hope.

He closed his eyes and reached into the earth with his magic. If there was just one seed, one, somewhere in the earth under this desert...

He gasped. There was not one seed here, but hundreds, thousands, all just waiting, waiting for someone like him. Someone to wake them up and bring them to life...

But I don't know if I can. I don't really know how I made my magic work that one time. And Meghan was there, and she isn't here now...

He looked at the handkerchief in his sleeve, and lifted a hand to touch the chain which held them together. *No, she's here. She's with me. And together, we're strong. Strong enough to make this work.*

Let what is wrong here be made right, he willed, closing his eyes again and feeling Meghan's blue-violet magic, and fainter behind it, the multi-colored magic of the Pride. Let life come to this place of death...

xXxXx

The two wishes, made by the two linked minds, coincided.

Into the midst of life came death, and into the midst of death came life.

xXxXx

Neville opened his eyes and looked around. He knelt on green moss in the middle of a forest. His mother still knelt beside him, but she was staring past him, and the look on her face suggested she was seeing something she'd loved dearly, and never thought she'd see again.

xXxXx

Meghan opened her eyes and looked around. She stood in a spacious clearing between fine healthy trees. Mr. Longbottom still stood in front of her, but he was looking past her, with all the love of twelve separated years, and all the hope he hadn't had a moment before, in his eyes.

“Alice...”

“Frank! Oh, Frank!”

In an instant, they were in each other's arms, both of them crying, crying and laughing at the same moment, and clinging to each other as if they'd never let go.

We did it. I think we really did it.

Meghan shivered, suddenly chilled. Part of it was reaction, she knew, and part of it was the tiredness that overcame her every time she did a major healing. She would probably fall down in a minute...

Strong, warm arms were around her, holding her up. “We did it,” said Neville’s voice in her ear. “We really did it, didn’t we?”

“I think we did.” Meghan turned to face him. “Together.”

They held each other in their arms, each keeping the other upright, for a moment or two, Meghan’s head nestled against Neville’s chest, Neville’s cheek leaned against Meghan’s braids.

“We should get back,” said Neville finally, regretfully. “Can you hear them?”

Meghan listened. “That way,” she said, pointing towards the distant music. “It’s that way.”

“Should we bring them?” Neville indicated his parents, who didn’t look likely to pay attention to anything but each other any time soon.

“I don’t think we have to,” said Meghan, thinking it over. “I think this is just like a normal dream now, and when they wake up, they’ll be all right. Do you see?” Wordlessly, she invited Neville into her magic and showed him how she could tell that the minds around them were healed and made right. The people who owned those minds would awaken healthy and able to understand what happened around them.

“I do see,” said Neville quietly. “I do see. Meghan – thank you.” He hugged her again, tightly.

“You’re welcome.” Meghan hugged him back.

Hand in hand, they followed the music homewards.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 12: Thirds (Year 3)

Chapter 12: Thirds

Near midnight on Christmas Eve, the clouds broke over Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, revealing the stars, brighter than usual in the chill air of winter. Those who were awake to watch saw a bright streak of light pass through the air over the school. The centaurs saw it. Professor Sinistra saw it. And one other saw it as well.

Centaurs do not believe in wishing on shooting stars. Professor Sinistra's only wish was to get home safely for Christmas.

The other had something else in mind.

xXxXx

It was fun to play in the forest, especially in the winter. It was fun to run, and dodge, and hide, and sniff at things, and climb, and go down holes. It was fun to roll in the snow. Everything was fun. That was why he had agreed to stay an extra day, to give the day to someone else who wanted to leave the forest early. He didn't want to leave early. He wanted to stay as long as he could.

But something was different about the forest right now. There was a smell that had not been there before. He sniffed, taking it in.

Food. He started off in that direction, trotting cheerfully through the light dusting of snow on the ground, licking his chops. He would see what kind of food it was. If it looked appetizing, he would have some, whether its current owner agreed to share or not.

He sniffed again, and sped up. The odor was more tantalizing by the minute, drawing him to it ever faster, insisting that he hurry, hurry, there was not a moment to lose...

No. Wait.

He stopped, confused. Why wait? Food was good.

Traps are not good.

No, traps were not good. He shook himself all over. Traps were nasty things that closed on you and either hurt you so badly that you had to hurt yourself more to get free or just held you there so you couldn't get away at all.

This might be a trap.

He shook his head again, confused. Where were these strange thoughts coming from? He'd never thought like this before...

Oh, yes, you have. I have. You were – I was – warned about this. Getting too far into Animagus form, so far that I never want to come out again. This is nice, but I think I need to be human right now...

With a small snap, he changed forms, and memorized how it felt to do so, the process he'd gone through. *It may be a while before I can do this for real, but it's good to know.*

For real. This is a dream. Which means there's something important where that smell is coming from. Something I either should see, or shouldn't.

Draco shrugged. *If it's a dream, then I can't get really hurt. I might as well see what it is.*

He changed back, but very consciously kept his human mind close to the surface. Fox instinct guided him, showing him how to track the scent and how to hide and sneak, and identified the odors wafting towards him – roasting meat, baking bread and biscuits, and as he got closer, human.

It was his human mind, though, that realized what it meant that he was smelling a human.

Dream constructs smell different than real people. This is someone else, a real person, dreaming with me. It could be another of the Pride – it's possible we're still magically linked and dreaming together – but it could be someone else too...

He turned human, took off one of the mittens he was wearing, and changed again, sniffing at it.

They're similar. Very similar. He muffled his nose in the snow and sneezed. Whoever's over there is related to me by blood. Closely related.

No points for guessing who, now.

For a moment, he considered walking away, but by the rules of a shared dream, they'd have to meet eventually.

I wish it weren't on his ground, but I'd rather get it over with, I think.

He changed again and reclaimed his mitten. *No use blowing our secret. No matter what happens, I have to stay human.*

He took a few deep breaths in the pattern Letha had taught him, calming himself, then walked forward as if he had all the time in the world, following the smells which were now even present to his limited human nose.

Three coves of pine trees later, he found what he was looking for.

"God rest ye merry, gentleman," he said, giving a small, polite bow to the man sitting at the head of the ornate table.

“Clever,” said Lucius Malfoy, rising and returning the bow. “Very clever. Will you eat with me?”

“If you wish.” Draco took a seat along one of the sides of the table and watched his father fill two glasses of wine from the same bottle, then set them side by side in front of him and step back.

Very nice. Giving me the choice, thereby assuring me that neither of them is poisoned. Unless, of course, they are both poisoned. Though he’s not a pirate...

Draco told himself to shut up and selected a glass. Malfoy took the other and sipped from it.

Very, very nice. He’s smooth when he’s prepared. Draco took a sip himself. He’d had wine before – it was sometimes served at the Den for special occasions, and anyone who wanted some could have it. This was quite good.

Now, will he tell me what’s going on, or will we eat first?

Malfoy drew his wand and tapped it on the table twice. The dishes came to life, walking toward them, and the first one stopped in front of Draco and opened itself, presenting candied yams for his approval. He served himself a small portion, and the dish moved on to Malfoy, who also took some.

“Would you care for music with dinner, Draco, or shall we attempt to converse while we eat?”

The phrasing of the question warned him of the correct answer. “I think music would be pleasant, sir.”

“Very well.” Another wave of Malfoy’s wand produced instrumental Christmas carols, and both wizards applied themselves to dinner.

The food was very good, Draco found when he tried it, at least on a par with Hogwarts or Danger’s cooking, though rather fancier than either of those. He knew he was being watched, and was careful to utilize every session on table manners he’d ever gotten.

“This is very... companionable,” Malfoy said after both of them had finished their first servings and were moving more slowly through seconds. “I see you can be polite when you choose.”

Draco discarded a large belch as a possible answer, along with *I see so can you* or *Yes, despite our primitive surroundings, my parents have managed to teach me civilized behavior towards other human beings*, and finally settled on simply, “Yes, sir.”

“I imagine you seldom have meals like this.”

No, we gnaw bones around the fire and grunt at each other a lot. “No, sir, I don’t.”

“Perhaps you would like to have something like this more often. Something sophisticated, refined, elegant.”

Instead of that cave I live in now, right? “Perhaps I would.”

“It is not beyond the bounds of possibility. You would need only two things to make it work properly. As distasteful as it is to mention, you would need money. And, of course, someone to guide you along the way, to keep you from making fatal mistakes.”

“Money, I have,” said Draco carefully. “You could, I suppose, recommend someone to me who could guide me as you suggest.”

“I could. I might even be willing to teach you myself, in return for certain considerations.”

“Considerations.”

“Yes. Safety would, of course, be paramount. Sophistication is difficult to achieve when one must be constantly looking over one’s shoulder.”

“Safety for myself, sir, or for you?”

Malfoy’s voice hardened. “Don’t play the fool with me, boy, I know you are none. For me.”

“And how, exactly, would this safety be obtained?”

“There are many ways.”

“Describe one.”

“A small sum would be sufficient to provide myself with a permanent disguise. I could rent a house or a flat near your own home, offer to give you lessons in something you wish to learn – you could invent a good story, I have no doubt, some reason to come to me. It could begin soon, and very soon, if you wish.”

“I’m sure. And during these lessons, what else would you be teaching me?”

“What else?”

“Yes, would we have sessions on Dark magic? Torture? Or maybe a little brainwashing, to try and convince me I’m still your son?”

Malfoy flung his glass aside, shattering it against a tree. “You *are* still my son!”

“By blood only, and that’s no fault of mine,” retorted Draco, slamming his own glass down on the table.

Malfoy glared at him. “You *will* return to me.”

Draco matched his glare. “Never.”

“And if I took you now?”

Draco snorted. “Now? From here? Where would you take me? Or more to the point, how would you keep me?”

“How...” Malfoy’s face, baffled for a moment, cleared. “I see,” he said, suddenly urbane once more. “I do see. And I do remember. Two years ago, was it not? Almost exactly – no, exactly two years ago, to the day, we met before. Do you recall that?”

Draco nodded, then, too late, remembered that he shouldn’t tell about that. He swore under his breath as a smile spread over Malfoy’s face. “Excellent. So you should recall this as well. Listen closely, Draco.”

“Make me.”

Before Draco could react, Malfoy had his wand on him. Draco felt his muscles all seize up, then go limp as his feet left the ground. He was dangling like a marionette several inches up, with a burning sensation around his neck.

Note to self – don’t taunt the bloke with the wand.

“Are you listening now?” Malfoy asked, swirling his wand in little half-circles, so that Draco’s body flopped back and forth and his head rolled from side to side. “No? You’re not? I must fix that. Perhaps a bit higher.”

I am not going to hurl, I am not going to hurl, I am not going to hurl – or if I do, I’m going to do it on him. Draco swallowed hard – at least he could still do that – as he floated higher.

“Listening now?” asked Malfoy, waving his wand up and down this time, bouncing Draco’s head back and forth, so that he bit his tongue painfully. “Excellent. What I can do here, I can certainly do in the waking world. And I will. No charms, no wards will hold forever. I will find you, and I will make you mine once more. How painful that process will be is entirely up to you. If you are cooperative, it might not hurt at all. If you persist in this senseless resistance, the pain will be all your own fault.”

Malfoy flicked his wand, and Draco collapsed to the ground, forcing himself to stay loose so he’d make a soft landing. He spent a few seconds coughing, then caught his breath. “Funny,” he wheezed. “I know another bunch of people who say things like those. ‘Resistance is futile’ and all that. And what’s funny is, they may win for a while, but they always lose in the end. By the end of the program, the good guys beat them every time.”

“How nice for the people on the *program*,” said Malfoy silkily. “We are speaking here of real life, Draco, not some foolish escapist fantasy. You cannot hope to hold out against me forever without help.”

Draco got to his feet and straightened up. “No, probably not,” he agreed. “But that’s why I have

help.”

An owl hooted from a tree behind him. A hawk’s scream answered it from a tree behind Malfoy. A wolf and a large wildcat with a short tail and tufts of black fur on its ears stalked out of the trees on one side. A calico cat, her bright colors cheerful amid the snow, leapt onto the abandoned dinner table and began to wash her side, keeping a weather eye on Malfoy.

Malfoy smirked. “I fail to see how animals will help you defeat me,” he said, looking at the cat, then up at the hawk as it sailed in to land on the table beside her.

“I’m sure you do,” said Draco. “But you’re looking at the wrong ones.”

The wolf chose this moment to bite Malfoy on that portion of his anatomy upon which he was accustomed to sit. As he screamed, the lynx launched herself at him, knocking him to the ground facedown. The wolf jumped onto his back as well, giving an open-mouthed grin similar to Padfoot’s when he’d just done something very clever.

The owl took wing, soaring down and plucking the wand neatly from Malfoy’s hand. She circled around and dropped it into Draco’s hand, then came in for a landing on his outstretched wrist.

Draco knelt in the snow by his father, out of grabbing distance but close enough that the man could see him. “Now you listen to me,” he said coldly. “I will never come to you willingly. If you want me back, you’ll have to come and get me, and the Pack and the Pride will fight you every step of the way.”

“Pack and Pride,” Malfoy spat, his face turning pink. “Animals, that’s all you are, filthy animals.”

“And those filthy animals beat your arse pretty good,” Draco shot back. “Keep in mind it’s been nearly ten years since my brother and sister knocked you out. Think about what they could do to you now, if they wanted to. And that’s without counting all our other friends, or our parents. So get a brain. Get a life. And save yourself some trouble. Stay away from me.”

The wolf and the lynx leapt off Malfoy’s back, taking up stations beside Draco, half-encircling Malfoy. The owl fluttered off his wrist and took a place on his other side, and the cat and the hawk completed the circle, jumping and flapping into position.

The wolf growled, then waved a paw dismissively, spattering Malfoy with half-melted snow. The other animals did so as well, flicking paws and wings at the man. Finally, Draco picked up a handful of snow for himself and packed it. “Goodbye,” he said, and hurled the snowball into Malfoy’s face. As it struck, the wizard disappeared.

Draco shook his head. “Waste of a good snowball,” he said. “Who wants some dinner?”

“Me,” said Ron, standing up where the hawk had been.

Draco grinned. “No surprises there. Anyone else?”

“I think I could eat,” said Ginny, brushing snow off her hands.

“I suppose so,” said Luna, shaking her hair out of her face.

“Well, just to keep you all company,” said Hermione, already heading for the table.

Harry made a face. “Let me go rinse out my mouth first.”

“I was going to say,” said Ron. “Why’d you bite him there?”

“So he wouldn’t see me coming. Why? Where would you have bitten him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe on the nose or something.”

“The nose? How was I supposed to reach his nose?”

“I wasn’t talking about you, I was talking about me!”

“Why?”

“Because you asked me where I would bite him!”

“I meant if you were me!”

“I’m not you!”

Ginny made a trumpet sound. “I hereby proclaim my brother Ron to be the one, the only, Captain Obvious,” she said, framing him with her fingers. “So, Captain Obvious, what are you going to do now?”

“Eat,” said Ron, pulling up a chair and sitting down at the table. “I’m starving.”

“And once again, you earn your name, Captain Obvious,” said Hermione, passing a tureen of mashed potatoes down. “You’re *always* starving.”

“I’m a growing boy. I need lots of nourishment.”

“You’ll grow as big as Hagrid if you keep eating like you do,” said Luna, sitting down. “Pass the turkey, please?”

“Not after you just insulted me, I won’t.”

“Good. It’s not by you anyway. Ginny?”

Despite the wintry forest around him, Draco felt warm. Life was once again as it should be, and it was going to be a happy Christmas.

xXxXx

Christmas morning cub-watch fell to Sirius. He wasn't really expecting anything to happen – Meghan had slept for a week after she'd healed Harry, and it had been barely two days since the Pride had healed the Longbottoms. But they had to be watched.

We could have a scry on them, like we had on Frank and Alice, but the point of that was to give them some privacy, watching just closely enough to know if they needed help. Which they didn't. The cubs know to expect us here when they wake up. They might even be afraid if we weren't here.

So they'd been taking it in turns to spend a few hours in the room where the Pride slept, each of them with a project of his or her own. Since there was little chance of waking them, Remus could bring his violin, and Aletha a vocal piece or two, or even a piano piece to practice, though she had to conjure the instrument. Danger occupied her time with a book or her knitting, usually both. Sirius had his latest manuscript, which he was in the process of revising and polishing.

Might be ready for the publisher by the end of January, even...

A noise caught his attention. Someone had just yawned.

Sirius set his quill down and scanned the room, looking for movement on a larger scale than breathing or shifting in sleep.

Ah-ha. There. On the other side of the room, close to the door...

Wait a second. That doesn't make sense. Pearl and Neville are over there, and they should be asleep longer than anyone. Shouldn't they?

But he couldn't argue with facts.

Time to get over there, I think.

xXxXx

All his limbs felt heavy. Even his eyelids were a burden to lift, but the burden was getting lighter by the second. Soon he'd be able to see where he was, and figure out how long he'd been asleep. The sour taste in his mouth told him it had been a long time, longer than he usually slept...

I wonder why?

Another moment, and memory supplied the answer. With it came a rush of adrenaline, burning away the weight in his body in an instant. Neville sat up with a gasp, his eyes flying open.

Mr. Padfoot jumped back from him. "You almost had me there," he said quietly, but with his usual good humor. "Good reflexes."

"Did it work?" Neville blurted. "Are they all right?"

The older wizard smiled. "It worked, Neville. You did it. They're back."

The room was suddenly much too hot, and the air seemed to have gotten thicker. By his side, Meghan stirred, but for once he had no eyes for her. “Can I see them?”

“Right away.” Mr. Padfoot went over to the fireplace, drew his wand, and lit a fire in the grate. “Bathroom’s through there,” he said, nodding over his shoulder, then tossed some Floo powder into the fire. “Crimson suite,” he said, and stepped into the green flames.

Neville got to his feet, a little awkwardly at first, as his muscles protested this sudden usage after a long period – how long, he wondered? – of inactivity. But he couldn’t be bothered with petty details like that. He needed to get cleaned up, and fast.

His parents were coming to see him.

xXxXx

“You look happy,” said Aletha as Sirius stepped out of the fire in their quarters.

“I am. Confused, but happy. Do you know where the Longbottoms are?”

“Up in their suite with Frank’s mum. Why?”

“Neville’s awake. Mind taking cub-watch for a moment until we get back?”

“Not at all,” said Aletha, standing up with a smile of her own. “I think I can honestly say this is one of the best things I’ve ever done.”

“I’ll second that.” Sirius added Floo powder to this fire as well. “Ginger suite,” he said this time, and let the fire carry him away again.

“Sirius,” said Frank, standing up to greet him, as did Alice and Mrs. Longbottom. “Something wrong?”

“Not at all. Are you doing anything you can’t put off?”

“No, I don’t think so. Why?”

Sirius grinned. “There’s a young man who’d like to meet you.”

xXxXx

Neville had just finished in the bathroom – used the toilet, washed his face and hands, finger-combed his hair, and done the fastest toothbrushing of his life – when he heard the door open. He dashed back out to the main room and froze in the doorway.

There they stood, both of them, looking at him with everything he’d always wanted to see in their faces – pride, joy, and immense love. His mother’s eyes were threatening to brim over, his father’s smile was trembling ever so slightly. They stood that way for a long moment. Then his

mother opened her arms.

Neville had no recollection of crossing the floor. He knew he must have, he had no idea how to Apparate, but he couldn't remember doing it. He was in the doorway, and then he was hugging his mum, and feeling his dad's arms around them both, and hearing them say his name. Somehow, they moved in an awkward group through the nearest open door, and heard it close behind them, and somehow they found a way to sit down, still holding each other, and then they all started to cry in earnest.

The dream that Neville Longbottom had cherished his entire life had finally come true.

xXxXx

Aletha shut the door behind her friends and turned away, blinking back a few tears of her own. She had someone to tend to herself.

“Mama Letha?” Meghan blinked up at her mother a bit foggily as Aletha sat down beside her. “Where's Neville?”

“He's with his parents, sweetheart. You did it. They're all right again.”

“Oh.” Meghan smiled and curled up next to Aletha. “That's good.”

“Pearl, my love?”

“Hmm?”

“Why are you two awake first? It doesn't make much sense. You and Neville did the most, so you should be asleep the longest.”

“Oh, that.” Meghan frowned, counting on her fingers. “Yeah. We should've been asleep until Tuesday. And everybody else should've woken up today. But everybody else took a day for us. So we can be awake today, and they'll all be awake tomorrow.”

Aletha frowned, then did some quick calculations. *Today to Tuesday is three days. Six if you count them both. And the rest of the Pride is six people. So “everyone else took a day for us” – I suppose they can share energy the same way they share magic, and take some of the burden from these two. Which is wonderful for the Longbottoms, and the rest of us won't suffer unduly for waiting one more day. We can have Christmas as soon as they're all awake and ready to appreciate their presents.*

Meghan had drifted back into a light doze. Aletha stroked her daughter's hair. “Happy Christmas, my little love,” she murmured. “May they all be so joyful for you.”

xXxXx

It was a good hour or more before the Longbottoms paid attention to anything but each other, and

that was only because Neville's stomach suddenly and noisily reminded him that he hadn't eaten in several days, which embarrassed him tremendously but made his parents laugh. Frank summoned a house-elf and had breakfast brought up for the three of them, and they continued talking while they ate.

Neville had just finished a grilled tomato when he recalled what he'd been working on this whole term, in hopes of a day just like this. "I have something to show you," he said. "Meghan and I made it together. Can I go get it, or send a house-elf for it or something?"

"Before you do," said his mum, setting aside her own plate, "I've heard a great deal about you and Meghan. Now I want to hear it from you. I know she's your friend, and that you spend a lot of time together..."

"Tell us about her," his dad supplied. "What is she like? What do you do together?"

Neville knew, from experience, that these same questions could have been asked in a tone of voice that would make him want to shrivel up, give as short an answer as possible, and run away. But his parents weren't his gran, and they sounded interested and open, without any premeditated notions of what it necessarily had to mean when an older boy became friends with a younger girl.

We're too young for that stuff anyway...

"We do almost everything together," he said, answering the last question first. "We like each other a lot. We get along well, and she always thinks the best of me." He smiled, a little embarrassed. "I think that's part of why I like her, because she would always talk like I was really the best at everything I did, and just hiding it so other people wouldn't feel bad. Even when I was the worst at things, she wouldn't believe I was really the worst. And... I started being not the worst, because she thought I wasn't."

His dad was nodding, and his mum looked thoughtful. Neville kept on. "She loves to dance. She taught me how, and I really like it now. We practice a lot, when we can get time and somewhere with enough space. It makes me feel all free and light, and really strong, because I have to pick her up to do some of the moves, and she's so little that I can do it. I worked hard on getting my arms strong enough to do the fast dances, the ones where you have to pick the girl up and spin her around or something."

"I'd love to see you dance with her," said his mum. "Maybe sometime soon."

Neville nodded. "We will," he promised. "And over the summer, we worked in her garden together a lot. I showed her how to tell if a plant's strong enough to stay where it is, or if it needs to be moved somewhere else, and how to tend climbers right – so many people just let them go any which way. The summer before that, back before second year, I taught her some of the magic we'd learned in first year, and she taught me how to read music."

"Taught you?" his dad asked. "You didn't already know?"

Neville shook his head. "Should I?" he asked, a little timidly.

"I don't know about *should*, but I'd thought Mum would have made sure you got lessons in something..."

His mum leaned over and whispered something, and his dad's face cleared. "Of course. That makes sense. Do you play an instrument, Neville?"

"Not yet." Neville hesitated – this was something he hadn't even told Meghan yet – but these were his parents. Who else should he tell? "I wanted to learn to play the guitar."

His mum laughed, his dad grinned. "That's my boy," he said. "Or did you not know I played?"

"You do?" Neville had thought his day couldn't get any better. "Gran never said – will you teach me?"

"I'll be delighted. I'd always hoped you'd want to learn." His dad leaned over to give him a hug. "You used to watch me play and try to grab the tuning pegs. I suppose they were shiny enough that they caught your eye."

"Do you sing too?"

"When we feel like it," said his mum. "We used to sing and play you to sleep every night with a special lullaby. Aletha composed it for us when you were just a few months old and cranky. It would put you out like that." She snapped her fingers.

There seemed to be no limit on how good this day could get, Neville thought. "Can I hear it?"

His parents looked at each other for a moment. "All right," said his mum, resettling herself on the couch. "Let's see..." She hummed a note, and his dad came in with a low harmony line.

*Dearest child, go to sleep.
Earth is quiet, skies so deep
Now do neither smile nor weep.
Sleep, my baby, sleep.*

*Lovely child, hush-a-bye.
Sleep until the sunny eye
Of morning brightens up the sky.
Bye, my baby, bye.*

*Sleep, my child, until this night
Is over and the dawn's first light
Does make the flowers all bloom bright.
Night, my love, good night.*

xXxXx

Red yarn wound around brown fingers as Meghan worked diligently on her crochet project. She had begun it soon after meeting Neville, and she knew she was nowhere near finished, but it didn't matter. She had years yet.

Her mind wandered as her fingers looped and pulled in rhythm. *I hope his parents like me. I hope I like them. I hope they like what we made for them...*

She looked up at a slight squeak of hinges. Neville was peering out of the room where he'd been closeted with his parents for nearly two hours now, and he was looking straight at her. She quickly held up the gold-leather-bound book she'd had a house-elf bring her from his dorm. He smiled and beckoned her closer.

Meghan shot a glance at her mother, who nodded to her and waved her onward. She tied off her work so it wouldn't unravel, got to her feet, and carried the book to Neville.

"I should have known you'd have it ready," he told her quietly. "Will you help me show it to them?"

"But I'm not in most of it."

"But you know about it. And we made this together. We should show it together."

In the back of Meghan's heart, a secret fear eased. Neville wouldn't stop liking her just because he had his parents back. She would still be part of his life.

But it'll be even better now, I think...

She stepped into the room, and Neville shut the door behind her.

xXxXx

Alice wasn't terribly surprised when both children began to yawn shortly after noon. Aletha had warned them that Neville might well be tired for a time after he woke, and Alice had no doubt the same went for Meghan, whose power it had been that allowed the healing in the first place. Frank saw it too, and with a little deft maneuvering, got Neville and Meghan ensconced together in one of the room's large armchairs.

Within a few minutes, Meghan's head was resting on Neville's shoulder, and Neville himself was blinking sleepily. "M sorry," he said on the tail end of a yawn. "Just so tired..."

"You sleep," Frank told him. "We'll still be here when you wake up."

"We love you." Alice kissed his cheek. "Sleep well."

"Thanks, Mum. Dad." A smile blossomed on Neville's face as his eyes drifted shut. He shifted his weight once, to accommodate Meghan better, then he was still.

Alice picked up the photograph album which Neville and Meghan had been showing them for the past hour or so. She flipped to near the back, where rested the pictures of the group the two called the Pride. She turned the pages, noticing how, in almost every photograph, Meghan stood next to Neville, or very near him. There were a few pictures of him with just the other boys of the group, but in every group picture, her son and Sirius Black's daughter were side by side.

"You see it too, then," said Frank from over her shoulder.

"I thought Letha might be exaggerating, but it seems not."

"They're very comfortable with each other." Frank looked at the pair in the armchair. "Not to mention cute as the dickens. Quite honestly, I don't see a problem."

"Nor do I. It might become one as they get older, but at the moment, they're good friends, and that's something everyone needs."

"And friendship can always grow into something more." Frank winked at her. "You know that."

Alice elbowed him. "You were just too shy to date me properly, or even propose. Every other woman I know has this romantic story about how her husband proposed marriage to her. I have, 'Well, I suppose we'll be getting married one of these days.'"

"It worked, didn't it?"

xXxXx

Sirius knocked on the door of the Defense teacher's quarters. "Moony? Danger? You in there?"

There was no reply. Sirius knocked again, louder. "Hello?"

Still no reply. Sirius frowned and tried the door. It swung open under his hand, and he stepped into the darkened living area. "Anyone home?"

Silence answered him. A little worried, he felt for his wand as he moved through the room. Remus didn't usually sleep this late, and even if Danger had wanted a lie-in, Remus would have been awake and telling Sirius to shut up by now.

Something's not right here.

Carefully, he twisted the doorknob of the master bedroom. The door opened, and he peered in, squinting to let his eyes adjust to the darkness within.

Remus lay alone in the bed, snoring gently. There was no sign of Danger.

I don't like this. Sirius transformed into Padfoot and began to sniff around. Danger had been here, that was certain. From the scent, she had slept in the bed all night, the way she should. But at some point a couple of hours ago, he guessed, she'd gotten up, gone to the bathroom – his nose wrinkled

at the odors coming from there, odors he'd have been able to detect even in human form – and now she was somewhere else.

Where?

He followed her scent across the hall to the other bedroom, and into it, over to...

What in the world is she doing in the closet?

Tentatively, he retransformed and reached for the doorknob. “Danger? You in there?”

“Go AWAY!” screamed Danger’s voice, and a blast of fire shot out of the barely opened door. Sirius yelled and dropped to the ground, and the fire vanished before it could hit anything.

“That was a warning shot,” said Danger, sounding hoarse and unhappy. “The next one won’t be. Go away, Sirius. I don’t want to see you.”

Sirius got to his feet and backed away from the closet, sitting down on the bed. “Are you ill?” he asked.

“No, I’m just *fine* . In the bloom of health. Now will you please leave?”

“No. You’re not fine, not if you’re upset enough to be shooting firebolts around. And why isn’t Remus awake yet? We’re making enough noise.”

“He’s not awake because I charmed him asleep. I didn’t want anyone to bother me right now. Is that all right with you, or do I need to check with you every time I need a little privacy?” The words were bitter and angry, but Sirius sensed something else beneath them, something oddly familiar.

“You’ve been acting a little strange for months,” he said conversationally. “Not quite yourself. People are starting to notice. Is there something going on I can help with?”

“No... well...” There was a shaky laugh from the closet. “Yes, I suppose you could help, but you wouldn’t. Not if you’re the man I think you are. Because it would be so incredibly wrong... we’d be breaking at least a dozen sets of promises, not to mention how weird it would be... I suppose, though, it’s a little inevitable I should think about it, with my name and all.”

Her name? “Which name is this?”

“Gertrude. With what she did... but wait, that’s right, you don’t read Shakespeare. You don’t know what she did. Go away.”

“No. Let me think.” Sirius played with a string on the bedspread, remembering everything he could about that particular Shakespeare play. *Gertrude is from Hamlet. She’s Hamlet’s mother, and Hamlet’s angry with her for marrying her dead husband’s brother...*

Oh my God...

“Danger, you don’t... this isn’t... you’re not jealous of Letha. Are you?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, you mangy bum-sniffer,” she snapped. Then her voice rose into a wail.

“Oh, Lord, I’m making a mess of this. Go *away!*”

Suddenly Sirius realized why this felt familiar to him. *Just after Halloween, two years ago...*

Think, Padfoot. I know you don’t do it much, but do it now. Something has Danger really upset. And she charmed Remus asleep, which means she doesn’t want him to know about it. Which means it’s something about him. Something I could help with, but I won’t, or I shouldn’t. And something related to... yeah. Maybe it’s something I can do that Remus can’t...

Ego aside, one difference came immediately to mind. Sirius would have discarded it, except that as he thought it over, it made more and more sense. *And Moody used to say, go with your first reaction, it’s most likely to be right...*

“Danger?”

A frustrated shriek rose from behind the door. “Why won’t you just leave me *alone?*”

“Because crying your eyes out in the closet isn’t going to solve anything. Are you going to hurt me if I open the door?”

“Yes!”

“All right.” Sirius drew his wand and pointed it at himself, murmuring a mid-power fireproofing spell. *Now I’m protected if she flames me. If she changes forms, I think I still remember how to take down a wolf from Hogwarts days. And if she pulls something else...*

Well, I’ll just have to be ready for it.

He opened the door. Danger glared up at him from her huddled position in the corner and told him to go do something that Aletha wouldn’t appreciate at all, then followed it up with a suggestion for an unpleasant dietary supplement.

“You are in a mood.” Sirius lit his wand, stepped into the closet, and pulled the door shut behind him. “Danger, what’s this all about?”

“It’s none of your *business!*” She added a description of him that would have tallied with what the *Daily Prophet* was printing while he was in Azkaban.

“Things that affect the Pack are my business. And this is obviously not just going to go away. You’re reminding me a lot of Letha, a couple years back. You remember, after the cubs’ first Halloween here, when Meghan started showing an interest in Healing?”

Danger flinched at the mention of Meghan's name. Sirius' eyes narrowed. *I'm getting closer...*

"This started over the summer, I think. After Draco ran away, and we got him back."

Danger snorted. "It wasn't *that*. You men, you're all alike, think it's all about you."

Something else, then. But something around that time, and something about the girls...

"Neenie started her cycles that night. Is this related to that?"

Danger's whole body stiffened for an instant. "Get out," she said, baring her teeth.

"No. I don't abandon a trail just when it starts getting easier to follow." On a hunch, Sirius changed forms again and sniffed. Danger's scent was all around him, rank with powerful negative emotions – anger and fear and guilt and something he had a hard time pinning down, save that it was not pleasant in the least. And there was something else, something physical rather than emotional, but it was related to the emotions, and might even be the cause of some of them...

That can't be the whole answer, but it has to be part of it. He snorted slightly. *And tonight's full moon. Wonderful. They have coinciding times of the month...*

That thought set off a chain reaction in his mind. *Time of the month. Something Remus can't do. Hermione becoming a woman – the Longbottoms and Neville – Draco thinking about his father...*

The unidentified scent was suddenly clear to him. Envy. Raw jealousy, for something Danger knew she'd never have.

He changed back. "You want a child," he said, fighting to keep his voice even and free of emotion, even the embarrassment struggling to show itself on his face. He couldn't afford it now. "You want to have a baby."

Danger's breath was coming short as she glared at him. Her eyes could have set things on fire – *and for once, that's not a metaphor.* Sirius swallowed surreptitiously and prayed his protections would work.

Danger braced herself against the floor with both hands, tipped her head back, and screamed. Flames erupted all around the closet. Sirius flinched away automatically, but felt nothing. Then, daring greatly, he scooted himself forward and touched her, feeling the tension of her muscles beneath her skin. *Have to keep it low key, brotherly at all costs...*

"Sssh," he told her, pulling her to him gently. "Sssh, it's all right."

Her scream died away, and the flames with it. "It is *not*," she said hoarsely, shoving at him, but he wouldn't let her go. "It is *not* all right. I'm bad, I'm bad to want it, I'm bad to want anything else when I have so much..."

"You're not bad. How could you ever think that?"

“I *am*. I don’t love him enough, I’m not good enough for it not to matter to me...”

“Just because you love someone doesn’t mean you should give up your own dreams.” *God, I sound like a character in one of my own novels.*

“It does if the dream will hurt them.” She looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. “Sirius, I don’t dare tell him about this. He’d take it all wrong – he’d think it meant I don’t love him because we can’t have children, and that’s not true...” Her face crumpled again.

“I think I understand,” said Sirius, praying he was right. “You love Remus exactly the way he is, and you wouldn’t change anything about him. You’re afraid that if he knew about this, he’d feel either that you regretted loving him, or that he’d failed you somehow. But it’s tearing you apart inside.”

She nodded.

Sirius took a moment to put his thoughts together. “I don’t know if you should tell him about this or not,” he said. “I promise you no one will find out from me, though. This stays between us, unless you tell someone about it.”

Danger sniffed. “Thank you.”

“That’s what big brothers are for, isn’t it?”

“You’re not *that* much bigger than me.”

“Oh, really?” Sirius squeezed her just a little tighter. “But remember this. It’s not by Remus’ choice that he can’t give you children. It’s part of something he never wanted, and I’m sure he’d get rid of it if he could...”

He realized too late that he’d just put his foot in it, as Danger tensed up again. *And I was just getting her to settle down.* “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I could have gotten rid of it for him. I could have changed everything – maybe even made it so Harry never had to face Voldemort – I don’t know, but I *know* I could have helped Remus! And I didn’t, and now I’ll never have the chance again...”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Before your trial. When I was gone. I could have made it so that you’d all be safe and happy for the rest of your lives...”

Oh. “If I remember right, that offer had a price tag on it. Spelled D-A-N-G-E-R. Am I right?”

“That doesn’t matter – what matters is that I had the chance, and I didn’t take it!”

“It doesn’t matter?” Sirius stared down at her. “Hell, yes, it matters! I don’t care what advantages

we got from it, or what else might have changed. *None* of us would be happy without you. *Especially* not Remus. Didn't he tell you that himself?"

Danger wouldn't meet his eyes.

"That's what I thought. He came after you, remember that? And he told you point-blank that he'd be happy to transform every night of his life, as long as he knew he'd see you in the morning. Danger, he loves you. *You*, not just what you do for him. And he knows you love him back. I can't say he won't be hurt if you tell him this – he's not perfect, and no one likes being reminded that there are things he can't do – but I can promise you he won't think you don't love him because of this."

He felt the tension gradually leaving Danger's body. "How'd you get so smart?" she asked finally.

"Practice." Sirius pushed the hair out of her face and looked down at her. "Danger, I swear to you, you're not bad. There's nothing wrong with wanting children – most women do, I think it's in their genes somewhere, like belching and Quidditch are for men."

"Oh. Well, if that's all this is to you – if it's only as important as a good burp and a stupid game..."

"That's not what I said," Sirius began, then felt her shaking in his arms and realized it wasn't with tears. "Why, you little..."

"Yes?" She looked up at him, smiling cheekily.

"You're horrible."

"Thank you. Honestly, Sirius, I couldn't resist – belching and Quidditch?" She laughed aloud, shakily but still a laugh. "Thank you," she said again. "Thank you for listening, and for being there, and for not going away."

"Despite your telling me to repeatedly."

"Exactly."

"You know, this is why men don't understand women. How are we supposed to know when 'go away' really means 'go away,' and when it means 'I need you, come here'?"

"You seem to be doing pretty well."

"I'm just too dumb to take a hint. An intelligent man would have been out that door the instant you nearly burned his nose off."

She scowled at him. "You stole my comeback line."

"I'm terribly sorry."

“Like hell you are.”

“You see, this is what isn’t fair. Men can’t understand women, but women get to understand men. Or at least figure out some of what they mean.”

“No one ever said life would be fair.” Danger heaved a sigh. “I suppose I need to remember that. And count my blessings. I have children, even if they weren’t born to me. I got to watch them grow up, and help them along the way. It’s more than a lot of women get. I should be grateful.”

“Danger?”

“Hmm?”

“If there’s ever anything I can do – besides...”

“You didn’t think I *meant* that, did you?” Danger shoved him, laughing. “First Letha would kill us, then Remus would resurrect us and kill us again, and then we’d get the fallout from breaking the Pack-oath...”

“At least we don’t have magical marriage oaths to break. Both our marriages were Muggle-style.”

“They’re still legal, aren’t they?”

“Oh, legal, of course. But some magical marriages have other things bound into them. Things that are often a tad more repressive to the witch than to the wizard...”

“No big surprises there. So you’re saying that if we were married magically, and we did... ah...”

“Stray?”

“Yes, that. That I’d be in more trouble than you would?”

“With a contract like my parents had, I wouldn’t be in any trouble at all. I think my dad had a new girlfriend every few months. But Mum, of course, never strayed. She couldn’t.”

“Makes sense, I suppose, if you’re interested in preserving the purity of the line. With that kind of system, there’s no way any, shall we say, adulterating factors could creep into the bloodline...”

Sirius snickered. “D’you think that’s why they call it adultery?”

“Quite possibly.” Danger sighed. “And I should get out of this closet and go take that spell off Remus. This is not the way to spend Christmas.”

“I beg to differ. Do you feel better now?”

“Well... yes.”

“Then this was a fine way to spend Christmas. And it isn’t over yet, not nearly. Go wake up your husband and wash your face, and I’ll go see about some Christmas dinner for us. And a little horsie told me that the rest of the cubs ought to be awake tomorrow.”

“The rest?”

“Oh, that’s right, I never got a chance to tell you – Neville and Meghan are awake. Or they were. They might be asleep again by now. But they were up for a while, and Alice and Frank got to meet their son and his best friend.”

“Sirius, that’s wonderful. But – oh, now you’ve gone and missed Meghan’s being awake, just for me – you shouldn’t have...”

Sirius gripped Danger’s shoulders and shook her gently. “Enough with the guilt already. The world’s not about to end because I didn’t see Meghan awake today. I’ll see her tomorrow. And I helped you. You’re worth it, and don’t start in that you’re not, because I won’t put up with it. All right?”

Danger sagged, then nodded. “You know me way too well.”

“Side effect of the whole Pack thing.”

She embraced him. “Thanks again.”

“Anytime.”

“Really?” Her eyes sparked mischief. “Any time?”

Sirius groaned and pushed the closet door open.

xXxXx

Albus Dumbledore stepped out of his fireplace and lowered the hood of his cloak. *Home for the holidays. And with the prize I went to gain.* He removed a small bottle from his pocket and set it inside one of the drawers of his desk, which he locked securely with his wand.

Now to catch up on the news here...

Fawkes appeared in a flash of fire and soared to Dumbledore’s shoulder, trilling cheerfully. Dumbledore smiled. His friend would not be so happy if anything had gone severely wrong in his absence.

“How go things, friends?” he asked the portraits hanging on the wall. Several of them volunteered answers, all of which amounted to the same things – everything was all right, nothing out of the ordinary...

“Oh, except that young couple you were interested in,” said Phineas Nigellus, stepping into his

frame and leaning on the back of his chair. “The ones my three-greats-granddaughter was trying to help, whatever their names are. Shortbottom or something.”

Dumbledore hid a smile. Phineas never forgot a name, and was as addicted to gossip as any witch, but he tried to hide it, and most of the time Dumbledore let him get away with it. “Yes, and what news of them?”

“They seem to be all right. Moving about under their own power, and their conversation is no madder than any I’ve heard lately. They’ll probably be along at some point to see you.”

“Or perhaps I will go to see them,” said Dumbledore, holding out his arm so that Fawkes could sidle down to his perch. “Have they had Christmas dinner yet?”

“They’re just getting ready to sit down. In a suite on the fourth floor, I think.”

“Then I believe I shall join them there.” Dumbledore took off his cloak and hung it up, then went to change into his holiday robes. “The staff will forgive me if this once I take dinner with some old friends.”

xXxXx

“Ronald!” scolded Hermione, smacking Ron’s hand. “You’re not supposed to take thirds!”

“Why not? It’s a dream, Hermione. We’re not going to get stomachaches or anything, and there’s always more. Why shouldn’t I have thirds?”

“Just... just because!”

Ron looked at Harry and Draco. “Just because,” he repeated. “Does she make any sense to you?”

Harry shook his head. Draco looked thoughtful. “I think she means, ‘Because I’m going to be sick if I watch you eat any more,’ but she’s too polite to say it,” he said.

Hermione bristled. “That is *not* what I mean!”

“Then what do you mean?” asked Ron, looking at her in bewilderment. “Just because – because what?”

“Because I think we’re going to wake up soon, and we haven’t even had a decent game of hide-and-go-seek.”

“Oh.” Ron set down the spoon. “Why didn’t you say so? Not Seeker.”

“Not Seeker,” chorused Harry and Hermione, with Draco and Ginny an instant behind them.

“I suppose I’m the Seeker, then,” said Luna. “How much should I count to?”

“Do a hundred by fives,” said Harry. “On your marks, get set, go!”

Animals raced into the brush on all sides. A white owl hid her head beneath her wing and began to hoot to herself.

One of the first rules of the Pride was, *Have fun whenever you can.*

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 13: Close Call and Christmas (Year 3)

Chapter 13: Close Call and Christmas

Remus lay next to a sleeping Danger, breathing quietly, trying to get to sleep himself. But for some reason, perhaps because he had slept so late today – he'd been in bed till after noon, something he almost never did – he was wide awake.

He slid his nose under her neck, hoping to calm himself with her scent, then pulled back, startled.

What in the world?

His wolf emotions clamored that an enemy must be near. With a practiced hand, Remus reigned them in and brought his human mind to bear on the situation.

She was seriously upset about something earlier today. But she seemed fine when I woke up – she was good company all day, and she doesn't have that edgy feeling to her anymore that I've been noticing for a little while now.

He licked around his jaws in thought. *If she was all right when I woke up, then something obviously happened before I woke up. But she must not think I need to know about it, or she would have told me...*

He felt a flash of unease. *The last time something happened that she didn't think I needed to know about, it was that spell that backfired on her. If I'd known about that, I might have been able to get it off us earlier.*

Quickly, before he could talk himself out of it, he slid into her mind and moved down through layers of memory, trotting along in an illusory form which flickered from wolf to human to lion as he moved. *I won't pry, he told himself. This isn't prying. I'll just look at this one thing, work out what to do about it, and surprise her with it in the morning. She'll thank me for it later.*

Show me what happened this morning, he told Danger's mind. Whatever had you so worked up that I can still smell it more than twelve hours later...

Something very solid loomed up before him. He backpedaled frantically, just avoiding slamming into it. It was the solidest block he'd ever seen in Danger's mind.

She really doesn't want me knowing about this, whatever it is.

He felt guilty. *I should get out of her mind, stop spying on her. She deserves privacy, her own secrets, just like I do...*

But I don't keep secrets from her. At least, not many. And not something this big.

So I won't try to break this. She'd know if I did, and that would be prying. But it isn't wrong just to sit here and listen...

For scraps of thought were drifting out from behind the block, though the main event remained solidly out of his reach. He sat very still and let the images and snatches of conversation drift into his eyes and ears, one by one...

Danger in Sirius' arms, crying her heart out.

"Sirius, I don't dare tell him about this."

Danger smiling up at Sirius with her best roguish charm, that impish smile Remus had always loved on her.

"He's not awake because I charmed him asleep."

Sirius looking back at Danger with his own devil-may-care grin, snickering.

"D'you think that's why they call it adultery?"

Remus yelped aloud, jerking backwards and out of Danger's mind. He shook his head violently, trying to rid himself of those images, those words.

No. No! That's ridiculous! They wouldn't – they can't have –

I'm taking this wrong, I have to be. Those were just little snatches of their conversation, it can't possibly mean...

His breath was coming a little faster. *A conversation. A long conversation. While I was asleep. Charmed asleep, it would seem... to get me out of the way?*

Stop this, now, he told himself severely. *There's some perfectly good reason why they were...*

Alone, together, in a little room. Holding each other like that, and laughing, and crying. And something Danger doesn't dare tell me – and Sirius, joking about adultery –

The wolf's emotions were rising again, and this time, Remus let them. His breathing was coming still faster now, and a mist seemed to be settling before his eyes, clouding what he could see. In his nostrils was the smell of one he had once called friend, but no longer – for he would call no one friend who would steal his mate –

But does it count as stealing if she goes to him willingly?

He began to shake with rage. He could still see, on the backs of his eyelids, Danger smiling cheekily at Sirius – that puckish smile he so adored, and had thought was kept for him alone –

It seems I was wrong.

He had been betrayed, betrayed by those he thought he could trust, those he had trusted for so many years –

How long has this been going on? And how have I been so blind to it before now?

His mind was presenting him with a slideshow of a thousand little moments between Sirius and Danger, moments which had seemed utterly innocent, the playful banter between a brother and sister. But Remus could see, now, with utterly clear hindsight, the clasp of hands held a little too long, an embrace that lingered a bit beyond the merely brotherly, jokes made when he wasn't listening – at his expense, perhaps?

I will not tolerate this. No more.

Anger was flooding through him. His claws were flexing in and out. Dimly he recognized what was happening – *the wolf, it's waking, it's going to take me over* – but he didn't care. Not as long as the wolf's fury would be properly targeted.

This one! he shouted, tearing Sirius' image and scent from his memory and placing it foremost in the wolf's mind. *This one has taken your mate – he seeks your place – he will think you are weak tonight, and sleeping – you must strike at him before he strikes at you again!*

Yes, the wolf growled. *Yes! Kill the usurper, kill his mate and cub – end the tainted bloodline –*

What? No!

But it was too late. The wolf was firmly in control. *Yes. Kill. Too long with no killing – too long with no blood. Blood tonight.*

No! Remus shouted at the wolf, but he knew it was futile.

What have I done – they won't have a chance, they'll be murdered in their sleep – what was I thinking, I must have been out of my mind –

You, the wolf snarled at him. *Down!*

He had no choice. At the full moon, the wolf was stronger than he. But before it could dominate him completely, Remus screamed one word, unsure if it had reached its mark or if it had even left his mind, but knowing it was his only chance to save himself and his Pack.

Danger!

Then he fell into darkness, despairing.

xXxXx

Danger!

She started awake. **Remus? What's – OW!**

The werewolf's claws had scored lines across her shoulder. **You**, it snarled into her mind – *it*, for there was no trace of her husband in the eyes that glared at her, and the speech was in the image-fragments of a maddened animal. **You – with him –**

The scent-sight-sound package accompanying the word made the “him” Sirius, and the “with” the werewolf used had a distinct connotation to it –

No! Danger cried in shock. **Never!**

I saw. I heard. You *did*. The werewolf stood over her, teeth bared. **You will no more. I kill him. I kill his blood. Then I teach you. You will not stray again. You are *mine*!**

I belong to no one that way! Danger retorted without thinking, then howled in pain as the werewolf struck her again.

You belong to *me*. You will learn. After I teach the other. He must die. The werewolf bounded out of the room.

The other – he means Sirius!

Danger staggered to her feet, wincing – blood was dripping down her shoulder into her fur, the cuts hurt like hell, but she couldn't think about that now – not when Remus was about to –

A slam resounded through their quarters, and an angry snarl. Then another slam. Another, and this one accompanied by the distinct sound of splintering wood –

NO! She was in the office now, charging across the floor space, knocking Remus aside just as he was setting up for another run at the door, one which would almost certainly have got him through it –

NO! Remus, you can't! She was on him now, pinning him down, but not for long as he slashed at her again. She flinched back automatically, but refused to run. *Skin to skin is what does it – I have to get through the fur somehow –*

She had hesitated too long. The werewolf leapt onto her and buried its teeth in her scruff, biting down hard. Danger howled again, almost losing control of her form, but clung to her wolf shape desperately. *I can't change now – if I do, he'll kill me, and then we'll both be lost –*

Remus, please! Come back to me – don't do this!

The furry body atop her own quivered suddenly as if it had been struck. The jaws bearing down on her opened slowly, releasing her.

Danger?

She exhaled shakily in relief at the sound of his voice, tentative and frightened though it was. **Yes. Yes. It's me.**

Remus slid gracelessly off her, landing with a thud on the floor, his eyes human once more but terrified. They darted around the room, noticing everything. **You – you're hurt, you're bleeding – your blood, I can taste it, it's on my claws and my teeth – and the door – oh, God, what did I do? What did I do?**

Nothing, Danger assured him quickly, moving to lie next to him. **Nothing, you didn't do anything. You didn't get out. And I'm fine, I'll be fine. I've been hurt worse.**

Your shoulder – your neck – I did that – and Sirius – A wave of his panic rolled over Danger. **I wanted to kill him! I wanted to kill him, and I let the wolf out – it would have killed him, and Aletha, and Meghan – I would have done that, it would have been my fault...**

Remus, what happened?

She felt him shudder. **God have mercy, Danger, I never meant any of this to happen...**

I know. I know. Will you tell me?

I was wrong. I'm so sorry. I should never have done it.

Done what?

I went in – into your mind – I could tell you'd been upset about something, and I wanted to know what – Danger, please, the truth – are you and Sirius – is there anything going on between you?

The emotional tangle that accompanied these words was too complex for Danger to sort through on short notice. She set it away for later examination. **No**, she said "aloud," opening her mind to Remus fully, so that he could see that she spoke the truth. **Nothing like that. There never has been.**

Relief inundated her first, then sorrow and shame, as Remus began to shake with what, if he'd been human at the moment, would have been sobs. **All this, then – for nothing...**

Danger nosed his ear gently, then began to lick his fur, offering comfort as best she could. **I love you**, she told him. **In this way, I love only you. There was never anyone else.**

And I would love to know what made you think there was...

Keeping half an ear on Remus, and continuing to groom him, she began to sort through the snarl of emotions she'd received from him earlier. Fear was certainly present, fear that he might be right in his assumption, but also fear that he might be wrong.

My poor love. He can't win either way.

Anger, at what he presumed Sirius had done, and jealousy – disgust and loathing – and something very odd and complex. A feeling that he somehow deserved this, that it was somehow only right that Danger and Sirius be having an affair, that it was nothing more than his just reward for –

For what?

He said he went into my mind. But we're so open to each other, he must have known I wouldn't mind him looking at almost anything – what could he have seen, that he'd think he deserved that?

Very gently, she probed the question further, and suddenly everything became clear.

Oh, good Lord. I almost want to tease him about it, about eavesdroppers never hearing anything good – but no, not now, not when he's so torn up. Maybe next week, or next year. Not now.

She fitted the curve of her body into his. He was still shaking, but it was better now than it had been. **Thank you for the truth**, she said quietly.

You're welcome. His voice was still on the verge of tears, but slowly backing away. **I'm so incredibly sorry, Danger – neither of you had ever given me any cause to think such a thing, and I just went and leapt to conclusions based on scraps of a conversation I wasn't meant to hear...**

Are you quite finished lamenting and beating your breast?

Yes, I think so.

Good. Can we go back to the bedroom, then?

Remus laughed ever so slightly. **You and Neenie – you hardly ever seem to lose your cool over anything...**

But when we do, watch out, right?

Something like that.

Danger got carefully to her feet, favoring her bad shoulder. **We can fix the door first thing in the morning. No one ever needs to know about this.**

Oh, yes, they do. I owe Sirius an apology, for one. And you are getting those scratches seen to. It can stay in the Pack if you insist, but it has to go at least that far.

Danger sighed. **All right. That far, but no farther. And why in the world do you think you owe Sirius an apology?**

Remus looked at her as if she'd grown another head. **For assuming he'd do something I should have known he never would?**

Remus, people have misjudged their friends before. Sometimes those misjudgments have very bad consequences. And sometimes, like right now, they get nipped in the bud, before anything too terrible can happen. I lost a little blood, and our door took a beating. That's all.

Yes, but for me to assume you were doing something together, when he was just holding you that way because...

Uh-oh. Danger gulped as Remus stopped walking and turned his head to look at her.

Come to think of it, he said slowly, I don't think you ever actually told me what you two were doing in that room together. Just what you weren't.

Danger's throat closed in panic. *I'm not ready for this – I hadn't decided yet – I don't know what to say –*

What is it? Remus' voice, surprised and urgent, broke into her madly scurrying thoughts. **Are you all right?**

I don't know, she replied inanely, staring at the floor beneath her paws as though it might give her insight. **Am I?**

Not by your scent, or by your thoughts. Danger – Remus' voice hardened slightly – **I want your word that Sirius hasn't hurt you in any way.**

No! Of course not! Relief made her momentarily light-headed. **He didn't hurt me. He was helping me. I'd thought of something – it was like this, like panicking, only it was something else, something that made me sad – I did it to myself, Sirius helped make it better.**

And just what is it that you did to yourself?

Danger gathered her thoughts and found a compromise, something acceptable to both of them, she hoped. **Remus, can you trust me?**

With my life, or more than that. What is it you need? For me to leave this alone?

Not for the first time, Danger blessed whatever deity – *or other supernatural being* – had sent her such a wonderful husband. **Yes. But only for a little while. Only long enough for us both to get over what's happened tonight. Then, if you still want to know, I will tell you. But it's only fair to warn you that it may hurt you to hear, and that it's nothing either of us can change.**

I understand. His voice was heavy.

And I can also tell you what it isn't. It isn't anything like "I'm tired of you" or "I want to leave you" or "There's someone else" or anything like that. There isn't anyone else, and there never has been. I never want to stop being married to you. And I am *not* having an affair with your best friend. All right?

All right – though I think I may go crazy trying to figure out what it is before you tell me, Remus teased. Danger’s heart rejoiced at the light tones in his voice. What did I ever do to deserve a woman like you?

You were born, and grew up to become this most utterly lovable man that you are, whom I don’t deserve in the slightest.

Haven’t we been over this?

Yes, but it’s always nice to go there again.

Hmm. That gives me an idea.

Oh?

Remus lay down on their pile of bedclothes and arranged himself to make room for Danger. **You’re not the only one allowed to have secrets. Though this won’t be one for very long.**

Well, if you insist. Danger lay down beside him. **I do love a romantic man.**

You do? Is he taller than me?

Laughter accompanied them both to their destination.

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On a broad stone terrace under a bright full moon, they danced.

She was all in white, with lilies-of-the-valley in her hair. He wore black and red, with a tiny sweetheart rose in his buttonhole. They had eyes only for each other.

In the shadows, an unseen figure raised an imaginary glass, toasting them.

“This will come to pass again one day,” he murmured to himself, so softly that no one else heard. “And when it does, all your dreams will have come true.”

xXxXx

She opened her eyes, and thought for a moment that she hadn’t, because she couldn’t see much of anything. Then she realized that with her eyes open, the darkness around her had a distinctly brown quality to it, and that something soft and thick and fibrous lay over her face.

Stupid hair. Maybe I should get it cut short, it’s always in the way, and such a pain to wash... at least I have a wand to get it dry quickly, I don’t know how Muggle girls manage...

Hermione brought her arm slowly around – slowly because she didn’t really have the energy for anything quick – and cleared her face. She wasn’t incredibly surprised to see that there wasn’t

much to see now, either. A low, bumpy, sepia-toned landscape lay in front of her, and she could hear other people breathing around her.

It's just dark in here, so I can't see much color. This must be where they put us after we all fell asleep.

She thought back. She and Ron had spent quite a while trying to get their magic aligned – they seemed to butt heads more easily than anything, and the more things she thought of to make it work, the worse it got. Finally, she had backed off, made her own magic as receptive to his as possible, and only helped him when he asked for it. *Well, and once when he didn't. But that was just his stupid male pride, refusing to admit he didn't understand something.* Within a few seconds, they'd been in full harmony.

I have a feeling I was supposed to learn something from that, but I don't much care for being manipulated into learning things.

Not even if they're good for you? asked a voice that sounded quite a lot like Moony at his quietest and most ironic.

Especially not then. Hermione pulled away from this line of thought and continued remembering.

After we linked, then Ron linked with Ginny, and suddenly we were in with everyone. That was a moment worth remembering – the rush of Pride-magic through her veins, all the different feelings and colors and scents at once. Sorting out whose was whose hadn't been nearly as difficult as she might have thought.

Then Neville and Meghan went in, and there was a draining sort of feeling, a little scary, but not too much, because I could feel that we were so strong it would take them a long time to drain us all the way. And when we started to sing, we had even more power.

It had been a fine time overall. There had been some worry for Meghan and Neville, but the link to them was still evident, their magics still present in the circle, so no one had fussed too much. The worst clashes had been over what carols or songs to do next, and most of those had diffused in laughter rather than anger. It had sometimes been confusing, since everyone had forgotten at least once not to think “aloud” and broadcast their thoughts over the link, but nothing terribly embarrassing had happened.

Being in full-bond like that was... not quite comfortable, but right. Not the sort of thing I'd want to do every day, but not something I'd never do again, either. There'd have to be a good reason for it, though.

Finally, there had been an enormous pull of power, staggering everyone for a moment, but they'd recovered quickly to keep the thread of the song going, and within about a minute, they'd felt Neville and Meghan returning, fatigued but joyous. The message they bore – **We think it worked** – spread around the link just ahead of the wave of exhaustion radiating from them. Hermione'd had barely enough time to settle herself in a comfortable pose before it hit her, catapulting her

into sleep.

And then dreams. I don't remember much – Neville was unhappy about something or other – oh, that's right, about not waking up for so long. Those five days he and Meghan needed to recover looked like big books they were carrying. She smiled to herself. They looked like me in the morning, before class. And all of us only had two, so we decided to reallocate things.

Each of the six members of the Pride who had been support staff had taken one book from either Neville or Meghan, redistributing the amount of recovery time needed across the whole Pride. Then the scene had faded into something vague but enjoyable. *A forest, and a dinner there. I remember playing in cat form, and I think there was some excitement, but it passed.*

But speaking of dinner...

She was quite hungry, Hermione discovered. She sat up carefully, just in case she got dizzy or light-headed, but nothing of the sort happened. Other than hunger and a general need to use the bathroom, she felt fine.

She had just enough warning to brace herself, as something large hurtled through the dim air to land on her knees.

“Crookshanks! You scared me!” She looked around the comfortable, round room. “The door's closed. How did you get in?”

Crookshanks gave her a look which seemed to say, *You ought to know by now that cats do whatever they want.*

“Well, you can just wait here.” Hermione dumped the cat off her lap and got up. “I don't think you'll like where I'm going. Too much water.”

Crookshanks curled up and began to wash his side, with an injured expression. When Hermione returned, though, he deigned to get back onto her lap and sit there, looking gloriously ineffable and purring loudly enough that Hermione was amazed the others didn't wake up.

Which they didn't. Not for quite a while. Hermione had located her wristwatch – lying on the mantelpiece, along with everyone else's incidental belongings of that sort – so she knew what time it was, and just how long it had been since she'd awakened.

Finally, she got tired of waiting.

“Care to speed things along?” she asked Crookshanks.

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Harry awoke from rather muddled dreams of soft red flowers to someone pushing rhythmically on his arm, seemingly using a few fingers from each hand.

“Go’way,” he muttered, rolling onto his side and pulling his blankets over his head.

The pushing continued, and got harder. Now there were little prickles of pain involved as well, as if the person were digging in fingernails –

Or claws?

Harry pulled the blanket off his face and scowled at Crookshanks. “Scat.”

The cat walked very deliberately up to him, looked at him sideways for a moment, then leaned over and licked his nose with a scratchy tongue before turning and strolling away.

“About time you woke up,” said Hermione’s voice from across the room. Harry pushed himself upright and squinted in that direction – the combination of the dim light and being without his glasses made her doubly hard to see, and he pinpointed her more by virtue of her being the tallest thing over there than anything else. “I’ve been awake nearly half an hour, just watching the rest of you sleep.”

Harry wasn’t sure what to say to this, so he settled for another topic of conversation. “Do you know where my glasses are?”

“On the mantelpiece. Hold on a second.” The tall thing across the room became even taller, then moved sideways. A few moments later, it had resolved itself into Hermione, squatting down in front of him to hand him his glasses.

“Thanks.” Harry took them and put them on. The room came into clearer focus. Ron lay sprawled against the wall nearby. Ginny was next to him, her hair fanned out artistically across her pillow. In the middle of the room lay Luna, one arm over her head. Draco was curled up a few feet from her.

“What’s today, do you know?” he asked, realizing he didn’t.

“No, but it ought to be Boxing Day, if we all slept three days. So we’ve only missed Christmas by one day, and it really doesn’t matter, because we’re all here, and we’ll have our dinner and our presents just the same.”

“I don’t see Meghan,” said Harry, looking around the room again. “Or Neville. I know they were supposed to wake up yesterday. I wonder where they are?”

“Probably with Neville’s parents,” said Hermione. “If it worked. I think it did, but we’ll have to wait and find out.”

“Should we wake the others?”

“Little late to be thinking of that, isn’t it?” said Ron, turning over with a yawn. “Happy Christmas.”

“Happy Christmas,” Harry and Hermione wished him together.

“How did you sleep?” asked Hermione.

“Fine, I guess. I don’t really know. I don’t notice much while I’m asleep.”

Hermione giggled. Draco stirred at the sound.

“I’ll be back in a second,” said Harry, standing up. “Bathroom.”

“Me too.” Ron got quickly to his feet, one hand on the wall for balance.

By the time they both returned to the main room, Ginny and Luna were awake as well. Draco claimed next turn in the bathroom, with the younger girls after him.

“Did anyone else dream of a forest?” asked Ginny.

Everyone’s hands went up.

“And Draco’s father,” said Luna. “You bit him, Harry.”

Ron guffawed. “And where – that was brilliant, it really was. You have to do that for real sometime.”

Harry made a face. “No, I bloody well don’t. That was disgusting enough in a dream, thank you. You want to bite him there, be my guest.”

“I don’t think I could reach there. Maybe I could dive-bomb him, though.”

“Ew!” Hermione laughed, shoving him. “That’s *really* disgusting!”

“I’ll help,” said Luna, smiling broadly. “One of us can aim for his hair, and the other one for his face.”

Draco came out of the bathroom, shaking water droplets off his hands. “What are you all laughing about?” he asked.

This just made everyone laugh harder.

The Pack-parents had to be watching them, Harry thought. There was no other way Letha could have turned up just as Ginny and Luna had finished in the bathroom, with clean holiday robes for everyone in her arms, and the welcome news that the Longbottoms had indeed been healed, and were eager to meet them all. “Or meet again, in your case, Greeneyes,” Letha said from outside the screened enclosure she’d conjured for the boys to dress inside. “They remember you from when you were tiny.”

Harry gave his Pack-mother a hard look as he came out of the enclosure. “Just please don’t start

telling them embarrassing stories about me.”

“I promise. We won’t start.”

“They’ve already started,” Draco predicted, coming out behind him. “Probably been telling them all the time we were asleep.”

Harry groaned and looked at Letha without much hope. The small, sly smile on her face killed his hopes.

Let me guess. She started with throwing flour in the pantry, then moved on to writing my name on my face with lipstick, then she probably told them about the time we covered Padfoot in condiments – though that’s worse for him than it is for us, really...

He traded weary looks with the rest of the Pride.

Sometimes I wonder if adults were ever kids themselves.

xXxXx

Christmas dinner was marvelous. Fourteen people – the Pack and Pride, plus the Longbottoms – sat around a comfortably large round table, and devoted themselves to the dual pleasures of eating and talking. Table manners were observed rather sketchily, but no one made a fuss about it, and there was plenty of everything, though Hermione did stop Ron from taking a fourth helping of pudding.

“This isn’t a dream,” she hissed at him, glaring. He glared back, but set the spoon down in the dish without taking anything.

Honestly, is he ever going to learn?

Finally, after dinner was over, they all moved to the other room, where a splendid Christmas tree towered above a truly impressive number of packages. Two of the packages looked much the same, about five and a half feet long and slender, but thicker at one end than the other. The boys’ eyes all popped when they saw these.

“I know one’s Harry’s,” said Draco. “But who’s the other one for?”

“Are you volunteering to hand out presents?” asked Danger.

Draco rolled his eyes. “All right, fine.”

Everyone quickly found seats as Draco sat down on the floor by the tree and picked up one of the wrapped broomsticks, turning it to read the label. He squinted and frowned, turning it this way and that.

“Enough drama, fox, just pass it along,” said Padfoot, taking a seat in one of the room’s

armchairs. Letha sat beside him in the matching chair, while Moony and Danger took a couch, and Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom the other one.

Draco scowled. “You ruined my moment.”

“Too bad.”

“Here.” Draco pitched the broomstick across the room towards Ron, who caught it automatically, looking rather surprised.

“Who’s it for?” he asked.

“You, stupid.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“No? Then why are you still sitting there and not opening it yet?”

“Wait – it’s for *me*?” Ron stared at the package in his arms as the Pride covered smiles.

“I think I said that,” said Draco with an overabundance of patience in his voice. “Read the label if you don’t believe me.”

Ron turned the parcel around. “To Ronald,” he read aloud. “A Very Happy Christmas from Mum and Dad, Mr. Padfoot and Mrs. Letha, Mr. Moony and Mrs. Danger.” He looked around at the adults in confusion.

“Go on,” said Letha, smiling at him. “You earned it.”

Ron hesitated one more instant, then grabbed the narrow end of the package and ripped. The paper came off in a long strip, and the broom rolled out onto the floor.

“Ooooooh,” said everyone who appreciated brooms. Hermione said it too, just to be companionable. In truth, the broom was rather handsome, with a jauntily polished handle and tightly bunched twigs. Ron picked it up and ran his hands along it reverently.

“It’s a Cleansweep Ten,” he said, looking awed. “The latest model.”

“Best maneuverability in its class, and still plenty of speed,” said Padfoot. “That’s what a Keeper needs, is the ability to pull tight turns and get from one goal to the next. This ought to serve you well, but we’ll have to teach you how not to fly into the stands.”

Everyone laughed. Ron was still staring at the broom in his hands with awestruck eyes. “I – I thought I was just getting my old one repaired – I didn’t know why Mum wouldn’t tell me when it was going to be done...”

“Well, now you do,” said Moony. “Happy Christmas.”

Hermione shook her head fondly. *Such little things make him happy...*

“Harry, this one’s yours,” said Draco, passing this parcel carefully over. “I think we all know what it is...”

Harry, grinning, ripped the paper off to reveal –

Nothing. The form inside the paper had been made by strips of cardboard taped to the inside.

The girls all fell about laughing at the look of tragic disappointment on Harry’s face. “It’s not funny,” he said angrily. “Hermione, how would you like it if you were promised some new set of books, and when you got them, you found out they were just empty covers?”

Hermione shook her head again. “I wouldn’t be angry,” she said. “Because I know the Pack-parents always keep their promises. And I think I see something shiny over there.” She pointed towards the couch Moony and Danger were occupying.

Padfoot drew his wand. “*Accio Firebolt!*” he intoned.

A sleek, shining broom slid out from behind the couch and zoomed towards Padfoot, stopping in front of him at mounting height. Harry’s face transformed magically from a mask of tragedy to one of joy. Hermione sighed and exchanged tolerant looks with Meghan and Luna. Ginny, of course, was as Quidditch-mad as any boy, and was the first to ask Harry for a go on the Firebolt – “after you get to ride it, of course,” she added quickly.

There were piles of other presents, of course, but the two broomsticks were the apex of the day for Harry and Ron. Ginny’s favorite present was a set of extra-fine quills and special inks – Hermione had known vaguely that one of Ginny’s favorite hobbies was calligraphy.

Luna’s father had sent her a new set of jewelry – a necklace, earrings, and tiara, all set with, as Luna informed everyone, “real fossilized fairy fewmets.” She said they would bring her luck in the new year. Boys and girls alike crowded up to see them, but Hermione stayed back. Moony caught her eye and waved her over.

“I suppose you’re not going to tell them what fewmets are,” he said quietly.

“What, and miss the fun?”

Moony smiled. “Taught you well, we have,” he said in a squeaky voice.

“Aren’t you a little tall for Yoda?” asked Hermione critically.

Meghan ripped into one of her presents and gave a shriek of joy – Aunt Amy had come through again, sending Meghan a magical CD player of her very own, along with a collection of famous ballets on CD. Harry and Draco looked jealous. Hermione made a mental note to be very nice to Meghan over the next few months.

Neville's best gifts, of course, hadn't come wrapped, but his smile grew even wider when Mr. Longbottom produced a black case from under one of the couches and lifted out a guitar. He was just showing Neville how to place his fingers for a simple chord when he looked up and discovered the entire Pride was watching him. He looked over at Moony. "And I thought you were making it up," he said.

Moony shrugged. "I tried to tell you," he said. "What one of them does, they all take at least a passing interest in. So if you're going to teach any one of them something, better plan to expand your lessons, at least the first few. After that, the ones who aren't really interested drift back to their own things. I suppose the novelty wears off."

"I still think what you decided to teach all of them is a little extreme," said Mrs. Longbottom. "But it's not as if we're going to tell you to stop. That would be unfair to Neville, when Augusta already said he could. Besides, if I understand correctly, he's doing well?"

"Very well," said Letha. "Neville, would you care to demonstrate your latest conquest?"

"Er, okay." Neville handed the guitar back to his father and pulled out his wand. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let it out, then opened them. Aiming his wand at his left arm, he carefully said, "*Lacerus et ulna sinistrus dimidius integumentum veneficium.*"

His left arm shrank and the fingers lengthened. It grew a great deal of silvery fur, and when Neville shut his eyes again and concentrated, the arm wavered and disappeared, giving him the look of an amputee. His parents applauded, as did the Pride – although they'd seen it before, it was still impressive.

"Neville's spells are longer than anyone else's, either," Hermione volunteered. "Because his form is magical, he has to have an extra word or two in every spell to make sure that part of him has the magic that demiguises have."

"Going to be worth it, though, isn't it?" asked Ron. "Be able to disappear whenever you want?"

"He can disappear whenever he wants now," said Ginny.

Neville shook his head. "I can't," he said. "I tried it at home with Gran. It didn't work there. I think it only works at Hogwarts."

"Disappearing?" inquired Mrs. Longbottom. "I don't think we've heard about this."

"Change your arm back first, Neville," said Padfoot. "And then we'll tell you about the nocturnal exploits your son makes possible," he said to the Longbottoms. Mrs. Longbottom looked a bit disapproving, but Mr. Longbottom seemed interested.

"*Reditio lacerus et ulna artus,*" said Neville, returning his arm to its original form. He was rather pink. "We've never done anything really wrong with it," he said. "We just go out sometimes, when we don't want other people to see us. Or when we need to help someone."

“I’m still not clear on what ‘it’ is,” said Mrs. Longbottom.

“Watch, Mum.” Neville began to mutter to himself. Hermione concentrated. She had a feeling that if you knew, for a fact, that Neville was there, and looked really, really hard at the place you knew he was, you might be able to see through his magic.

She nearly gave herself a headache, but she managed. By the time Mrs. Longbottom exclaimed over the way Neville had vanished, Hermione could still see her friend, smiling happily within a cocoon of what looked like thickened air. She kept her eyes trained on him and tried not to blink too often.

“Hermione, what in the world are you doing?” exclaimed Danger.

Everyone looked at her. She felt her face heat to the approximate temperature of the Sun. “Er, nothing.”

“Well, ‘nothing’ appears to be making your eyes bloodshot,” said Moony. “Draco, do we have anything a little easier for Hermione’s eyes to rest on?”

“I think so.” Draco dug around in the packages. “Ah-ha, here’s one. Nice and big and blocky. Feels like... books. What a big surprise.” He handed it to her ceremoniously.

Carefully, Hermione tore the paper off, and felt her eyes go wider than ever.

Lying in her lap were seven leather-bound books, each done in a different shade of brown or red, each with a ribbon sewn into the binding to mark one’s place with. The title of the one on top was *The Last Battle*.

She beamed at the Pack-parents. “Thank you, thank you so much! It’s perfect!” She was peripherally aware of the boys shaking their heads, but she didn’t care. It wasn’t every day that she got a brand-new, hardcover set of C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*. She could hardly wait to see the Pevensies and Aslan and all her old friends again, this time with the smell and feel of real leather and parchment to accompany her as she journeyed.

“Magical edition, too, Kitten,” said Moony. “Look inside.”

Hermione opened *The Horse and His Boy* eagerly and watched in delight as Bree and Hwin trotted down the path together, the ragged Shasta and the armored Aravis on their backs. Magical editions of Muggle books could be hard to come by, because laws applied differently to books than to other things. However, if the buyer signed an affidavit that the books would not pass into Muggle hands, they could be had, at a price. Hermione knew these must have cost a pretty Galleon.

“I’ll take the best care of them,” she promised, hugging them close.

“You’d better,” said Padfoot mock-sternly. “So, we all out of presents, or are there any more under there?”

There were more. Most of them were smaller things like candy or new quills or little toy animals or broomsticks, but down at the very bottom, Draco discovered a box addressed to him, about half the size of a shoebox. “It says it’s from Cousin Tonks,” he said, looking at the card. “She says, ‘Look into this to help you study.’”

“If anyone would know about study aids, it would be Dora,” said Padfoot. “She crams like a mad thing for tests.”

Draco tore off the wrappings, opened the box, and lifted out the item within.

It was a globe of black glass, of a size to be held in two hands, slightly translucent and with something red embedded in its heart. Draco rolled it over in his hands, looking at it. “It has runes on it,” he said. “They’re engraved all over.” He held it up to the light, studying it. “They’re really complex, though, I don’t think I can make them out. Neenie?”

Growling briefly for custom’s sake, Hermione joined him near the candelabrum. “These are complex,” she said, running her finger along one of them, a mass of interjoined and connected lines. “Let me see it?”

Draco looked reluctant, but handed the globe to her. Hermione turned it in her hands. “This one looks familiar,” she said finally, “but I can’t remember what it means. I can’t read any of the others.” She handed it back to him.

Draco pulled out the cloth the globe had been wrapped in and reverently wrapped it up again before sliding it carefully back into its box. “I really like it,” he said. “I’ll have to remember to write Tonks a good thank you note.”

Harry and Ron made noises of disbelief. “Listen to you,” said Harry. “Thank you notes? What kind of wizard are you?”

“A polite one. And witches like polite wizards.”

“Who cares if witches like you?” said Ron.

The adults all covered smiles as the girls exchanged highly insulted looks. “I think you’re about to,” said Letha.

“Get him!” shouted Hermione, and dived on Ron, smacking him over the head with the first thing that came to hand, which turned out to be a large wad of discarded wrapping paper. When the fight was over and the entire Pride appeared to have been gift-wrapped, Mrs. Longbottom produced a camera and took several pictures of them before the adults would stop laughing and help them get unwound.

“Look at it this way,” said Luna. “Now we know for sure what they can embarrass us with when we grow up and get boyfriends and girlfriends.”

It wasn't until late that night, snuggling into bed with Crookshanks warming her feet, that Hermione recalled what the one familiar rune on Draco's globe meant.

It was the rune for blood.

She wondered if she should tell him, then decided not to. She might have misread it, and it probably wasn't important anyway.

Her dreams were full of mazes, with corridors running confusingly into one another, dead ends popping up out of nowhere, and unexpected jerky transitions from one to the next when she stumbled into random spots, until suddenly Ron dived down from above on his new broom and carried her away into the sky, where she could look down and see that she'd been trapped in the unfamiliar, complicated shapes of the other runes on the glass globe...

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 14: Understanding (Year 3)

Chapter 14: Understanding

Draco let his fingers trace along the shapes of the runes carved into the glass globe as he stared into the center. He'd owned this strange object for two days now, and still he didn't understand what was so mesmerizing about it. The liquid redness within it seemed to beckon to him, calling him to it, until his eyes and mind were filled with nothing but red, and the smoothness of the lines under his fingertips...

"Draco?"

He jumped and hastily covered the globe with its black wrapper. "In here!"

Harry opened the door and squinted in. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

Draco shrugged. "Just am, I guess. What's up?"

"We're going out to have a fly. Want to come?"

"Can I have a go on the Firebolt when you're done?"

"After Ginny and Ron."

Draco scowled, getting up to find his coat. "Sure, favor your friends over your own brother."

"They asked first."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

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After everyone who wanted to try out the Firebolt had done so, the group walked down to visit Hagrid. He was outside throwing snowballs for Fang to chase. Harry showed off the Firebolt's amazing acceleration by chasing down a snowball and catching it before it could hit the ground. Hagrid was duly impressed.

"Yeh know who'd really like ter see yeh all," he said. "Would yeh believe, Buckbeak's gone an' got a taste fer humans?"

"Hope you don't mean that like it sounds," said Ron, looking alarmed.

"No, no, nothin' like that," said Hagrid, chuckling. "No, he jus' likes a bit o' company now and again. D'yeh have a minute ter come and see him?"

“I think so,” said Harry. “We’re not due back at the castle until dinner, and that’s hours yet.”

“Come on, then.” Hagrid led them to the paddock, and sure enough, there was Buckbeak, rolling in the snow. He sprang upright at Hagrid’s whistle, though, and trotted over to the fence, peering eagerly at the little group.

“What do we do again?” whispered Ginny.

“Bow,” Draco reminded her. “Bow and hold it until he bows back.”

The four of them bowed, and after a moment, Buckbeak bent his neck to them. Ginny climbed over the paddock wall and stroked the hippogriff’s feathered face, making him croon deep in his throat. Then he gently nudged her away and fixed his eye on Draco. Draco swallowed nervously and reached out a hand. “Hello, Buckbeak,” he said politely.

Buckbeak extended his neck past Draco’s hand, towards his head – Draco held very still – and took a small piece of Draco’s hair in his beak, tugging on it before he let it go.

“He preened you,” said Ron, laughing. “I think he likes you. Luna’s going to get jealous.”

Draco bent over, picked up a handful of snow, and threw it into Ron’s face without bothering to pack it first. Ron retaliated with a handful down Draco’s back. Buckbeak fanned his wings, screeched, and cantered away in what looked very much like a hippogriff huff.

Ginny sighed and shook her head in a very motherish way. “What are we going to do with them?” she asked Harry as their brothers rolled in the snow, wrestling.

“Take bets?” Harry suggested.

“Enough o’ that, now,” said Hagrid, bending over and separating Draco and Ron easily. “Come on inside an’ have some tea, an’ tell me what’s bin goin’ on up at the castle.”

“Well, you know about the Longbottoms, right?” asked Harry as they started for Hagrid’s house.

Hagrid nodded. “Haven’t seen ‘em yet, but I’m sure I will soon enough.”

“Mrs. Letha says some of the Healers aren’t very happy about what happened to them,” said Ginny, trotting to keep up with Hagrid’s long strides. Draco and Ron were hanging back, probably hoping to have an excuse to pummel each other again. Harry looked over his shoulder, then dropped back to join in.

“Not happy?” Hagrid looked confused. “Why wouldn’ they be happy? They’re Healers, aren’t they? They want ter Heal people, make ‘em better. Why wouldn’ they be happy Frank an’ Alice are better?”

Ginny shrugged. “I think they feel like Mrs. Letha is kind of taking over where they belong. Because she quit the Healer’s program so long ago, so she’s still only a trainee, really. I guess

they're mad because a trainee did what they couldn't do." She grinned. "Except she didn't, and she can't tell them who really did."

Hagrid chuckled, watching what appeared to be three undersized yeti beating each other up. "They'd really be up in arms over that, wouldn't they? Little bitty girl like Meghan, not even Hogwarts age yet, an' she kin do somethin' all the best Healers can't..."

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"What do you mean, you refuse to tell me?"

"I mean, Healer Young, that this is a matter of Healer-patient confidentiality. The patients have asked me not to divulge information about their treatment, and therefore I will not."

"You're being deliberately obstructionist, Trainee Freeman-Black."

"No, sir, I'm merely respecting my patients' wishes."

"It is the duty of every Healer to disseminate information, to facilitate the treatment of other cases like these the world over!"

"Sir, I've investigated. There are no other cases like these, at least not living ones."

Healer Young deflated abruptly. "Yes, and that's what makes this attitude of yours so very remarkable – I would have thought you'd want your name in lights for this miracle you've seemingly worked, and instead, you refuse even to take proper credit for it, you don't want anything exposed about it at all – one would think you hadn't done anything!"

Aletha set her jaw against laughter and made a gracious, non-committal gesture.

"Well, they certainly do seem recovered." Healer Young heaved himself out of his seat. "I'm sure you'll give them all the usual instructions, check-ups and taking care of their health and such, so here are their papers." He handed her a sheaf of parchment.

"Thank you, sir. And if any other cases like this ever do come along, I'll be more than happy to do what I can to help."

"That's very generous of you, Trainee." Aletha could hear rather heavy sarcasm in the voice, but also a measure of true meaning. "No need to get up, I'll see myself out."

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"He's not a bad old windbag at that," Aletha told Sirius later that day. "Pompous, but well-meaning. And he really cares about his patients, and about healing in general."

"I suppose a certain amount of snobbery's inevitable as you get higher in the ranks," mused Sirius. "Looking down at the young, eager, new faces and wondering, was I ever like that?"

“And not having the courage to say, yes, I was.” Aletha smiled reminiscently. “Even though you know perfectly well that you were.”

“And oh, I was.” Sirius rubbed his forehead ruefully. “Frank and Alice are the two best cures for my ego I’ve ever met. They remember me as a wide-eyed apprentice, and then as a snot-nosed first year Auror, and all the stupid things I did – and they have no compunction whatsoever about telling these stories to anyone who will listen to them.”

“And since several of the people who listen to them happen to live in our house...”

“Exactly.”

“Personally, I thought the one about the peanut butter was very sweet.”

Sirius made a face. “You would. That’s just one of those things I really didn’t want people to know about me.”

“Of course, I know things you want people to know even less.”

“Things like what I’ve been working on for the past four or five months.”

“Yes, things like that.”

“And you’re mentioning this, why?”

“Just to keep things in perspective, love. Frank and Alice can embarrass you with stories about the boy you used to be. I can embarrass you with stories about the man you are right now.”

“Somehow I don’t think it’s my manhood you’re having issues with here.”

“And how would you know if I have issues with your manhood?”

“Well, I don’t think you’d agree with me quite so vigorously if you did.”

“Agree with you?”

“Yeah, you agree with me all the time at night. I could ask you just about anything I wanted to, and I think I know what the answer would be.”

Aletha scowled at him. “Is there some school men go to where they all learn to be disgusting?”

Sirius shook his head, beaming. “Pure instinct.”

“Well, instinctualize this.” She got up, came around the table, leaned down, and gave him a definite biological cue.

Instead of answering verbally, Sirius reached up and pulled her down into his arms.

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Elsewhere in the castle, a different couple sat together, talking about the same basic topic, but a very different part of it.

“So that’s the truth,” said Danger, staring at the floor. “I’ll show you if you really want to see...”

“No need.” Remus slid two fingers under her chin and lifted it up, meeting her eyes, then moved in for a brief kiss. “I’d be lying if I said it didn’t hurt me some to hear this,” he said when they broke apart. “But you warned me about that. And I know it hurts you just as much to have these feelings. So neither of us can play the martyr here.”

“Neither of us should, you mean.” Danger sighed. “I was far too close to doing it myself.”

“No, you were honestly expressing your feelings. You can’t be a martyr unless you have an audience.”

“And I did my best to dissuade my audience.”

“True, most people would have left pretty quickly after having fire shot at their heads.”

“Of course, with Sirius’ thick skull, I don’t know if even a direct hit would have hurt him.”

They both laughed.

“We’re going to have to find some way to deal with this,” said Remus. “Something other than you trying to deny it, because it’s real, and a part of you. But this is probably not the best time to get into a problem this complicated.”

Danger shook her head. “Not with everything else we have going. How about the end of this school year? We’ll have the summer off. Two months to talk it to death, get other opinions if we need them, find out if anything can be done. And if it can’t, I’ll just have to get my head straightened out and accept the fact that I can’t get my own way all the time.”

“If I had *my* own way, you would,” Remus told her, sliding an arm around her shoulders.

Danger smiled. “I know. That’s what makes this a small problem instead of a big one.” She put an arm around his neck and made further conversation aloud momentarily impossible.

Maybe love couldn’t solve everything, but it was awfully good at helping with most things.

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The rest of the holidays passed quickly.

Frank Longbottom and Peeves had an encounter shortly before New Year’s, in which Peeves definitely came off worst. The entire Pride howled with laughter as Frank demonstrated the

Peeves-in-a-box he'd made. It played "Pop Goes the Poltergeist" when you wound the crank, and the lid sprang open to display a very sullen Peeves, in his jester's cap and bowtie, bobbing up and down at the end of a magical spring.

The next day, Frank and Alice took Neville to Diagon Alley to go shopping for all sorts of things, most especially a new wand for Neville, since he'd been using Frank's.

"Mr. Ollivander looked kind of funny when it was this one," said Neville to the Pride, showing around eleven inches of cherry wood with a unicorn tail hair inside. "Said something about it being early days. I didn't quite understand."

"I don't think anyone understands him," said Harry. "He's a bit creepy."

Neville had his own guitar as well now, and was spending an hour every day working on his chords and fingering. Meghan made up a salve to help his fingers develop calluses more quickly.

But the largest item the Longbottoms were interested in buying wasn't sold at Diagon Alley. Not directly, at least.

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"We're not trying to snub you, Mum," said Frank patiently, having been over this ground at least three times already. "But you have your own life now, your own friends, your own routine. It would be rude of us to barge in and take it away from you."

"We're not trying to stay away from you," Alice added. "Trust me, we'll be over all the time. You'll get tired of us and be glad you have somewhere to tell us to go."

Finally, Augusta Longbottom lost her rather dour expression and smiled. "I don't think I could ever get tired of hearing your voice again, Alice dear," she said. "I can't tell you how wonderful it is... well, of course, I have told you, many times. You're sure about this?"

"Positive, Mum," said Frank. "It'll be easier for everyone this way. Trust us."

"Very well, then." Augusta embraced her son and daughter-in-law. "You'll let me know as soon as you've found something?"

"The very minute we make a decision, we'll owl," Alice promised.

After Augusta was gone, the Longbottoms looked at each other and sighed in relief.

"That went better than I thought it would," Frank said, sitting down and patting the spot beside him.

"It took a while, but she came around," Alice agreed, sitting where he indicated and leaning into him. "So what do we do next?"

“Next, we look for possibilities. We can ask the Blacks, or the Lupins, they should both be aware of what’s going on in that neighborhood.”

“Do you think we should tell Neville?”

“Not until we have a firm idea of what’s going on. Term starts again in about a week, and he’ll be here for three months, so it won’t matter much to him, anyway.”

“I beg your pardon?” Alice sat up, looking indignant. “It won’t matter much to him? It will matter a great deal! A boy deserves to know where he’s going to call home, even if nothing’s been settled yet!”

“All right, all right.” Frank raised his hands in surrender. “We’ll tell him. We’ll tell him.”

Alice settled back down with an air of having been just barely mollified. “Won’t matter much to him, indeed,” she grumbled.

“Your maternal side is showing, dear.”

“Do you have a problem with that, Frank?”

“No, not at all. I just felt you ought to know about it.”

“Is there anything else you feel I ought to know about?”

“I adore you and love you utterly?”

“I knew that already.”

“So you don’t want me to tell you again?”

“Well, if you put it that way...”

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Albus Dumbledore sat back in his desk chair and sighed. “I should have known,” he said quietly. “It was too easy. He was too cooperative. I should have known.”

Fawkes made a brief series of sounds in a scolding tone. *Perhaps you should have*, he seemed to say, *but berating yourself does no good.*

Dumbledore smiled at his friend. “It is true, no harm is done by this,” he agreed. “And I have begun upon this project now, rather than later, so that setbacks like this one can be corrected without any great losses.”

So, now I must think. How to go about obtaining what I truly want, without resorting to underhanded tricks or brute force?

The task would not be easy. But he had never really enjoyed easy tasks. The hard ones were what made life interesting.

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The Pride, minus Hermione and Neville, sat in the Gryffindor common room, boys at one table, girls at another. The rest of the students would be back in two days, so they were taking advantage of this, their last quiet time, to get some homework done.

Harry wished Hermione was there, as his Arithmancy text seemed to be making less sense, not more, as he read through it. He almost wished he'd taken Divination instead – at least then, if he didn't understand the assignment, he could make something up and get away with it.

“No, you don't,” said Ron when he voiced this wish aloud. “Trust me. Trelawney spends every lesson sighing over you as it is. If you were in the class, she'd never leave you alone. She thinks you're going to die. You, too,” he said to Draco, who was poring over a chart in his Ancient Runes textbook.

Draco grunted absently and went back to his work. Harry frowned. Even upside down and from across the table, the runes didn't look like the ones Draco'd shown him earlier in the year. “Have you moved on in Ancient Runes?” he asked curiously.

“What? Oh – no, not really. I was just wondering if I could find out what the ones on my globe mean. They're really high-level, though, complicated and all, and the more complex they get, the more meanings they have. So they could mean loads of different things...” He sighed, flipping more towards the front of the book. “Never mind. I'll find out when I find out, and I've got homework.”

The portrait hole opened. “Hullo, Neville,” said Ron, looking up.

“Hi.” Neville looked breathless and happy, Harry noticed.

“What's going on?” asked Ginny, shutting her own textbook over at the girls' table. “You look like something really good just happened.”

“It did.” Neville looked at the two groups, a grin breaking out on his face. “Dad just told me he and Mum are looking into buying a house. When I was a baby, they lived where Gran and I live now, but they don't want her to feel like she has to leave, so they're getting a different house.”

“That's nice,” said Draco, looking a bit puzzled. “Do you not like your old house, then?”

Neville shook his head, his grin widening. “It's where it is. The new house. It's in Devon. Only about a mile from your village. We're going to be neighbors!”

Cheers and glad whoops erupted from the tables.

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Hermione sat alone in an empty classroom, staring out the window.

Behind her, the door creaked. She didn't look around.

"I've been looking for you," said Danger's voice. "May I come in?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I want to be alone."

"What time is it?"

Automatically, Hermione checked her watch. "3:39."

"All right. I'm coming in, and I'm staying until 3:45. That's only six minutes. Then I'll leave you alone for the rest of the day, if that's what you want. All right?"

"Fine." Hermione threw as much sullenness into the word as she could. She didn't care what Danger thought of her right now.

The door closed. A chair grated on the stone floor as Danger sat down. "What's wrong, Neenie love?"

"Nothing." Hermione bit the word off savagely. "And don't *call* me that."

"What? Neenie, or love?"

"Either. Both. I'm sick of everyone thinking they can just do what they want! I'm sick of everyone ignoring me, and thinking life is just grand the way they like it! I hate stupid people, and I hate people who don't understand!"

"Don't understand what?"

"Everything!"

"Any stupid people in particular?"

"No. "

"Yes."

"Yes, but I'm not telling."

"I wasn't asking. Boys?"

Hermione snorted. "Yes. And no."

“Let me see. Yes and no. Not boys – a boy? One in particular?”

Hermione didn't answer. Danger was too close.

“Yes. So which boy has been getting on your nerves? Not the one you keep nagging at, by any chance?”

Hermione's hands tightened into fists. *I hate her, I hate her, I hate when she does this – it's like she can read my mind –*

“The only reason I know is because I used to be just like this...”

“I don't *care!*” Hermione shouted the word towards the ceiling. “You weren't like this – nobody was – you don't *understand!*”

“Oh, I see. Nobody else has ever been a teenager, or in love...”

“I am *not* in love!”

“Oh?”

“Love is stupid! It makes you do stupid things! I'm not in love, and I never will be!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!”

“Sure that you're not even a tiny, itty-bitty, little bit–”

“YES!”

The shout echoed around the classroom for a moment. Then there was silence. It grew and thickened, pressing on Hermione, until she opened her mouth and let a small sound out, just to make it go away.

“No,” said the small sound.

Danger sighed. Hermione heard the scraping of her chair again, and footsteps as her sister crossed the room to stand beside her. “Love is seldom comfortable at first,” she said. “Especially if you don't know if the other person returns it, or if he even knows you exist.”

“He knows I exist. He just doesn't care.”

“You're young yet. Give it time.”

“I don't *want* to!”

“I know. But I think you have to.”

Hermione growled in frustration and pounded her fist against the stone windowsill. “He’s so stupid! And disgusting – I hate him sometimes. But it doesn’t change how I feel about him! I just wish...”

“You just wish he didn’t have all these annoying habits. That he was different. Don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t.” Surprised by Danger’s tone, Hermione looked up. For once, there was no humor in her sister’s face. “Don’t ever wish for someone you love to be different. If you do – if you say, ‘Oh, I’ll love him when he stops doing such and so that bothers me’ – then you don’t love a real person. You love somebody you’ve made up. That can be very nice, but it’s not what life is about.”

“What life is about?” Hermione frowned. “I thought nobody knew that.”

“No, we know. We just don’t want to admit it, because the answer’s so hard to take. Life is about other people, Hermione. About meeting them, and really getting to know them, and then liking them in spite of themselves, and in spite of yourself. A really good life is based around friendship and love, or around doing things so other people can have friendship and love. Everything else is either commentary or working for the other side.” Danger shook her head, smiling. “And aren’t I philosophical today. I should write an inspirational book and make a million Galleons.”

“Maybe you and Padfoot can write one together,” Hermione suggested, feeling her bad mood beginning to depart. “And then it would be worth two million.”

Danger laughed. “Maybe. Feeling better?”

“Yes. Some.”

“Good. Will you please go a little easier on that boy, then? He’ll survive the occasional stomachache, and just maybe it’ll bring him to see that you’re trying to help him, not drive him up a wall.”

“Yes, Danger.”

“Now go do something silly and have some fun.”

“Yes, Danger.”

“And wipe that smile off your face before I do it for you.”

“Yes, Danger.” Hermione planted a very serious expression on her face and strutted out the door, nose in the air.

She was going to find the other girls. And they were going to prank the boys to within an inch of their lives.

xXxXx

Danger sat down on the windowsill. **What have we done?**

Are you asking in the strict sense, or metaphorically?

Actually, I was asking rhetorically.

Then you shouldn't have asked at all.

Probably not. But I'm still amazed.

About what?

I'm not even sure. I suppose I never expected Hermione to turn out the way she has.

You mean moody?

Well, yes.

I think that's a passing thing. Hormones and such.

Possibly. But I just never expected her to be so...

Human?

No... well, yes. Danger sighed. I guess I was secretly expecting her to be a good little angel who never gets angry or upset about anything. But I shouldn't be. She's a person. She's as entitled to her own feelings as anyone.

I'm so glad you agree.

What – are you laughing at me?

Now would I do a thing like that?

Yes.

You're right. I am.

Fine. You just stay right where you are, Remus Lupin, and I'll come and find you and teach you why it's a very bad idea to laugh at a Granger woman.

I'm so scared.

I'm bringing my dishtowel with me.

All right, now I am scared. Give me a head start?

I am, right now. Get running, I'll find you.

Is that a threat or a promise?

Yes.

Oh, goody...

xXxXx

Hermione was lying on her bed reading when the door of her dorm opened. She looked up. "Colleen! Welcome back!"

"Thanks," said Colleen Lamb. "How was your holiday?"

"It was fine, how was yours?"

"All right. But something strange happened to me. I got a present I wasn't expecting, and I don't know what to think about it. Can I show it to you?"

Hermione nodded, sliding off her bed to come to Colleen's side. Colleen pulled back her sleeve to display a bracelet she was wearing.

"Oh," breathed Hermione, her hand moving without her conscious decision to stroke the carved stone. "It's lovely!"

"I know. But it's strange, too. Look at it." Colleen slipped the bracelet off and handed it to Hermione.

"It's – it's a snake," said Hermione in confusion, turning it over in her hands. "No, it's two snakes, look – this one's a lighter green than that one. And they're biting each other's tails..." She frowned. "That's a symbol of something. Stability, I think. Or balance, like a yin-yang. This is really beautiful, Colleen. Who sent it to you?"

"That's the problem. I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"The card that came with it just said, 'From a friend.'"

Hermione shook her head. "That is strange. But as long as there's nothing wrong with it..."

"My parents checked it. There's no curses on it, or anything like that. Who would want to hurt me, anyway?"

"Good question. So I guess it's just someone trying to be mysterious."

“I guess so.” Colleen replaced the bracelet on her wrist. “Has there been a lot of snow here?”

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“Harry!”

Harry looked up from the final sentences of a Potions essay. “Hello, Wood.”

“Just got in,” said Wood, shaking snow off his cloak. “How was your holiday?”

“Fine, thanks.” Harry chose to omit the part about all the furniture in the boys’ dorm suddenly starting to sing Christmas carols loudly and off key two nights ago at midnight. “Yours?”

“Great, just great – Harry, listen. I don’t want to be pushy, but have you found any way to keep the dementors off your back? I mean, you’re the best Seeker I’ve ever seen, I really don’t want to replace you, but if you’re going to.. well..”

“I think I should be all right,” said Harry, crossing his fingers under the table. “Professor Lupin’s going to start teaching me how to repel them as soon as he has time. Our first lesson is this week.” It wasn’t, but Harry was sure it would be as soon as he reminded Moony about his promise.

“Well, that’s good.” Wood looked very relieved. “Now, about your broomstick – have you ordered one yet?”

Harry shook his head.

Wood looked puzzled. “Why not?”

Harry gave in to his impulse to tease his captain. “Do you have a second?”

“Of course, why?”

“Come up to my dorm,” said Harry, putting his book aside. “I’ve got something to show you.”

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About a minute after Harry and Wood had disappeared up the stairs, there was a loud shout from the direction of the third year boys’ dormitory, followed by a great deal of jubilant whooping.

Ron coughed into his hand, making a sound very like “Show-off.”

“Give him a break,” said Draco. “He doesn’t do it often.”

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“Oh, that’s right, I did say I’d teach you that.” Moony looked momentarily flummoxed, then shook it off. “I’ll find the time. How about eight o’clock Thursday evening, or is Wood taking all

your time with Quidditch practice yet?”

“I’ll be there,” said Harry. “Do I need to bring anything?”

“Just your wand, and yourself. The History of Magic classroom, I think, you’ll need some room to do this.” Moony frowned. “But how we’re going to get good test conditions is another thing. We can’t exactly bring a dementor into the castle.”

“Can’t I learn it without one?” asked Harry, a little dismayed to hear that dementors would be part of the learning, though he shouldn’t have been, he told himself. If it was an anti-dementor charm, then the only way to see if it was effective was to test it against a dementor.

“You can learn it, of course, but you can’t see if it will really work. And a false sense of security won’t help you any. I wonder...” Moony drummed his fingers on his desk for a moment. “Harry, I know you don’t like dementors. Would you say they scare you?”

“Yes.”

“Quite a lot?”

“Yes.”

“Then I think I may have an answer. I assumed you couldn’t face the boggart in class because it would turn into Voldemort – but do you think it might have turned into a dementor instead?”

Struck, Harry thought about this. “It might,” he said. “Both times I faced Voldemort that I can remember, I had something I had to do, or someone I had to protect. I didn’t have a lot of time to be scared. But when I was near the dementors, I didn’t know what to do, or if I even could do anything. I hated it. I think I even hated it worse than facing Voldemort.”

“That settles it.” Moony nodded firmly. “I’ll find a boggart. A boggart-dementor ought to have the same effect that a real one would, but I’ll be able to face it down if it gets out of hand. History of Magic classroom, eight o’clock Thursday.”

“I’ll be there.” Harry got up to leave, then thought of a question he’d wanted to ask. “Moony?”

“Yes?”

“What’s your boggart?”

“Harry, I thought I heard voices,” said Danger, coming through the door of the private quarters into the office. “How long have you been here?”

Moony looked at her, then at Harry, and gave him a slight nod.

“Er, I was just leaving,” said Harry, feeling incredibly stupid.

“Oh, well, sure, run away on my account,” said Danger, sounding confused. “Did I say something?”

“No.” On impulse, Harry went over and gave her a hug. “I just have to get back to the Tower before curfew.”

“If Filch makes trouble for you, send him to us,” Danger called after him.

“I will. Good night.” Harry made tracks up the stairs towards Gryffindor Tower. He couldn’t believe how idiotic he’d been.

I should have known that. Nothing could possibly scare Moony more than seeing Danger hurt. He even hates it when she’s sick. I guess, because they’re connected like they are, he can feel it too, so it actually hurts him when she’s hurt...

“Password?” asked the Fat Lady.

“Ear defenders,” said Harry, and climbed through into a noisy common room.

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As Hagrid had promised, he had salamanders for them to study in the new term, and the Care of Magical Creatures class took turns collecting dry wood from the edges of the Forest and looking at the fire-dwelling lizards. Danger was there as well, because, as Hagrid told the class with a straight face, “she does a better fire-protection charm than I do.” Harry, Hermione, and Draco took their turns stroking the salamander Danger held out to them without cracking a smile, though it was a near thing in Hermione’s case.

Snape seemed just a trifle less hostile than usual in the term’s first Potions class, making it all the way through the lesson without deducting more than five points from Gryffindor. Harry was puzzled by this, but let it slide. It wasn’t as if he was eager for Snape to return to form, after all.

Neville got some interesting results with his new wand in Charms and Transfiguration, but Professor Flitwick was able to get the warts off Seamus, and Professor McGonagall turned the wall back into stone from strawberry ice cream, as Ron complained, “before I could even get a decent taste.”

And on Thursday, at eight o’clock, Harry arrived at the History of Magic classroom, wand in hand and heart in throat, making it hard to breathe or swallow. Moony was already there, with a large packing case. “One boggart,” he said. “I found it in Filch’s filing cabinet. He was quite happy to be rid of it.”

“I’m sure.” Harry coughed into his hand, praying Moony hadn’t noticed how close his voice had just come to cracking.

“It’s all right to be frightened, Harry,” Moony said quietly. “That’s what this is about, is moving past fear. You have to acknowledge it’s there before you can move on.”

There are days I wish they weren't so bloody understanding. Harry nodded.

“All right. This is the incantation. *Expecto patronum.*”

“*Expecto patronum,*” Harry repeated.

“Good. But just the incantation doesn't do anything. You have to be thinking very hard about a happy memory, a time and place and moment when you were extremely happy. That memory conjures the Patronus, the protector. It's made of all the things dementors take from us – hope and happiness and the like – so it makes a target of itself, drawing the dementors away from you. Understand?”

“I think so. I have to pick out a happy memory and think about it hard, and then say the incantation, and that makes the Patronus?”

“Basically. There's a lot more to it, but you're not much for magical theory.”

Harry shook his head emphatically. “No.”

“Let's get to it, then. Think of a good memory, one of the best moments of your life.”

Harry scowled. “I hate it when you do this.”

“Do what?”

“Put me on the spot like this. Now I can't think of anything.”

“Nothing at all?” Moony's tone was teasing.

“Stop it.” Harry closed his eyes and thought back. His life had been happy enough – surely he shouldn't have trouble finding a really good memory to use?

Flying the Firebolt for the first time, he decided. That should work.

“Got one,” he said, opening his eyes.

“All right. Let's have a dry run first. Think about your memory, and say the incantation.”

Harry shut his eyes again and concentrated hard on the feeling of absolute freedom the Firebolt gave him. The ability to go as fast as he wanted, spin and roll and dive, shoot back and forth through obstacles without a halt...

“*Expecto patronum,*” he said quietly, still on the Firebolt in his mind. “*Expecto patronum... expecto patronum...*”

A quiet exclamation from Moony made him open his eyes. A wavering silver shape hung in the air, but dissipated before Harry could see what it was. “Did you see...” he began to ask.

Moony shook his head regretfully. "I'm sorry, I didn't. Maybe next time. Now that you know you can, shall we give it a try with our friend here?" He tapped the packing case.

Harry wanted to say no, but remembering the Firebolt, and that if he didn't get his dementor problem under control he might not be able to play in the next match, he nodded.

"Get ready, then." Moony flipped open the latches of the packing case.

Harry tried to think about his Firebolt, but another set of thoughts was creeping in. What had he heard, that night on the train? And that day at the Quidditch match? What was the worst memory of his life, the moment the dementors made him relive? Or was it just one moment? Draco had said he'd heard different things. Did there necessarily have to be just one worst moment of a person's life?

Moony lifted the lid of the packing case. A hooded, black figure rose from within, shrouded face pointed towards Harry. The classroom was suddenly much darker as the lamps all went out. Harry felt a momentary surge of panic – should a boggart-dementor have that effect? – but he forced it down and thought about his broom. "*Expecto patronum!*"

Nothing happened. He was starting to shake from the cold, the dementor was gliding toward him, one decayed hand outstretched...

"Expecto patronum! Expecto patronum!"

Still nothing, and now darkness was creeping over his vision, and he was beginning to hear voices, two voices, one shrill and despairing, and the other cold and unfeeling...

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry..."

"Stand aside, you silly girl... stand aside, now..."

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead..."

A cruel laugh, and a woman screaming, screaming, and Harry felt himself begin to fall...

"Harry!"

He jerked awake. He was lying on the floor of the classroom, the lamps once more alight, the packing case closed. Moony was leaning over him, looking concerned. "Are you all right?"

"It was my mum," he whispered.

"I'm sorry?"

"I know what I heard." Harry tried to push himself up, but his wrists were still wobbly. Moony slid an arm under his shoulders and helped him sit up. "I know what I hear when they get too close. It's my mum – and him – Voldemort..."

To his horror, a tear leaked out of his eye and started making its way down his cheek. Moony handed him a Chocolate Frog and a tissue. “Eat this,” he said. “Not the tissue, that’s not good for you... though you did go through a stage as a baby where you thought paper was delicious, all your old books have teethmarks at the corners...”

Harry managed a shaky laugh, and took a bite of the Frog while wiping his cheeks as best he could with his left hand. “I want to try again,” he said as soon as he’d swallowed. “I know I can do it, I just have to try harder.”

“May I make a suggestion?”

Harry nodded, taking another bite of Frog.

“You might want to try another memory. Something happier. If I may ask, what were you using?”

“Riding my Firebolt.”

“Not bad – especially considering how I know you feel about flying – but, it seems, not good enough. Can you think of anything else?”

Harry considered for a moment or two. “I think so.”

“And you’re sure you want to go on?”

“I’m not a quitter,” said Harry indignantly, stuffing the rest of the Frog into his mouth.

“I didn’t say you were – there’s no shame in refusing to fight an opponent who has you outmatched, Harry...”

Harry snorted. “No raggedy-arsed dementor has me outmatched.”

Moony’s eyebrows flew up. “I won’t insult your intelligence by asking you where you learned that phrase,” he said. “But I will ask you not to use it in front of either Danger or Letha, unless you *want* to see your godfather hung out to dry on a broomstick.”

“Now that could be a memory I could use...” Harry said thoughtfully.

Moony groaned. “I knew it was a mistake to raise Marauders,” he said to the ceiling. He paused, as he often did when Danger was making a comment, then shook his head. “Never mind. Are you ready?”

Harry scrambled to his feet, bringing up the memory of the end of last year, of seeing Padfoot and Hermione awake again, of making friends with Sangre and defeating Tom Riddle’s diary with her help and Ginny’s... “Ready.”

Moony pulled the lid open. The boggart-dementor rose from within, its breath rattling in its throat – the room went dark and icy cold again –

“Expecto patronum!” Harry yelled. *“Expecto patronum! Expecto—”*

Darkness crept across his eyes, then a white fog, with huge, blurry shapes moving all around him – and a voice, a new one, a man’s this time –

“Lily, take Harry and go! It’s him! Go! Run! I’ll hold him off—”

A sudden lurch, and the darkness was back, with two voices screaming in it, a child and a woman –

“Dayger , Dayger!”

“Shut up, you miserable brat, shut up! She’s not coming back, now be quiet! No one here has time for you—”

“Harry, wake up...”

Harry’s eyes shot open. He was shaking all over. “I heard my dad,” he whispered. “And – something else...”

“Something else?” Moony asked quietly, handing him another Chocolate Frog.

“I think... I think it was me.” Harry stared at the Frog before tearing the wrapper off. “Moony, is Danger busy?”

“Not terribly. Why?”

“Can she come down for a second?”

“Of course.”

Harry stiffened in shock. Danger’s voice had just come out of Moony’s mouth.

Moony was controlling himself well, but Harry could tell he wanted to laugh. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That wasn’t nice of her at all. She’s on her way.”

Harry muttered another phrase he’d learned from Padfoot and crammed half the Chocolate Frog into his mouth.

About a minute later, someone knocked at the door, and Moony opened it with his wand to admit Danger. She crossed the room and sat down beside Harry, hugging him without waiting to be asked. Harry hugged her back, hard and without shame. No one was here to see him.

The voice rang in his head again. *“No one here has time for you...”*

“I think I heard my aunt,” he said very quietly, as Moony moved to sit behind him, putting an arm around his shoulders. “When she shut me up in the cupboard, before you came to get me from her

house, when I was a baby. I think I heard what she said to me, and what I said.” He pulled away a little to look at Danger. “I wanted you.”

Danger smiled a little at him. “I suppose I should be obscurely flattered that I figure in your worst memory,” she said. “Though I think it’s an honor I’d be happier to refuse. Just remember, Harry, the dementors are telling you the beginning of the story, but you know the ending. Bad things have happened in your life, but so have good ones.”

“What were you using that time?” Moony asked. “Which memory?”

“Last year, after everything came out all right.”

“Better, but still not enough. You need something life-changing, something as good as your worst memory is bad.”

Harry looked at the floor. “Is there anything like that?” he asked quietly.

“There must be,” said Danger with quiet confidence. “Or if there isn’t, we’ll have to get to work right away on making sure there is.”

Harry bit the rest of his Frog in half and put both halves in his mouth at once, feeling his confidence rise again.

Of course I have good enough memories. My whole life has been good. And it’s because of Moony and Danger that it’s that way – and because of Padfoot and Letha, and Neenie and Meghan and Draco – and Ron and Ginny, and Luna and Neville –

I have a million good memories. I just need to pick the best one.

And suddenly he knew which one it would be.

“Ready for another go,” he said, standing up.

“You’re sure?” Moony looked doubtful.

Harry nodded. “I’ll just get nervous if I wait.”

Danger kissed him on the head. “Good luck, Greeneyes. Pardon me.” She transformed into the wolf and loped over to the back wall, where she sat down to watch. Moony muttered something which Harry pretended not to hear, but which sounded a lot like “Sirius will kill me for this,” then went over to the packing case.

“Wand ready?”

Harry lifted it.

“Memory ready?”

He nodded.

Moony hoisted up the lid of the case. The black figure loomed out of it, the lamps died –

Harry summoned the memory of the day of Padfoot's trial, the moment Dumbledore had told the Pack-parents they were free to go, that their years-long charade was over. "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" he shouted. "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

The dementor's approach to him slowed, then stopped – Harry concentrated harder on the joy of that moment, on seeing Padfoot's face as he leapt out of the chained chair to run to the cubs and pull them all into a hug – he could hear the screaming in his head, but he was trying to ignore it, and funnily enough, the more he ignored it, the quieter it got –

"*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

His legs were starting to shake, his breath to come quicker, but he was still upright – and then, without warning, a cloud of silver mist billowed from his wand and hung in the air between him and the dementor –

"*Riddikulus!*" shouted Moony, interposing himself between Harry and the boggart, which fell to the floor in two pieces – Harry winced as he saw it was Danger, her body and her head lying nearly a foot apart –

"Oh, that's an easy one," said a scornful voice from behind him. Danger had returned to human form, and was standing with her hands on her hips. "Show him, Remus."

"*Riddikulus,*" Moony repeated, and Danger's severed head began to sing.

"*I ain't got nobo-o-o-dy...*"

Harry fell into a chair, laughing, as the boggart turned into a sort of mist and vanished into the packing case, which slammed shut behind it. "That's disgusting," he said, still laughing.

"Don't criticize what works," said Danger as Moony handed Harry a large bar of Honeydukes' chocolate with walnuts, his favorite kind. "Got any peanut butter in there?"

Moony made a face. "I wanted that one."

"Can we share?"

"If you insist." Moony took out the peanut butter bar, snapped a tiny corner off, and handed it to Danger. "The rest is for me."

"Just remember, I know where you live."

"You live where I live."

“Oh. Right.”

Moony shook his head as he broke the peanut butter bar in half. “Do you understand her?” he asked Harry.

“Not my job,” said Harry with his mouth full.

Danger grinned. “Truer words were never spoken.”

xXxXx

In the dorm, Draco sat on his bed, reading his Charms text.

His right hand stroked the runes on the glass globe set on the nightstand.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 15: Look at It This Way (Year 3)

Chapter 15: Look at It This Way

“I’m almost sorry Slytherin won that match against Ravenclaw,” said Draco, rubbing his hands together to try and warm them up. “Wood’s gone mad for practice.”

“More mad,” corrected Ron, leaning against the wall. “He was always mad.”

“So true,” said Fred, pushing the big oak door closed. “But you’re right, Ron – he’s never been quite this bad before.”

“Everything’s never been riding on one match like it is on ours against Ravenclaw,” Ginny pointed out. “If we lose, we’re out of the running for the Cup, and this year is Wood’s last chance.”

“You don’t have to tell us, Gin,” said George, massaging his shoulder where Fred had hit it by accident with his bat. “He tells us himself often enough.”

“Lay off her,” said Harry, leading the way across the entrance hall. “You were asking why Wood’s having us practice five times a week, and she told you.”

“I didn’t ask,” said Fred. “I was just saying.”

“You as good as asked,” said Ron.

Fred looked oddly at his brother. “Why would I ask a question I already know the answer to?”

“How should I know how your mind works? Assuming you even have one?”

“Oh, and who was it asking me for help with his Charms homework the other day?”

“Shut up,” said Draco wearily. “Harry, any chance you know a secret passage that could get us to the common room sooner?”

“Not off the top of my head. Wish we had the Map.”

“Well, we don’t, and wishing won’t make it come,” said Ginny testily. “So why don’t we just keep moving and get there as soon as we can the normal way?”

Harry looked at Ron. “Is she always like this when she’s cold and tired?” he asked.

“Thought you would have figured that out by now, Harry,” said George as Ron and Fred both nodded. “We’ve been having practices like this for what, three weeks now?”

“But Harry’s always rushing off to get somewhere else right afterwards,” said Draco. “I think this is the first time he’s come in with us since term started again.”

“Yeah, Harry, where are you all the time these days?” asked Fred. “You’re never in the common room anymore.”

“During all our free time, right?” said Harry sarcastically. “I’m having private lessons with Professor Lupin, and I’m not good for much after they’re over, so I have to get right inside after Quidditch to do my homework.”

George looked intrigued. “Private lessons? What about?”

“He *said* it was private,” said Ginny, elbowing her brother. “That means it’s none of your business.”

“Everything is our business, O small sister,” said Fred loftily. “If it isn’t our business, we make it our business. And it strikes me that some of those times Harry’s not around, neither are you. Or Ron, or Draco, or any of your little gang.”

“It’s called a Pride,” said Ron. “And we can do what we want.”

“Of course you can, little brother,” said George patronizingly, reaching up and patting Ron on the head. “Of course you can.”

Harry sighed. The truth was that with Quidditch practice, homework, and Patronus lessons, he hadn’t had time to do any real work on his Animagus spells since term had started again. It was all the more frustrating because everyone else was progressing so well. Predictably, Hermione was doing the best; it was even possible that she’d have finished the partial transformations within another month or so.

Then all she has to do is take the potion and write her final incantation, and she’ll be an Animagus...

“Earth to Harry,” said Draco, waving a hand in front of his eyes. “Come in, Harry.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“Good question,” said Ron. “You asleep on your feet or what?”

“Almost,” said Harry, stifling a yawn. “Sorry, I was just thinking.”

“Quick, someone owl the *Daily Prophet*,” said Ginny. Harry glared at her, but another yawn made him squint and ruined the effect.

“Hold still, Harry,” said George. “We’ll give you a ride.”

“Wha—” He never finished the word. Quicker than his eyes could follow, the twins had their wands

out, and he was suspended in midair between them.

“No tricks,” Fred assured him. “Just a nice easy trip to Gryffindor Tower.”

“You can even take a nap up there if you like,” suggested George as they set off.

Harry considered hexing the twins, but that would probably mean they’d drop him. Besides, a nap was sounding better and better. He closed his eyes and let the rocking motion created by the twins’ steps soothe him, and sleep came surprisingly quickly.

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Most of Gryffindor House was highly amused when the portrait hole opened and Fred and George Weasley levitated in a sleeping Harry Potter, one arm dangling and his mouth slightly open.

“He’s wearing himself out,” said Hermione as Fred carefully lowered Harry into an armchair.

“How so?” asked George, leaning over the back of the sofa.

“We all of us have a lot going on, with classes and Combat Club, and our... other project,” said Hermione, taking Harry’s glasses off and setting them on the table in front of him. “And you all have Quidditch as well. But Harry also has those lessons with Moony – Professor Lupin, I mean. That’s five big, important things. I think he’s working too hard.”

“Someone write this down,” said Ron. “Hermione Granger-Lupin thinks somebody else is working too hard.”

“She has a point, though,” said Ginny, dropping into a chair herself. “Harry does have a lot going on.”

“So tell him that,” said Luna, turning a page in her Transfiguration book. “He’s not stupid. He’ll see he has to decide what’s really important.”

“That’s not the problem,” said Draco. “The problem is, he might decide the wrong things.”

“Then he has some trouble.” Luna scratched her cheek with her quill, leaving a line of ink behind, then scribbled something on her parchment. “Everybody has to have trouble.”

“She’s right,” said Neville. “We’re not Harry’s babysitters. He can take care of himself. We should just point out to him that he’s doing an awful lot of things all at once, and let him decide what to do himself.”

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“I can handle it,” said Harry firmly, bringing his foot onto his bed to tie his shoe. “I have been handling it. And I’m fine.”

“You’re not sleeping,” said Draco, sitting cross-legged on his bed, one hand on his globe. “That’s not a good definition of ‘fine.’”

“You don’t enjoy Quidditch like you used to,” added Ron. “You used to look happy every time we went down to the pitch. Now you look like you’re going to detention.”

“Well, what do you think I should do, if you’re so smart?” Harry challenged, pulling up his other foot.

Ron and Draco had a silent but vehement conversation. Ron surrendered first. “You’ve got to give something up,” he said unhappily. “You can’t keep doing all this.”

“Give something up? Like what? Classes?”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Draco.

“No, that’s your department,” Harry shot back, standing up. “I told you, I’m fine. And I’m not giving anything up. Not unless someone makes me.”

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“Sit it out?” Harry jumped to his feet, staring angrily at Percy. “What do you mean, sit it out?”

“Harry, you haven’t been to practice since term started.”

“I’ve been busy with Quidditch!”

“Well, then, Quidditch is obviously more important to you. There’s nothing wrong with that, you’re a fine player – nonetheless, I can’t let you take part in the match tomorrow if you haven’t the slightest idea what we’ll be doing.”

“I can find out!”

“How, if you don’t have the time to come to practice?”

Harry stared at Percy, feeling baffled anger mount in his chest – he wanted to shout and storm, but making a scene wouldn’t get him anywhere, and something inside him was telling him Percy was actually in the right...

“Fine,” he said finally, turning on his heel to head back to the Pride, who were sitting on the other side of the common room.

“No luck?” asked Draco as Harry threw himself into an armchair.

“No luck,” Harry confirmed. “How did he get to be Combat Club Captain for Gryffindor, anyway?”

“Don’t know,” said Ron. “He was doing things like keeping track of who came to practice and who was good at what from the beginning. I think now people are just noticing it.”

“Percy’s very good at organizing things,” said Hermione. “He’s got an orderly mind, and he likes things around him to be orderly too.”

“Just having an orderly mind doesn’t necessarily make him a good leader, though,” said Draco. “I hope we don’t regret putting him in charge.”

“Draco, it’s a game,” said Ron, dipping his quill into the inkpot. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

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“You’re not allowed to ask ‘What’s the worst that could happen’ anymore,” Meghan muttered to Ron.

They sat back to back in a corridor deep in Slytherpuff territory, with a Hufflepuff fourth year guarding them. The Slytherpuff team was dominating the match so far, having taken more than half of the necessary territory of the castle to win. Percy and Penelope Clearwater, the joint heads of the Gryffinclaw team, had sent out several small scouting squads to check the Slytherpuffs’ defenses.

This, in itself, wouldn’t have been so bad. The trouble was that Percy had insisted on telling each squad precisely where to go, and how long to take doing it. Ron had tried to object to the route his squad of three had been assigned, but Percy wouldn’t listen to him.

“I think I know a little more about it than you do, Ronald,” he’d said officiously. “And Gills here won’t let anything happen to you.” Gills, a Ravenclaw sixth year, had given Ron a very confident smile and led them out.

Ron wondered how confident Gills’ smile was now. They’d been jumped at the exact point he’d suspected they would be, and although he and Meghan had each accounted for one or two of their attackers, there had been too many for them to escape. To Gills’ credit, he had been “killed” trying to defend them, and that had given Meghan time to activate her locator, telling the main force that there were enemies along their scouting run.

But they had still been captured, and Ron had been “wounded” in the arm. He’d been allowed to bandage it, stopping the damage from spreading, but it would still count as points for the Slytherpuffs, as would their capture.

Unless we can get away somehow. Then it’s points to Gryffinclaw, both ways – taking points from them, because they won’t have us anymore, and we get points of our own for a successful escape... even if we get “killed” trying to get away, that’s fewer points to them than if we’re still alive at the end of the match...

Ron moved forward a little bit. “Hold still!” snapped the Hufflepuff, pointing her wand at him.

“I need to scratch,” Ron said, trying to sound whiny. He was rather unsettled by how well he succeeded. “My back itches.”

The Hufflepuff kept her wand trained on him. “All right,” she said, waving at him.

Ron scratched his back, turning as he did so that he could see Meghan, who had also turned a little in place. “What’s your name?” he asked the Hufflepuff.

“Brianna Morgan,” she said, still watching him suspiciously. “You’re a Weasley, aren’t you?”

“Ron Weasley. I’d say nice to meet you, but…”

Morgan gave a short laugh. “Nicer for me than you, I think. You’re a good shot, Weasley. You took out a couple of my friends back there.”

“No hard feelings, I hope.”

Morgan shrugged. “All’s fair in war and pick-up Quidditch.”

“Which one is this again?” asked Ron, using his most clueless voice and making both girls laugh.

He brought his hands around to his front, being sure to move slowly and keep them where Morgan could see them, and looked over at Meghan. “She’s not a bad sort for a Hufflepuff,” he told the younger girl, scratching the ring finger of his left hand while curling the other ones out of the way. “Don’t you think?”

“Definitely,” Meghan agreed, sticking out the first two fingers of her right hand and swinging them back and forth horizontally.

Ron arched his back, stretching. “I think I got a five on that last assignment for Snape,” he said casually. “But it could have been a four.”

“What, not a three?” Meghan asked, shifting position and touching Ron’s wrist. A tingle ran up his arm, and suddenly he felt stronger. “Or a two?”

“Not on this one.”

“You probably deserved a zero.”

The word had barely left Meghan’s lips when the two of them were up and charging Morgan. Ron slammed into her, taking her down hard, and Meghan yanked the wand from her hand before she could shoot. “Gryffindor,” she said into the point of the wand, then swung it at a nearby wall. A spurt of red-orange dye shot from it. “We’re good,” she said, pointing the wand back at Morgan.

“Nice trick,” gasped Morgan as Ron got off her chest, making sure he was never between her and

Meghan. "You are good."

"Thanks. You too." Ron held out his hand, and Meghan gave him the wand. "Sorry about this, but we can't let you run off and tell." He swung the wand down hard, spraying dye all over Morgan's chest.

"Don't worry too much," said Morgan, lifting up a talisman from where it dangled at her belt. "I got a message off before you shot me. You'd better get going, before reinforcements get here."

Ron shook his head. "Hufflepuffs," he said in mild disbelief. "Fair even if it kills you."

"It's not such a bad way to be."

"This from a dead woman. Come on, Meghan, let's go."

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Danger stepped out of the fireplace and sneezed. And sneezed, and sneezed.

Dammit , the last time I reacted to anything like this was...

"Letha must have begun brewing the potion," said Remus from behind her, and she felt his arms around her, holding her up. "Let's get you outside until you get acclimated."

"Thanks." Danger shut her eyes and let Remus guide her feet.

When the Pack-adults had been working on their own Animagus transformations, Danger had helped Aletha brew the potion that they all had to drink. It had all gone splendidly for the first eight days, during which time a new ingredient had to be added every day. On the ninth day, the ingredient was powdered wolf claws, and Aletha had no sooner opened the jar than Danger had begun to sneeze. She'd had to leave the room lest she accidentally upset the cauldron. Luckily, her reaction had worn off within about five minutes, but they had been five of the longest and most miserable minutes of her life.

You'll be all right soon enough, Remus reminded her, guiding her into a seat on the bench on the back patio. It was warm to the touch and not snowy at all, which meant he'd cleared it for her. **Just ride it out.**

You're so helpful. Danger knew she should be nicer, but with her eyes watering and her nose stuffed, she really didn't want to.

I try.

Luckily, Remus was used to her by now.

"Thought someone was setting off firecrackers out here," said a voice from the direction of the house. "But I guess it was just you."

Danger scooped snow off the arm of the bench, packed a snowball, and mentally tapped Remus for permission. In a moment, she was looking out of his eyes. With the odd sense of disorientation that always accompanied such an act, she watched herself aim the snowball and throw. Sirius saw it coming and dodged, of course, but it was the thought that counted.

Besides, his dodge ran him straight into the one Remus had thrown.

“Not fair,” Sirius complained, wiping snow out of his eyes. “Two on one.”

“You ought to have figured that out by now,” said Remus, as Danger returned to her own senses and blew her nose. “When do we ever do anything separately?”

“And don’t answer that,” Danger put in, knowing from experience that Sirius would run straight through an opening like that and go places they really didn’t want him.

“First you ask a question, then you say you don’t want it answered.” From his tone of voice, Danger could tell Sirius was shaking his head. “I don’t understand you people.”

“You don’t have to understand us,” said Remus. “You just have to obey us.”

“Make me.”

There was a scuffle and a rumble akin to a muted roar. “All right, all right,” said Sirius breathlessly. “You made me.”

Danger’s eyes began to clear just in time for her to see lion-Remus letting Sirius out from under his front paws, having left claw marks in the fabric of Sirius’ jacket as a reminder.

The window behind them opened. Aletha stuck her head out. “Is he making trouble?” she asked. “I can give you a hand if you need one. Though you seem to have things under control,” she added as Remus turned to look at her, shaking his mane back.

“Why is it always me?” Sirius asked the world at large.

“Because you invite it,” said Danger, blowing her nose again. “If you didn’t make trouble, you wouldn’t get in trouble.”

“What fun would that be?”

“Exactly. How’s the potion coming, Letha?”

“Not bad. I’m up to day nine, as I’m sure you’ve already realized.”

“No, I had no idea,” said Danger, blotting at her eyes. “Let me see. You started about a week ago, end of January, so it should be done by the end of April, beginning of May?”

“About then. I’ll be stopping before it’s quite finished, though. You can store it when it’s one

ingredient away from done, you know, but not when it's completely finished. You either drink it or it goes bad."

"So you'll be finishing it in small batches, then?"

"Probably. Larger if more than one person is ready for it at a time. But I have a feeling I know who's going to be ready first."

Remus changed back to human and dusted off his hands. "I think we all knew that," he said with a smile. "Hard work and dedication pay off again."

"Now what kind of thing is that to be teaching the cubs?" complained Sirius. "We were supposed to indoctrinate them into Marauder ways. Quick and dirty, and never mind the consequences. When did we get so... so..."

"Old?"

"That'll do."

"Right about the time we realized that our parents weren't quite as mad as we thought they were?" suggested Aletha.

"Speak for yourself," said Sirius, leading the way indoors. "My parents were every bit as mad as I thought they were. Why do you think I ran away?"

"Well, excepting you, we all found out our parents weren't quite as mad as we thought they were," said Danger. "And I think we've taught the cubs plenty of Marauder ways. What other family would be not only sanctioning, but helping, their children learn illegal magics at the age of thirteen?"

"Well, if James had lived..."

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"So how did the most recent Combat Club go?" asked Sirius later when they were all sitting around the kitchen table.

"The Slytherpuffs beat the Gryffinclaws pretty soundly," said Remus. "It was hard on the Gryffindors – their first loss – and especially so for Percy Weasley. He was in charge."

Aletha sighed. "Poor boy," she said. "He's so interested in power, but that's not the sort of thing he's good at. He'd make a better diplomat than a war leader."

"You'd have to teach him some tact first," said Sirius. "Good diplomats can make anyone feel comfortable. Percy's gift seems to be to make everyone feel uncomfortable."

"That's not nice," scolded Danger, flicking a crumb from her scone at him.

“Unfortunately, it is true,” said Remus. “We’re in den here, no reason to mince words. Percy Weasley would probably bow down to anyone or anything in authority, simply because it was in authority, and not bother to look at whether or not what it was saying made any sense, or whether or not it was right.”

“In other words, he bears careful watching if what Albus fears ever actually happens,” said Aletha darkly. “He could be manipulated the way Ludo Bagman was, used to collect information.”

“Or other things.” Sirius rubbed at a tea stain on the tablecloth. “There’s always secretaries and interns poking around in the files at the Ministry, looking for things. If you wanted something planted, something incriminating, possibly...”

“I don’t think he’d go along with anything that actually harmed people,” said Danger. “He’s not stupid. But he could easily be willfully blind, disbelieve reports because his authorities tell him they’re exaggerated or untrue.”

Remus nodded thoughtfully. “In which case, the best cure would be to confront him with something he can’t explain away.”

Sirius shook his head, looking disbelieving. “Wait a minute,” he said. “When did we start analyzing our neighbors’ children? Don’t we have enough to do with our own?”

“We started,” said Aletha quietly, “when we realized that their lives are going to be closely tied to ours. And when we realized that there might be – have been, and probably will be again – threats to our cubs’ lives while they’re still young. It’s our responsibility to know how all the people around us might act in a situation like that, so we know who we can count on for help...”

“And who might be the opposite of helpful,” Danger finished, staring at the center of the table.

“We’re quite a cheerful bunch, aren’t we,” said Remus, smiling one-sidedly. “Borrowing trouble like it was going out of fashion. Why don’t we talk about something else?”

“What would you suggest?” asked Aletha.

“How are your classes coming?”

“Oh, just fine. Some of the other students keep giving me odd looks, but I don’t know if that’s because I’m so much older or because they’ve heard about the Longbottoms. I do tend to keep to myself, but that’s mostly because I seem to make them nervous if I get too close... although I do get the occasional starry-eyed one who thinks you’re romantic,” she said to Sirius. “Did I tell you about the latest one?”

“No.” Sirius visibly braced himself. “Go ahead.”

“This was a couple of days ago. She plunked herself down at my lunch table – clutching a copy of *Happy Ending*, no less – and proceeded to tell me that she thought you and I were just like something out of Valentina Jett, and that she wishes she could find a man who would spend years

in hiding with no access to the outside world except through her.”

Sirius put his head down on the kitchen table with an audible thump. Danger was doubled over in her chair, holding her chest and stomach. Remus was upright only by virtue of clutching the back of his chair. “At least she got one thing right,” he said through his laughter. “You two are very much like something out of Valentina Jett.”

Sirius lifted his head and glared at his friend. “They say to write what you know. What else was I supposed to do?”

“What I like best is this girl’s apparent delusion that you went into hiding solely because you loved Letha,” said Danger, recovering enough to sit up. “Not because of that little thing called a murder charge.”

“Well, not that I wouldn’t go into hiding for her,” said Sirius, looking at his wife. “But there were other considerations at the time. I’m still amazed she agreed to have anything to do with me, knowing I’d have to be underfoot all the time.”

“You did have quite a reputation as a ladies’ man before we started dating, you know...” Aletha grinned. “This way I could be sure of getting you to stay home.”

Unfortunately, this set Remus and Danger off again.

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Draco carefully sprinkled half an ounce of powdered dragon scale into his cauldron and stirred it three times counterclockwise, then dug into his bag to find the apple leaves he’d need next.

Behind him, there was a scuffling sound and a thud. He turned to see Theodore Nott sprawled on the floor between the two rows of desks, with Blaise Zabini helping him up.

“Is there a problem?” said Snape, sweeping over.

“No, sir,” said Zabini quickly. “Nott just slipped, I think the floor is slick here.”

Snape pulled out his wand and cast a charm on the patch of floor, then walked away. Draco frowned, feeling a vague unease about this, but dismissed it in favor of shredding the apple leaves fine enough.

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“What the hell was that about?” Theodore demanded of Blaise in the Slytherin common room later. “Why’d you stop me?”

“What were you about to do?”

Theodore glared at him and didn’t answer.

“I don’t know why you’re trying to get Black in trouble, Nott, but it stopped being funny about the time half of us got a week of bad luck out of it. Leave off.”

“Or what?”

Blaise raised an eyebrow. “You’re not even going to try to deny it?”

Theodore scowled. “Why should I? You wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

“You’re right, I wouldn’t. And I don’t really care why you’re doing it. But like I said, it’s not funny anymore, if it ever was in the first place. So leave him alone, or I’ll make you.”

“You’ll make me?”

“Yes, I’ll make you. Remember, we sleep in the same room. And don’t think your fancy expensive locking charms make your things any safer. You still have to sleep in that bed, and there’s no way to lock that up.”

“I could take this to Professor Snape, you know. You’re threatening me.”

Blaise snorted. “Please. You think these are threats? You haven’t hung around your father’s friends much, have you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Quit playing stupid, Nott. Your father was a Death Eater.”

“That’s not true—”

“Don’t bother denying it, we all know it’s true. There’s even some people who might think better of you for it. But if you’re planning on doing what your daddy does, you’d better get used to threats. Real threats, threats towards you, not just your things. Death Eaters like the Unforgivables, from what I hear. And they practice them on each other if they can’t get anyone else. So quit whinging and grow up a little. And leave Black alone.”

“Lion-lover,” muttered Theodore under his breath as Blaise walked away.

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Remus looked at his watch again. Harry was now five minutes late for his Patronus lesson.

Will you please relax? He’s thirteen, he’s not always precisely punctual to everything.

Remus was spared the necessity of coming up with a cutting reply by the opening of the door.

“Sorry we’re late,” said Harry, setting his bag down.

“We?”

Draco stepped into the room, looking nervous. “Harry said you wouldn’t mind if I watched, and maybe tried it myself...” He let the sentence trail off.

“I certainly don’t mind if you watch, if Harry doesn’t,” said Remus. “You can even give the charm a try. But I don’t think you can try it against the boggart, since yours is different than Harry’s. Unless Harry faces the boggart, and you cast from farther away... if that’s all right with you,” he added to Harry. “You’d be the one getting the effects.”

Harry swung his arms in warming-up circles. “It hasn’t killed me yet.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Remus dryly. “All right, wands out.”

Draco was able to produce a few wisps of silver mist on a dry run, though not nearly as much as Harry could. Then he backed against the wall to watch Harry practice against the boggart-dementor. Remus was neither surprised nor happy to see both boys pale and sweating when the lamps came back on.

Harry went against the boggart twice more before Remus called a halt. “If you want a go, now’s your chance,” he told Draco. “But only one. It’s getting late, and you two have the match against Ravenclaw on Saturday.”

“Which is why I need to be able to do this,” said Harry unhappily, massaging his wand hand. “And I still can’t, not really – all I get is this big cloud, and it drains me almost as fast as the dementors do...”

“But it’s under your control,” Remus reminded him. “And it should hold them off long enough for us to notice and help you, and for you to land so you don’t fall again. Remember, this charm is higher even than N.E.W.T. level. Don’t expect perfection from yourself the first time out.”

“No, that’s Hermione’s trick,” said Draco. “Think you can stand one more, Harry?”

“If I have to.” Harry turned his chair to face the packing case where the boggart lurked. “I think I’ll stay sitting,” he said. “Save some time when I pass out.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Draco came to within three paces of Harry’s chair and swung his wand back and forth, his eyes half-shut in concentration.

Remus sighed quietly. **Do I know what I’m doing?**

Last time I checked.

Thanks. I just wanted to make sure.

Fingers crossed, Remus lifted the lid of the packing case.

The boggart-dementor rose from within, chilling the room and plunging it into darkness –

“Expecto patronum!” shouted Draco, his eyes glinting weirdly silver in the moonlight coming in the windows. *“Expecto patronum – expecto patronum!”*

The moonlight seemed to gain a third dimension directly in front of Draco – the silvery gas was drifting forward, covering Harry, slumped in his chair – the boggart-dementor’s advance had been halted, but Draco’s breath was already coming faster, his wand arm shaking –

Remus stepped in front of the boggart. This time, Danger’s body was covered in blood. His *“Riddikulus”* turned the blood into ketchup, and the boggart swooped back into the packing case. “Well done,” he said, turning to look at the boys. “Well done, both of you.”

Harry grinned in thanks and accepted the bar of chocolate Remus handed him. Draco nodded and waved it away. “Not hungry, thanks,” he said.

“Trying to get me in trouble, fox?”

“No...”

“Then eat it, or Danger will be after me for neglecting you.” Remus handed the chocolate firmly to Draco. “To the Tower with you both, and get some sleep.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, throwing a salute. Draco saluted with his chocolate bar, and the boys left the classroom.

Remus sat down, closing his eyes. **I think these lessons take as much out of me as they do out of Harry, he said wearily, leaning back in the chair. It’s so damned hard to watch him fighting, and not do anything to help...**

Because all your fatherly instincts are screaming that he can’t possibly face this alone, but all your professorly ones are telling you that he has to learn and he never will if you keep helping him along, right?

Succinct and direct as usual. How did you know?

The usual way. Having experienced it myself. I want to swoop in and make everything all better for Hermione, but I know if I do I’ll just ruin things. Besides firmly cementing my image as a nosy parker and a matchmaker.

So what did you do?

Gave her advice, told her it won’t last forever. So it had better not.

It won’t. You just wait. Probably around the time they’re sixteen or so, certain people are going to start noticing certain aspects of certain other people...

Sixteen? You do have old-fashioned ideas.

I meant specifically. I suspect other interests will blossom well before then. Possibly starting now, or very soon.

I wouldn't be surprised.

Would you be surprised if I started noticing certain aspects?

Of whom?

You, of course.

Good answer. No, I wouldn't be surprised, but I would be rather pleased...

Remus smiled. **Also a good answer. I'll be right up.** He got to his feet, picked up the packing case, and extinguished the lamps with a wave of his wand.

He was halfway down the hall when his pendants flared hot. He nearly dropped the case in his hurry, but Danger beat him to it. **Draco**, she said, her voice suddenly frightened. **Remus – if Wormtail could get on the grounds –**

Remus clenched his hand around the medallions. **It can't be. He's in no danger. Just angry, or frightened – maybe he fell, or hurt himself somehow –**

Danger was breathing hard, and Remus could feel her heart pounding, or maybe it was his own. **But his father doesn't want him dead...**

Remus changed forms and cast around, quickly finding the scent he wanted. **I'm on it**, he said, picking up speed. **Stay with me – if my sense goes out...**

I know. They were intensely one – Remus knew Danger could see the dim corridors he ran through and smell the track he followed, and he could feel the weave of the bedspread she was clutching, taste the sour fear in her mouth that she was swallowing against, over and over. It was as one that they began to hear shouting and crashing up ahead. But the shouting was in only one voice, and that a familiar one...

Remus skidded to a halt outside the door of a boys' bathroom, changed forms, drew his wand, and tried the doorknob. It turned under his hand, and he threw the door open.

Draco whirled, his face a mask of dismay that would have been comic under other circumstances. For instance, were his hands not dripping blood.

“What in the...” Remus forbore further comment, instead stepping in and shutting the door behind him. Something crunched under his shoes. He looked down.

The floor was thickly littered with shards of mirror glass. Only fragments remained in the four

frames on the wall over the sinks.

Draco was now leaning against one of the stalls, looking rather dazed. His hands weren't as bad as they'd looked at first glance, Remus saw as he got closer. Most of the cuts were shallow, bleeding all out of proportion with their size. However, there were one or two that still had the offending shards stuck in them. "Hold still," he said, taking Draco's wrist.

Draco blinked at him in confusion. "Moony? What – ow!" Remus had just removed one of the largest shards with his wand. "What did—" He stared at his hands, then at the room, looking appalled. "What *happened?* "

"You don't remember?"

Draco's face shut down again. "Not really." He didn't react as Remus drew the other shards from his cuts, or as the older wizard conjured bandages around his hands. When Remus repaired the mirrors, though, Draco looked into the closest one for a moment. His nostrils flared in distaste, and he turned away.

Not really, in this case, means I don't want to?

I think so. Mind letting the other cubs know Draco will be a little late getting to bed tonight?

I'll do that. And then have certain things ready up here?

If you would. "Come with me," said Remus aloud, leading Draco from the room.

"Am I in trouble?"

"No. But you need to get these seen to, so you can play on Saturday."

"I don't want to play on Saturday."

Remus nodded. "All right. No one will make you. But you still need to get these seen to."

Draco looked as if he might object, but didn't.

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"He tripped and fell on some empty potions vials," Remus told Madam Pomfrey in the hospital wing. "Cut his hands up. I got the glass out, but I might have missed some."

"No, you got it all," she said, running her wand over Draco's hands. "I assume you don't want to stay and be treated, Mr. Black?"

Draco looked surprised to be offered a choice. "Not really," he said, a trifle apologetically.

"No one ever does." Madam Pomfrey went into her office and came back with two bottles of

potion. "Here," she said, handing them to Draco. "This one in the short bottle to put on your hands before you go to sleep, and this one in the tall bottle to drink. Don't get them mixed up. Those cuts should be healed by morning, if they're not, come back, but they will be. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. I think so." Draco had a small smile on his face, but it vanished quickly as he looked at the potion bottles.

"Wait for me outside, please, Draco?" Remus asked. Draco nodded and slipped out. "Thank you, Poppy," he said quietly.

"He's obviously had a shock, or something similar," Madam Pomfrey said, vanishing the bloodstained bandages Remus had conjured. "And you're more qualified to deal with that than I am, you and Danger. I assume she's mixed up in this somehow."

Remus smiled. "When is she ever not?"

"Go on with you, take care of that boy," Madam Pomfrey chided, but she was smiling too.

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The living room of the quarters Remus and Danger shared was lit only by a brightly burning fire. Danger sat beside it on a cushion, sipping from a mug of hot pumpkin juice. A plate of spice biscuits she knew were special favorites of Draco's lay beside two more mugs on a wooden tray.

Draco took a mug and two biscuits and went to sit on the couch, across the room from Danger. Remus sat beside his wife and took his mug from the tray. **I notice you draped the mirror, and the curtains are shut.**

He seems to be reacting badly to reflective surfaces at the moment. I'd rather not have a repetition of what he pulled in the bathroom.

Good thought.

Thank you. So. Approach him, or let him approach us?

Let him approach us, definitely. Remus was certain of this. **It's just like when he was little. We have to let him make the first move. Give him space, and time, and let him do the talking.**

As hard as that may be.

Precisely.

Draco looked into his mug as he might into a crystal ball. Gently, he blew into it, and watched as (Remus assumed) the ripples caused by his breath faded away. His features wrinkled again in distaste and frustration, and he put the mug aside and took a bite of biscuit.

The Lupins waited quietly, doing their best to watch their Pack-son without staring at him, sipping

at their drinks and nibbling on biscuits. Finally, Draco broke the silence.

“I hate my face.”

“Any particular reason why?” Danger asked quietly.

Draco graced her with a “don’t-be-stupider-than-you-have-to” look. “Why do you *think*.”

“Because you look like your father,” said Remus, making it a statement rather than a question.

Draco crushed his other biscuit in his hand. “Yes. Because I look like him. No matter what I do or what I become, he’ll always be with me, haunting me. Because no matter how good I try to be, everyone looks at me and sees a Malfoy. *I* look at me and see a Malfoy.”

Danger took a breath to say something, but Remus stopped her with a mental touch. **I don’t think he’s done yet...**

“I mean, it isn’t *fair!*” Draco burst out. “Harry looks like his father, but his father was a hero! Ron looks like his whole family, and they’ve all been Gryffindors for ages and done all kinds of great things! Neville looks like his mum, and she’s a hero too – and Luna like hers, and *she* was a hero – Neenie looks like you, Danger, and Meghan looks like Letha – I’m the only one. The only one who has to look like an effing pureblood maniac who wants my family dead.” He dropped the biscuit crumbs on the floor. “I hate it.”

“Obviously,” said Danger. “But there are better ways of hating things than punching mirrors.” She sat down at the other end of the couch from Draco, who looked at her with a slightly distrustful expression.

“You weren’t supposed to know about that,” he said. “I was going to fix it. And I thought I locked the door.”

“It seems not,” said Remus. “And it was your pendants that gave you away. We can show you how to shut them off temporarily, for times when you really want to be alone.”

“I really wanted to be alone in the bathroom.”

“If you say so,” said Danger blandly. “As I was saying, I agree that most people who look at you will see something of your father in you. But I wouldn’t necessarily agree that that’s always a bad thing.”

“It’s not?”

“No. Because of who we are, and what we have to do.” Danger took a drink of her pumpkin juice, organizing her thoughts. “We’ll probably end up in another war eventually,” she said finally, setting the mug aside. “Voldemort is alive, more or less, and there are two Death Eaters out there right now who might at any time decide to go looking for their master and help him return. Unless I missed a memo somewhere, you’ll be on our side in that war.”

Draco nodded fiercely.

“And your father will be on the other side. So you feel that everyone will see him in you, and think you’re somehow tainted or dragged down by him.”

“Yeah.” Draco tugged at a loose end of bandage.

“Unfortunately, some people may well think like that. We can’t change how others think. What we can change is what they have to think about. And you are changing it, every day, just by being who you are. No one who really knows you will be able to think for a moment that just because you look like your father, you act like him as well.”

“It’s not the people who know me I’m worried about,” Draco muttered.

“I know. But think about this, Draco. War makes people do terrible things. One of the worst is also one of the easiest. It’s called demonizing the enemy. You know what that is – denying that your enemy is human, turning him into a faceless creature of evil, something that has to be killed before it kills you, not a person with a family and a home and a life. Except that, with you on our side, we’ll have a harder time demonizing Lucius Malfoy, because he looks so much like someone we love. So by looking the way you do, you may be helping to save some of our humanity.”

Draco looked at her, then pulled his hands apart several times. It was Marauder hand-sign for *A bit of a stretch, that.*

“Or you could say that you now have a goal for your life,” Remus put in from his place by the fire. “You want to reach the day where you’ve done so much good that people identify your father with you, not you with your father.”

Draco snorted. “Like that’ll ever happen.”

“It might,” said Danger. “Don’t make fun. You never know what tomorrow will bring.”

“Stiff hands,” said Draco, looking at his bandages. “And probably a lecture from Wood. Do you think I can still play?”

“Do you want to?” asked Remus.

Draco nodded. “I was just mad, earlier,” he said. “It didn’t make much sense even to me. Have you ever felt divided, like part of you is arguing with another part?”

Remus laughed. “All the time,” he said. “Even before I met the madwoman on the couch.”

Danger stuck out her tongue at him.

“I felt that way in the bathroom. Part of me was saying I should be proud of the way I look, and part of me wanted to destroy it, smash it to bits. But I couldn’t very well smash my own face. So I smashed the mirrors instead.” Draco looked shamefaced. “I guess it was stupid.”

“No permanent harm done, fox,” said Danger. “Do try to find something less harmful to destroy next time, though. I find fruit very satisfying, myself. It makes wonderful noises when you throw it hard against the wall.”

Draco smiled. “I’ll remember that.”

xXxXx

“Gryffindor leads Ravenclaw seventy to thirty, this match could still go either way, ladies and gentlemen – Draco Black of Gryffindor in possession, passes to Alicia Spinnet, who passes back to Black, who passes back to Spinnet – classic tactics here, confuse the opposite Chasers – and they have indeed been confused! Black’s away with the Quaffle – some fine acceleration there, though not nearly as much as Harry Potter’s top-of-the-line Firebolt–”

“Jordan!”

“Sorry, Professor. Black ducks a Bludger, dodges the Ravenclaw Keeper, and SCORES! EIGHTY-THIRTY GRYFFINDOR!”

Harry zoomed down to high-five Draco before returning to his station high above.

“Harry Potter is widely considered one of the best Seekers Hogwarts has seen in years – well-matched with his new Firebolt, the best broom on the market today, choice of the Irish national side, favorites for this year’s upcoming Quidditch World Cup–”

“JORDAN! PAY ATTENTION TO THE MATCH!”

“Yes, Professor – oh, look at that – Chang may have skills, but that Comet Two Sixty she’s riding just isn’t up to the standards of the–”

The microphone went dead.

High above, Harry agreed with Lee Jordan. Cho Chang, the Ravenclaw Seeker, did indeed have skills, and not just in flying. He would have loved to know how and why she was making his stomach do slow flips every time he looked at her. Was it because she was so pretty? But no – he knew girls as pretty as Cho, Hermione and Meghan were at least that pretty –

No, they aren’t, said a part of him. No one’s as pretty as Cho.

But how can I be sure? There are lots of girls –

No one is as pretty as Cho, insisted that inner voice. No one ever will be –

“Harry, look out!”

Harry did a roll in midair as a Bludger whooshed through the space where his head had been, followed quickly by George Weasley. “Pay attention to the match, mate!” he bellowed, slamming

the Bludger towards a Ravenclaw Chaser.

Right. The match. Harry shook his head and looked around the pitch – Ravenclaw had the Quaffle, but George’s Bludger was about to change that – Cho was at the other end of the pitch, flying slowly around the Ravenclaw goal posts –

And there, near the bottom of one of the posts, Harry saw a glimmer of gold. He gulped. Cho was much closer to it – he’d have to lure her away, then go after it –

He dived, eliciting screams from the crowd. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a blur of blue and black behind and to one side of him – Cho had been watching him, she thought he saw the Snitch – which he did, just not the way he was going –

He pulled up sharply, leaving her behind, and spun the Firebolt end-for-end, flying back up the field towards the Ravenclaw goals – Cho was below him, but the Snitch had flown higher since he’d seen it last – if he kept going, he would get there first – but he had to keep an eye on her, make sure she didn’t try any tricks –

Suddenly, Cho screamed. Harry looked down and saw, far below her, three tall, hooded figures, all in black, draperies billowing around them –

He snatched his wand out of his robes, pointed it at them, and bellowed “*Expecto patronum!*” A silvery shape shot from the end of his wand, but he didn’t have time to see what it was – he was almost to the Snitch, and for a miracle, there was no screaming in his mind, no freezing cold or darkness encroaching on his senses –

His hand closed over the Snitch, and the crowd went crazy.

xXxXx

“I did it!” Harry shouted over the crowd as Remus approached him. “I really did it!”

“So you did,” Remus agreed, hugging the boy briefly. “Well done.” *He won’t like this.* “But I’m afraid I have a confession to make, Harry. Those weren’t dementors you saw.”

Harry frowned. “What?”

“I thought you might do well with a field test of your Patronus. So Sirius and I worked out a spell that would cast a likeness of dementors onto the field. Your Patronus charged down our illusionary dementors quite beautifully, I must say.”

Harry’s expression had gone from confused to shocked to sullenly fuming. “I’ll get you for this,” he muttered.

Remus raised an eyebrow. “And my little dog, too?”

Harry laughed aloud. “Yes, him too.”

“Come on, Harry!” called Ron from the middle of the crowd. “Party with our names on it!”

“Go have a good time,” said Remus, waving Harry away. “You deserve it. Gryffindor’s back in the running.”

“But I will get you for this!” Harry shouted back as he fought his way through the crowd to Ron and Draco, still in his red robes. Remus lifted his hands – *of course you will* – and gave Draco a thumbs-up as he did. Draco returned it with a warm smile, and the red-and-gold-clad mob moved off towards the castle.

He did take that well.

He’s on a high from winning the match. Wait until tomorrow.

I don’t think I want to. Remind me to double-lock the door tonight.

“You didn’t tell him,” said Aletha as Remus returned to the stands.

“Didn’t tell him what?”

“About his Patronus.”

Remus shrugged. “Should I have?”

“He probably wants to know,” said Sirius. “I would.”

“I’ll let him do a clean casting at our next lesson so he can see it, then,” said Remus. “Will that satisfy your royal highnesses?”

“Ooh, touchy,” said Sirius. “And it’s not even close to that time of the month.”

“He was up late correcting papers,” said Danger. “Don’t get too close, he bites.”

“Only those I love.” Remus leaned over and set his mouth gently around Danger’s shoulder.

Aletha shook her head resignedly. “Just when I think someone else in this Pack besides me is finally starting to grow up...”

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 16: Prank and Prophecy (Year 3)

Chapter 16: Prank and Prophecy

Remus pushed open the door. “You wanted to see me, Minerva?”

“Yes.” Professor McGonagall set aside a stack of parchment. “Sit down.”

Should I be worried because I suddenly feel like I’m thirteen again?

Probably.

“What in the world did you think you were doing to my Seeker yesterday?” Professor McGonagall glared at him. “That was incredibly stupid – what if he’d been so startled that he fell? What if he’d fallen prey to the power of suggestion, and reacted to your false dementors the way he would to real ones? What if he had failed to get the Snitch?”

Ah, I think we’ve just come to the point here.

I think you’re right. “You may well be right, Professor,” said Remus diplomatically. “I’m very sorry. I’m afraid I let Sirius talk me into testing the spell during the match itself.”

Oh, sure, blame your friend.

It always worked before. “But the fact is that Harry did none of those things, as I was sure he wouldn’t. He stayed on his broom, his only reaction to the false dementors was to immediately send a very strong Patronus towards them, and he caught the Snitch. Gryffindor is back in the running for the Quidditch Cup, and I solemnly promise not to play any tricks during the final.”

“You had better not, Remus John Lupin.” She looked down her nose at him. “Because if you do, I will personally inform my House that it is your fault we have lost the Cup for the eighth year in a row. I doubt they will take quite so kindly to you after that.”

Ouch. She’s playing for keeps here.

I noticed. My full name and everything. “You have my word, Professor,” said Remus, raising his right hand. “No tricks.”

“Good. And you can stop calling me Professor now, I’m not yet so old that I’ll fall for such an obvious trick as that. Your apology is accepted. I think you owe Harry one as well, though you may feel the necessity’s been obviated by the most recent piece of school gossip.”

Remus winced. “You mean that rumor about my nickname?”

“Indeed. I was able to trace it back to Mr. Potter and company, so I assume this is his revenge.”

“Yes. Not that a story very much like it hasn’t circulated before.”

“Peter Pettigrew was responsible for the original, was he not?”

“Probably. But I think it was Severus who started the most disgusting form of it.”

“The one claiming the nickname derived from the exact nature of your friendship with Sirius? Don’t look so surprised, Remus, I remember it well. I also remember telling Horace Slughorn that if he couldn’t control the members of his House a little better, I’d do it for him. Why do you think that rumor died such a quick death?”

Remus closed his mouth. “I... suppose I never thought about it,” he said frankly. “It didn’t seem quick to *me*, but I suppose it never does to the subject of the gossip. Though now that I think of it, that story did have a remarkably short life.”

“Mostly due to my habit of assigning detentions to anyone caught repeating it.” She smiled smugly, then raised an eyebrow at him. “Isn’t there something you should be saying at this point?”

I do believe I’ve been set up.

I don’t think that’s what she wants you to say.

What did I ever do to deserve this? One nagging woman is bad enough, but two... Remus shut the connection on Danger’s yelp of indignation. “Thank you, Minerva,” he said, standing up. “If there’s ever anything you want me to do for you...”

“I’ll be sure to let you know.” If Minerva had been in her Animagus form at the moment, she would have had one paw on a fish and the other in a pitcher of cream.

Remus exited the office quickly with what dignity was left to him. **It is never a good idea, he mused “aloud,” to work alongside the same people who taught you as a cocky, stupid adolescent.**

What, you mean you’re not still a cocky, stupid adolescent?

I like to think I’ve moved on a little since then. Now Sirius, on the other hand...

xXxXx

Harry waited at the door of the Arithmancy classroom for Hermione to catch up, humming happily to himself. *Hogsmeade this weekend, Hogsmeade this weekend...*

“The homework doesn’t look too bad,” he said, catching two books as they fell out of Hermione’s bag. “Almost like a game, really.”

“It is a game,” said Hermione, taking the books back from him. “Like a maze, only we can’t see the walls. We have to figure out what numbers on the sheet are the next ones in the sequence. Like

figuring out what stones are safe to step on next.”

“Jehovah begins with an I,” intoned Harry, making Hermione laugh.

Their path up to the Tower led them past Professor McGonagall’s office. As they approached, Harry heard his name and slowed down.

“—safer in the castle?” said Professor McGonagall.

Harry froze, then flattened himself against the wall, conscious of Hermione doing the same.

“Of course they’d be safer,” Moony’s voice answered her. “But that’s only if they *stay* in the castle. You know boys, Minerva. How likely is it that a pair of thirteen-year-olds with a proven track record of misbehavior will stay where you put them, when everyone else of their age can go out and have fun?”

“But if you explain to them, surely...”

“They’ll understand,” said Danger, sounding weary. “But only with their minds. Their hearts won’t understand at all, and at this age, they’re still so guided by what they feel and how they look – it’s bad enough, from their point of view, that they have to stay with Remus. How much worse if they’re suddenly forbidden to go at all?”

“Hogsmeade,” Hermione breathed. Harry nodded once to show he’d heard.

Professor McGonagall sighed. “I just don’t like it,” she said. “With this new sighting – you haven’t told them yet?”

“We haven’t told them,” said Moony. “Which isn’t to say they don’t know – they’re astonishingly good at figuring things out, especially things they have no business knowing. Witness the Sorcerer’s Stone in their first year.”

“And everyone will know by tomorrow morning, when the *Prophet* blares it all over the place,” added Danger. “Do you think we should tell them before that?”

“Yes, of course. News like this is always better coming from a known source. And the worst of it is, we’re still no closer to finding out how Pettigrew got onto the grounds in October. Knowing he’s still around is not precisely comforting...”

Hermione’s hand slipped, and the books she was holding dropped to the floor, making a noise Harry was sure could be heard everywhere in the castle, including the Owlery six or seven floors above them. “Sorry,” she squeaked, just before the door of McGonagall’s office opened.

Danger stepped into the hall and looked them up and down, hands on her hips. “Bite your tongue, Remus,” she said over her shoulder. “What you said about them being good at figuring things out.”

“I see how they got that way,” said Professor McGonagall, appearing behind Danger. “Do you encourage this behavior at home, perchance?”

“We do not.” Danger’s glare warned Harry and Hermione that this would not be a good time to bring up the agreements that ruled Pack life. “Your office, Minerva. What do you think?”

“Hmm.” Professor McGonagall regarded them for a moment. “Five points each from Gryffindor for listening at doors,” she said. “Off with you.”

“Just a second,” said Danger, holding up her hand. “Come to the office after dinner tonight, all of you. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Speaking of taking long, I have class next period,” said Moony, appearing behind the two women. “If you’ll excuse me, ladies, I should go and prepare.” He nodded to Professor McGonagall, scent-touched Danger, and closed the door behind them as they returned to the office.

Hermione scooped up her books, looking as ashamed of herself as Harry felt. “We’re really sorry, Professor,” she said, still staring at the floor.

“I know you are,” said Moony, starting off down the hall. Harry and Hermione followed him. “And we should have shut the door, so part of the fault is ours. Five points to Gryffindor for either real contrition or a very good imitation of it.”

Harry pulled his lips in and bit down, determined not to laugh at this, or even smile. Hermione had one hand over her mouth.

“And five more points to Gryffindor for excellent self-control,” Moony added, glancing back at them.

Harry almost lost it, but swallowed his laughter at the last second. Hermione added her other hand.

Moony stopped and turned around, looking at Hermione in mild concern. “Hermione, are you all right?”

Hermione nodded hard.

“You’re not feeling ill, by any chance?”

Harry’s chest was starting to hurt from the effort of holding his laughter in. Hermione shook her head frantically.

“All right,” said Moony, turning away and starting down the hall again. At the base of the stairs, he turned back. “You’re sure?”

Both cubs nodded madly.

“I take my leave, then.” Moony swept them an elegant bow, winked at them at the bottom of it, and turned with a flourish to run lightly up the stairs. Harry counted ten after Moony’s heels had vanished before leaning against the nearest wall and letting his laughter out at last.

“He’s so awful,” said Hermione weakly a few minutes later, sitting on the floor with her books around her, catching her breath. “But he did give us all the points back, and we don’t really deserve it – we shouldn’t have been listening...”

“But we were,” said Harry, picking up his bag again. “And we heard something important.”

“We would have heard it tonight in any case,” Hermione returned. “You know they try not to keep things from us, unless it wouldn’t help us to know it.”

“But that’s the point. They have to decide if it would help us to know it or not.” Harry handed Hermione her last book and started down the hall. “One of these days they’re going to make a mistake, Hermione. They’re not going to tell us something that we actually did need to know. They’re not perfect.”

“Of course they’re not perfect, but they’ve been doing a pretty good job up to now.”

“I never said they weren’t. But it just bothers me that they get to decide what we hear and what we don’t.”

“They’re allowed to do that, Harry. I mean, they are our parents.” Hermione sighed. “Or the closest things we have, anyway. Do you ever think about that?”

“What it would have been like with my real parents?” Harry shrugged. “Sometimes. More often now, since I started Patronus lessons.”

Hermione winced. “That’s right, I’m sorry, I forgot – you hear them. When the dementors come too near.”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I hear other things. Never anything good, though. That’s what dementors do.”

“I know.” Hermione laid her head briefly on his shoulder as they walked. Harry smiled a little and reached around to pull a strand of her hair.

She slapped his hand away. “Watch it. I’ll have claws soon, and then you won’t be able to do that anymore.”

“That’s right, you’re almost ready – you only have the head transformation to go now, right?”

“Right. Of course, that’s the hardest one, but I think I can do it. And then I have to write my final incantation, but I have a month or more to do it, the potion can’t possibly be ready before then. It was nice of Letha to make it for us.”

Harry laughed. “It’s their way of saying they don’t trust any of us with a cauldron, not even you or Draco.”

“Or maybe they’re just trying to save time. Didn’t Padfoot say their potion failed three times before they got it right?”

“Yeah.” Harry thought back. “One ate through the cauldron, one exploded, and one curdled because they couldn’t find Wormtail in time – you have ten minutes to drink it, I think, or it goes bad. I don’t know why they didn’t just drink it without him and make another batch for him.”

“It wouldn’t have been fair,” said Hermione as they arrived at the Fat Lady’s portrait. “Splinters.”

“I think that’s one not-fairness I could live with,” said Harry, climbing through.

“But that’s looking at it from this end,” argued Hermione, following him. “If Wormtail hadn’t been able to change forms, that would have changed everything. Maybe he wouldn’t have been so good of friends with them after that, so he wouldn’t have joined the Order or been a spy. Then your parents would have used somebody else for Secret-Keeper – maybe even Padfoot, like they said they would – and…” She looked around the crowded common room and lowered her voice. “Voldemort might never have found you.”

“How would that be so bad?”

“I’m not saying it would be bad, I’m just saying it would be different. Everything would be different. And we have no way of knowing if it would be better or worse than what we have.”

Harry looked at her sideways. “If you’re telling me to count my blessings…”

She met his eyes. “We do have an awful lot, Harry. More than we would have had almost any other way. I’m not saying it wasn’t terrible that your parents died, but that’s why we have the Pack. So good things can come out of bad things.”

She had a point, but Harry felt that somehow, there was more to it than that.

xXxXx

“Quite honestly, this doesn’t change very much for you,” said Remus to the Pride that night. “We suspected Wormtail might still be around here, and now those suspicions are confirmed. You all know what you should and shouldn’t be doing, and we’re trying to keep your lives as easy as possible. If you can help us by staying within the rules, that would be much appreciated.”

Draco looked like he wanted to mouth off, but Remus caught his eye, and he kept quiet.

Ha. Who says men can’t give the Look?

Well, father to son, yes, but a competent woman can give the Look to anyone.

Who asked you?

“Has there been any news about Lucius Malfoy, sir?” asked Luna.

“No, none at all. If there is, be sure we’ll tell you.”

Odd that she’d ask and not Draco.

He may just not want to, so he asked her to do it for him. It’s happened before.

xXxXx

Harry tossed a bit of parchment into the fire and watched it burn. “So, either they’ve split up, or Lucius is smarter than Wormtail and laying low.”

“Gee, Lucius is smarter than Wormtail,” said Draco sarcastically. “What a genius you are to figure that one out.”

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Meghan.

“What do you think? I’m sick of being a prisoner in the castle, I’m sick of everyone looking at me funny, I’m sick of the whole damned mess! None of this should be happening to me!” He glared around at them. “I’m going upstairs.”

The Pride watched him go. “We’re outside almost every day with Quidditch practice, though,” said Ginny. “And you have Hogsmeade this weekend. Lucky prats,” she added without much real anger. “It’s not as if he’s not allowed to go.”

“I know.” Hermione frowned, watching Draco climb the stairs. “And people haven’t looked at him funny in weeks. Not because of his father, anyway. They’re starting to look at him on his own account. Is it just me, or has he been acting a little odd lately?”

“He is angrier than usual,” said Luna. “It’s like there’s a shadow over him. Maybe we should get him some sun flowers.”

“He’d probably just give them to me,” said Neville, flexing his writing hand. “Hermione, can you check this for me?”

“I mean the kind that glow like the sun,” said Luna. “They grow above the Arctic Circle, in places where the other plants need light when the sun doesn’t come up, so the sun flowers catch it and store it during the summer, and then give it off during the winter. The people there use them for natural headlights on their brooms.”

“You think he just misses sunlight?” asked Ron. “I know I do. Is it *ever* going to stop raining?”

“It’s the beginning of March,” said Meghan. “It always rains a lot at the beginning of March.”

“I know.” Ron sighed gustily. “It’s just depressing.”

Hermione frowned, looking at Neville’s paper. “Neville, can you really get that much water out of one water cress plant?”

“Why, how much did I put?” Neville leaned over to look. “A gallon? No, that’s not right – why did I put that? It’s a quart, not a gallon.” He reached for his wand and tapped the place, erasing the mistaken word, then wrote in the correct one. “There. Is that everything?”

“A couple of spelling mistakes, I’ve marked them, and a sentence I think is missing a word.”

Meghan giggled and began to sing.

You could while away the hours a-conversing with the flowers...

Neville laughed and joined her.

If I only had a brain!

xXxXx

In the dorm, Draco stared out the window at the pounding rain while the fingers of his right hand lost themselves among the lines and angles of runes carved in glass.

I hate this. I hate it all. I just wish it was over.

One way or another, I wish it was over.

xXxXx

“Form?” Harry shook his head. “I didn’t see if it had one. I was too busy trying to get to the Snitch. Did it have one?”

“It did. Why don’t you give it a try and see if you can make it appear now?”

“All right.” Harry pulled out his wand and thought hard about that moment when the entire Gryffindor team had descended on him, all of them shouting incoherently and grinning so widely he was sure their faces had hurt for hours after. “*Expecto patronum!*”

A gleaming silver animal burst from the end of his wand, and Harry didn’t need to think of a happy memory anymore. The smile on his face matched the ones on his teammates’, and the one on Moony’s, as they watched the creature canter around the classroom together.

“*Prongs,*” he whispered, holding out his hand to the silver stag.

xXxXx

The weather finally broke on Friday, improving everyone's mood tremendously. Draco was actually smiling again by the time everyone left for Hogsmeade on Saturday. After walking around the village for a while, browsing at Dervish and Banges a bit, and having lunch at the Three Broomsticks, Remus and the Pride walked up to the Shrieking Shack.

"What does it look like inside, Professor?" asked Neville curiously. Although he and his gran had never formally been let in on the secret of Remus' condition, he'd picked it up by osmosis after hanging around with the Pride for so long, and of course Alice and Frank had already known. Neville was greatly looking forward to the Easter holidays, which he'd be spending with his parents in their new home near Ottery St. Catchpole.

"It's a mess," said Remus frankly. "Torn up, all the furniture destroyed. Probably worse now than it was years ago; since all the predator smells are long gone, it'll be infested with vermin."

"There was furniture?" asked Ron.

"Oh, yes. Old furnishings from the castle, beaten up past use. The idea was for me to have something other than myself to attack. Later, when the others started coming along, we had plenty of things to play with, and on, and around, and under."

Draco rocked on his feet, staring at the Shack. "I want to throw something," he said. "I want to throw something at it."

"Be my guest." Remus bent down and picked up a palm-sized rock, which he handed ceremoniously to Draco. "Here you are."

Draco grinned, wound up, and threw. The rock slammed hard into the side of the Shack with a hollow thud.

"Move over," said Harry, scooping up a rock of his own. His didn't make quite so loud a noise, but it was respectable. Ron's banged off the eaves, making a different sound.

"Amateurs," said Hermione, picking up a smaller rock. "Window, first floor."

She pitched the pebble hard and fast at the tiny window. Glass shattered.

"Make a wish," said Remus, chuckling.

The boys were all staring at Hermione. "I didn't know you could throw like that," said Ron in amazement. "Why don't you play Quidditch?"

"Because I don't like to fly very much."

"I don't want to throw rocks," announced Meghan. "I want to throw something else. Can I get closer, please, Moony – Professor?"

"There's no one here to see you."

Meghan was already through the fence. Several feet from the house, she stopped, scooped up a large handful of mud, and slung it. It hit the wall with a sloppy smack and clung there. Giggling, she ran straight up to the house, picked up another handful of mud, and used it to write her initials on the wall – *MLB* – before erasing them with a third handful. “There,” she said, bouncing back to the fence with a cocky grin on her face. “All done.”

Remus sighed. “Hold still.” He *Scourgified* her hands and cloak, which had gotten splattered. “Your mother would be horrified.”

“That’s why she’s not here,” said Meghan brightly.

“Of course.”

xXxXx

“Hermione.”

“Mmm?”

“Wake up. Please.”

“Colleen?” Hermione rubbed her eyes and sat up. “What’s wrong?”

Colleen brushed back her long, tangled brown hair, looking worried. “It’s my birthday.”

“Many happy returns,” said Hermione, covering a yawn. “Is that a problem?”

“No – but there’s a present here, and I’ve already had them from Mum and Dad, and from my grandparents and my aunts and uncles. And it’s not signed. It just says, ‘From a friend.’”

Hermione was suddenly wide awake. “Like the bracelet you got at Christmas.”

Colleen nodded, running her hand over the carved stone snakes on her wrist. “Just like. The handwriting’s the same, too, I checked it.”

“Are you worried about it?” Hermione slid out of bed, putting her feet into the slippers Danger’d made her. “There wasn’t anything wrong with the bracelet, was there?”

“No – and I’m not really worried – I just...” Colleen looked at the floor. “I want someone else there when I open it,” she confessed quietly. “I thought that would make it... almost like a party. I’m sorry for waking you. I shouldn’t have done it.”

“No,” said Hermione quickly. “No, don’t think that. I’m glad you woke me, really I am. I...” She looked quickly at the clock, then at Parvati and Lavender, still asleep in their beds. “What do you think about an early breakfast in the common room? We’re allowed, as long as we clean up. We’ll make it just like a party, for the two of us.”

Colleen's smile was incredulous and delighted – *and gorgeous. She could be a model. I wonder if she realizes that? The way she walks around, it's as if she thinks she's ugly...*

Dobby brought them croissants and pumpkin juice, and the girls sat by the fire to eat. After a deliciously crumbly interval, Colleen wiped her fingers on her napkin and lifted the lid of the box.

Both girls gasped in delight. A pin in the exact shape of a white lily sat within, every petal and leaf outlined in detail. Colleen lifted it out and stroked it softly. "I love lilies," she murmured. "They're my favorite flower... but how did he know?"

"Look, there's a note!" Hermione caught a slip of parchment as it detached from the underside of the pin and held it out to Colleen.

The other girl shook her head. "Will you read it?" she said, still looking at the pin. "Please?"

"All right." Hermione swallowed to clear her throat. "'Dear Colleen, I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me for being mysterious. Please rest assured, I mean you no harm in the world. I simply think you a fascinating and beautiful girl, and I hope you will accept this token of my esteem as you accepted the bracelet I sent you for Christmas. No obligation attaches to them, and no return is expected for them. I merely hope to be your friend. At this time, for reasons beyond my control, that friendship must be from a distance. Perhaps at some future time, we can meet face-to-face. In hopes of that day, and with wishes for a happy birthday and many more, I sign myself, Your Secret Admirer.'"

Hermione set the parchment down and sighed. "That is so romantic," she said.

"I know." Colleen set the pin back in its box and shut it. "I just wish I had some way to write back to him. He keeps sending me presents, and I don't have any way to say thank you."

"You could ask the house-elves," suggested Hermione. "They know everything that goes on in the castle."

"Oh, but he wants to stay anonymous," Colleen protested. "He's gone to all this trouble, who am I to interfere?"

"They don't have to tell you who he is," Hermione pointed out. "They can take your letter straight to him."

Colleen's smile dawned on her face again. "I'll go start writing right away."

xXxXx

Dear Secret Admirer,

Thank you so much for the beautiful presents. How did you know so perfectly what I would like?

I think, if I'm going to accept your presents, that I need to know at least a little more about you.

Are you a student here at Hogwarts? Where do you come from? What is your family like? I'll tell you about me in exchange, though you already seem to know quite a lot.

I'm a third year Gryffindor, and I come from Bath. My family is magical, though we have Muggle ancestry not far back. All my relatives are Ravenclaws – my dad accused my mum of cheating on him when I was sorted into Gryffindor, and it was only half a joke. I tried to talk the Sorting Hat out of it, but it said that this is where I was best suited to be. I don't know why – I've never felt particularly brave.

I have one sister, three years older than me – Ravenclaw, of course – Maggie Lamb, prefect and nearly top of her year. Between you and me, I can't wait until she leaves. Maybe then the teachers will stop comparing us. Not likely, I know, but I can always dream.

I hope to hear from you soon, and thank you again for the lovely presents. I wear them as often as I can. They make me feel beautiful.

Your friend,

Colleen Lamb

xXxXx

Percy was pacing back and forth in the hallway, muttering to himself, when Ginny tapped him on the elbow. “Relax,” she said, smiling. “They’re your friends, remember? We’re all Gryffindors here, all part of the Combat Club, all on the same side, right?”

Percy shook his head, his face tight. “They’re angry with me,” he said. “I can’t blame them, really. That was very humiliating, losing to Slytherin and Hufflepuff that way.” He refused to use the team names made by conflating the Houses, calling them silly and childish. “Obviously, we just need to practice harder...”

“Percy, don’t you have N.E.W.T.s coming up?”

“Yes, and that’s what makes this doubly difficult, finding enough time to practice around studying and homework and all the other clubs, and my duties as Head Boy...”

“So why don’t you give it up?”

“Give it up?” Percy looked astonished. “Give it up? You mean, quit the Combat Club?”

“Maybe not quit entirely. But let someone else run these last two matches for Gryffindor.”

Percy’s eyebrows drew in. “Tell me the truth, Ginny,” he said, sitting down with a sigh. “Do they hate me?”

“No, they don’t hate you,” said Ginny, hugging her brother. This was a side of him hardly anyone ever got to see. Only she and their mother, as far as she knew, were privy to its secrets. “Percy,

would you think any worse of Professor McGonagall if she couldn't brew a complicated potion?"

"No, of course not. She teaches Transfiguration, not Potions."

"What about Professor Flitwick, if he couldn't tell you all about the constellations?"

"That's Professor Sinistra's job."

"Exactly."

"Exactly?"

How can someone so smart be so dumb? "Percy, leading the Combat Club isn't your job. Not really. You don't like it, and you're not good at it. There's no shame in giving it up to someone else who'd like it more and be better at it."

Percy's face set into the lines of his public mask. "Weasleys are not quitters," he said stiffly. "We finish what we start."

"Weasleys are also not stupid," said Ginny pointedly. "What they are is brave. Brave enough to admit they were wrong about things. You thought you could lead the Combat Club, and you were wrong." *I hate doing it this way, but it's time to let the Snitch out of my sleeve.* "I nearly got killed because you couldn't admit you were wrong."

Percy paled and shut his eyes. Ginny swallowed hard against guilt. She knew what she'd just done – reawakened memories of the Chamber of Secrets, which Percy had tried so hard to forget.

But he succeeded too well. He forgot everything he learned. He was all right over the summer, and for a little while at school, but becoming Head Boy put him right back into his old habits. This may be mean, but I think he really needs it...

Percy opened his eyes. "Maybe..." He coughed. "Maybe you're right."

Ginny hugged him again. "Thank you." *Now if we can just get you to say that without it sounding like it's being pulled out of you by the Cruciatus...*

"I'll go and have a word with Greene, then. He'd do a good job with the group, don't you think?"

Ginny nodded brightly and watched her brother walk into the room.

Another ten years, and he might even pass for a human.

xXxXx

After stalling on it for three solid weeks, Hermione finally managed to transform her head into that of a cat in the first week of April, and Remus pronounced her ready to take the Animagus potion as soon as it was finished. Harry would have been jealous, except that he was just too busy.

Wood had eased up about Quidditch practice to the tune of one night a week, and Harry's Patronus at the match had released him from those lessons, but one of those nights was devoted to Combat Club practice, and the other to dealing with his ever increasing amounts of homework. He was looking forward to the Easter holidays – he'd still have to do work, but there wouldn't be anyone adding to the pile while he was doing it.

Everything else in his life was going splendidly. The last Combat Club match had been a complete turnaround from the one before it. With David Greene in charge for Gryffindor and Cedric Diggory for Hufflepuff (since they were out of the running for the Cup, he had time to do this instead), the Gryfflepuffs played very well indeed, taking six of the seven designated "hills," holding four of them against all attacks, and capturing the one the Slytherclaws had originally taken. Their win had been not only assured, but wonderful. Even Percy Weasley, a bandage around one arm, had been seen to smile during the post-fight analysis.

So now we just need to win the Quidditch Cup...

xXxXx

Sirius knocked on Professor McGonagall's door, swallowing nervously. "I'm a grown man," he muttered. "An Auror in good standing, and a husband and father. I don't need to be nervous about this."

"Come in!"

"All right, maybe I do." He opened the door. "Good morning, Minerva."

"Sirius. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" Her tone was only a very little bit sarcastic.

"I wanted to bring you this." Sirius laid his present on her desk. "Since I know you're a fan."

Minerva went pale and snatched the hardbound copy of *Knowledge and Wisdom* off the desk. "How did you know about this?" she demanded.

Sirius swallowed again. "Look inside the front cover," he said lightly.

Minerva gave him a hard look, then flipped it open. Sirius turned his eyes out the window, knowing what she would see there. He'd thought long and hard about what to write.

To Minerva, the best Deputy Headmistress Hogwarts has ever known.

With thanks for all the detentions – they taught me about suffering first-hand.

I couldn't have done it without you.

"Valentina Jett"

"Detentions?" It was a harsh whisper. "This is your handwriting, Sirius Black, don't you try to

deny it.”

“I won’t. It’s mine. But it’s also Valentina Jett’s. See...”

Words failed him as he noticed what Minerva had in her hand. *I think I’m about to find out what it feels like to be cursed into the next century. So long, everyone, it was great knowing you...*

“Yes, I do see,” she said menacingly. “And I think I’ll show you what I think of you, young man. Impersonating a woman – writing romance novels – shame on you, Mr. Black. Shame on you.”

Her spell hit him full in the face.

xXxXx

Aletha was in the kitchen when she heard the Floo go off. “So, how did it go?” she called.

“I don’t know.” Sirius sounded bemused. “She hit me with a spell and told me to go home. At least it didn’t hurt. I don’t feel any different – do I look any different?”

Aletha looked around the corner. Her eyes widened until she was sure they’d fall out. “Oh. My. Oh my goodness. Oh my Lord.” Further words failed her, as she surrendered to a brief wave of laughter. “That is just... hold still,” she said when she could talk again. “Stand right there.”

“What?” Sirius demanded as she ran to get the camera.

“Remus and Danger will want to see this!” Aletha called over her shoulder. “Just hold still!”

She was planning to fall apart laughing again after she snapped the pictures. It wasn’t every day that Sirius came home in full drag-queen makeup.

xXxXx

Harry and Hermione returned from their last Arithmancy class before the Easter holidays to find Ron sitting alone at the Pride’s usual table. “Where is everyone?” Harry asked, dropping into a chair.

“Around. Ginny and Luna have class, Neville’s off with Meghan, and Draco’s up in the dorm, reading, I think.”

“How was Divination?” asked Hermione, sitting down on his other side.

“Trelawney,” said Ron with deep meaning in his voice, “is a fruitcake.”

“What’s she done now?” asked Harry.

“She asked me to stay after to help her tidy up. There really wasn’t anything to tidy up – we’ve been doing palmistry since term started, what was I supposed to do, dust people’s hands on the

way out? She asked me to get some books down off a shelf, but it turned out what she really wanted was to find out if you or Draco have been feeling weird lately. She said she's been feeling vibrations about you, that danger draws ever nearer to you."

Ron had his hand flung against his brow, his eyes half-shut, and was declaiming in a passionate, albeit wobbly, tone. Harry wondered if he should tell his friend that half the common room was watching him.

"Well, of course Danger draws ever nearer to them," said Hermione in a reasonable tone. "What should she do, leave them alone?"

Harry snickered.

"I don't think that's what she meant," said Ron in his normal voice, taking his hand away. Several first years who had been watching made disappointed noises. "Sod off," he snapped at them. Hermione glared at him.

"So Professor Trelawney thinks we're going to die," said Harry. "Nothing new there."

"Yeah, but then she went really weird. Her eyes rolled up, her mouth went open, and she started making noises like Crookshanks hacking up a hairball."

"Crookshanks does not hack up hairballs," said Hermione.

"Then what was that on my bed last week?"

"He's marking your bed as his territory. It means he likes you."

"Most animals piss on things to mark them as their territory," Ron retorted. "I don't want your cat pissing on me, or my bed, or anything of mine."

"Did she say anything?" asked Harry, hoping to avert another squabble between his friend and his sister.

"Who?"

"Professor Trelawney. When she went all weird on you."

Ron nodded. "She said a load of stuff, but I don't remember half of it. I think she was just trying to scare me, or freak me out."

"Maybe," said Hermione slowly. "Maybe not. You were wearing your pendants, weren't you, Ron?"

"Why wouldn't I have been?"

"I have an idea. Do either of you have anything you have to do tonight?"

“Not for an hour at least,” said Harry.

“Me neither,” agreed Ron. “Why?”

“Because I want to try something. But we need a private place.”

Harry looked at the wall by the fireplace.

“Good idea,” said Ron, and got up to walk over there nonchalantly, leaning against the wall and staring into the fire. Harry saw his friend’s lips move, and then, suddenly, he wasn’t there anymore...

No, that’s just the stealth mode working. Harry blinked a couple of times, and saw Ron climbing into the chute, with Hermione standing behind him, ready to come down after him. He set his school bag on the floor and followed them.

“It’s something Danger told me once,” said Hermione when they were sitting in the library together. “About the pendants, when she was telling me all the different things they do, the gifts from the different Founders. One of the Ravenclaw gifts is that they let us share memories. Kind of like a Pensieve.”

“A what?” asked Ron.

“It’s a stone basin,” explained Hermione, “and you put thoughts in it. You can take thoughts out of your mind, you know, thoughts and memories. You can put them in a Pensieve and let them mix around, and sometimes they come up with things you wouldn’t have on your own, or not right away. Or you can go back to a moment you experienced before, and look at it again to see if you missed something.”

“Weird,” said Ron.

“See if you missed something?” asked Harry. “You mean, even if you don’t remember it yourself?”

“Exactly.” Hermione beamed. “Because our pendants work a little like that, I thought we could go inside Ron’s memory and see what Professor Trelawney said.”

“Go inside my memory?” Ron stared at Hermione. “Won’t that hurt?”

“No, it doesn’t hurt. It’s like watching a movie, except we’ll be in the scene. We don’t hear your thoughts or anything, I don’t think. We just see what happened.”

“Why are you so interested in this?” asked Harry.

Hermione twisted a lock of her hair. “I don’t know, really... just a feeling. And something I found out the other day. With all you and Neville have been telling us about Professor Trelawney, Ron, I wanted to find out more about her. And they keep the minutes from old staff meetings in the

library, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“Now you do. I found the minutes from a meeting back before any of us were born, where Professor Dumbledore suggested removing Divination from the Hogwarts curriculum. A couple of the other professors convinced him to interview one more candidate for the position, and he agreed. By the next month, he had decided to keep Divination, *and* he’d hired the person he’d interviewed.”

“Who did he interview?” asked Ron. “Trelawney?”

Hermione nodded. “Something must have happened,” she said certainly. “For Professor Dumbledore to change his mind so fast, and so completely, and about someone like Professor Trelawney – I mean, he’s not stupid...”

“Maybe he just feels sorry for her,” suggested Harry. “Because she obviously never made a real prophecy in her life.”

“Or maybe she does make real prophecies sometimes,” said Hermione. “Maybe she made one during their interview, and Professor Dumbledore decided he wanted to keep her at Hogwarts so she’d be safe, and to make sure that if she ever made another one, he’d know about it instead of Voldemort.”

Ron gulped. “I wish you wouldn’t do that,” he said.

Harry rolled his eyes. “I wish you wouldn’t do *that*,” he said. “It’s just a name, Ron. A bunch of letters all put together in a funny way. He screwed around with the name his mum gave him and came up with that. What’s so awful about it?”

Ron shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “It just is. And I think you’re looking at this too hard, Hermione. So he decided to keep Divination – maybe he just changed his mind. People do that.”

“There’s something else, though,” said Hermione. “I told you this was before we were born, but I didn’t tell you when. It isn’t quite right, even. You were born, Ron, it was the summer of that year. But Harry wasn’t born yet. Nor was I, but that’s not important – do you see what I’m getting at?”

“No,” said Harry, then stopped. “Wait. Yes. I think so... yes. I do see.” He was tempted to look around for a dementor – the room seemed suddenly darker, and colder, much colder...

““The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches,”” whispered Hermione. ““Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...””

“No way,” said Ron incredulously. “No way – you think *Trelawney* made that prophecy? That old fraud? She couldn’t prophesy a dragon egg would hatch a dragon and be right!”

“It could be, Ron,” said Harry, forcing himself back to calm. “The timing’s right, it could have

been her.” Knowing this didn’t change anything, he told himself. He’d already known about the prophecy, or part of it, at least – there was more to it, he remembered, more that the Pack-parents weren’t telling him yet, and that wasn’t fair...

But knowing, or suspecting, who had made the prophecy wouldn’t make any difference.

Unless Hermione’s right, and this is another real prophecy Ron saw her make...

“Ron, can we see that memory?” he asked, making up his mind.

“Sure, if you want – I wouldn’t mind seeing what she really said anyway...” Ron pulled out his chain. “You’re sure you won’t see inside my head?” he asked Hermione.

“I think so. Like I said, it’ll be as though we were inside a movie. We’ll see you and Trelawney, but you won’t see us.”

Harry felt another cold chill. He had been inside another person’s memory precisely once, and only later had he found out who that person had been, or rather, had become.

But this is Ron, not Tom Riddle. My friend, not my enemy.

“Harry?”

He looked up. Ron was holding out his chain. “You in?”

Harry took the chain and slid it over his head. “Let’s do it,” he said.

“Fair enough,” said Ron. He looked at Hermione. “How?”

“Get your wand out,” said Hermione. “Touch it to the pendants, think hard about that moment with Trelawney, and say, ‘*Cadimus in memoriam.*’ I think that’s all you have to do.”

Ron drew his wand and set its tip against the pendants, his brow wrinkled up in thought. “Say it again?” he asked without looking away.

“Cadimus in memoriam.”

“Cadimus in memoriam,” Ron repeated carefully.

They had time for two breaths. Then, without warning, the spell took effect. Harry felt himself lifted out of the chair where he sat with a jerk a bit like a Portkey’s, but gentler and much less centralized. Then he was falling through darkness. It was almost like the effects of a dementor, except that he wasn’t at all afraid; he felt safe here, not embraced or coddled, but there was a sense that whatever was around him would die rather than let him come to harm...

He landed softly on his feet in a small, cluttered, circular room, dimly lit with a reddish light, filled with small round tables and chintz-covered chairs, and pervaded – he sneezed – by a sickly

sweet odor.

“I think she burns incense,” said Ron beside him. “Stinks, doesn’t it?”

“Where do you want these, Professor?” said Ron wearily – from across the room. Harry stared, first at the boy at his side, then at the one across the room. How could Ron be in two places at once?

“It’s all right,” Hermione said from his other side. “That’s Ron when this memory happened.”

Ron was staring at himself, fascinated. “I’m taller than I thought I was,” he said.

“I think it’s just Professor Trelawney,” said Hermione. “She could make anybody look tall.”

Harry agreed. Professor Trelawney was a small, thin witch, draped in shawls and beads, wearing enormous glasses which magnified her eyes tremendously. Currently, she was walking beside the Ron of memory, her hands fluttering.

“Do be careful with those, my dear, please – there on the table is fine – thank you for getting them down for me, you’re a fine young man, really you are – your friend Harry is very lucky to have you around...”

“Here we go,” said the real Ron, sitting down in one of the armchairs.

“How is he, by the way?” Professor Trelawney peered at the memory Ron. “I never have quite got over my disappointment that he chose not to study Divination – it would have been so lovely to have met him... before...” Her lips quivered. “Such a handsome young man, so brave in the face of such danger, drawing ever nearer to him... if I could only warn him... But no matter. How is he?”

“He’s fine,” said memory-Ron, setting down the stack of books he’d been carrying. “Just fine. But he’s probably waiting for me, I should go—” He grabbed his bag and made for the hole in the floor which was the exit, but Professor Trelawney detained him with a hand on his arm.

“And what of young Draco Black? How is he holding up against the dreadful strain? I have seen him, and his father, many times in my orb as I gazed within it – the vibrations around them are unusually strong – tell me, does he by any chance have an orb of his own? A ball of glass or crystal, into which he gazes for inspiration and calm?”

“Uh – yeah,” said memory-Ron, looking nonplussed. “His cousin gave him something like that for Christmas. I think it’s to help him study.”

Professor Trelawney blinked. “Study?” she repeated. “To help him study? My dear boy, mystic vibrations cannot be harnessed for such a mundane function as to assist in study! You must tell him to come to me immediately, before he attempts to crystal-gaze again! He could severely injure himself if he persists in gazing without proper instruction!”

“I’ll tell him, Professor,” said memory-Ron, now obviously disturbed. “But I really have to go

now, I have... er... another class..."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Professor Trelawney, seating herself in her armchair and fussing with her shawl. "Make sure to pass on my messages, now..."

And then it happened. A loud rasping noise filled the air. Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up, Hermione gulped audibly, and even Ron, who had seen this before, leaned forward in his chair, fascinated. The Ron of memory froze, one foot on the ladder, as a slack-jawed Professor Trelawney began to speak.

"The impossible will happen."

"Er... sorry?" said memory-Ron, staring at Professor Trelawney. Her eyes had rolled back in her head, her breathing was loud and harsh.

"On the night of the willing return to the long-abandoned prison of youth, the impossible will happen, three times over... souls shall join against the darkness, the faithful three will ride again, and five shall spill their blood upon the ground... revenge and mercy wreak havoc alike, as an ancient lie becomes truth... on that night... the impossible... shall... come... to... pass..."

Memory-Ron's jaw was hanging as loose as Professor Trelawney's. He summed up Harry's feelings perfectly with one word.

"What?"

Professor Trelawney blinked very rapidly and coughed several times. "I'm sorry?" she croaked, and her eyes went wide at the sound of her voice. "Mercy me, what a dreadful sound – I must have a cup of tea to wet my throat – would you like one?"

"Er... no thanks," said memory-Ron, still staring at her. "I – I have to go. Right now." He climbed down the ladder as rapidly as he could.

"I think that's all we need to see," said Hermione. "Ron? It's *Remigribus*. Point it up," she added, nodding to his wand.

Ron aimed his wand at the ceiling. "*Remigribus!*"

They were falling in reverse, soaring upwards, it was like riding a broom except there was no broom –

Brilliant figure of speech, that. I could write books like Padfoot, make loads of money off them.

Harry shook his head. He was sitting in an armchair in the library of the Hogwarts Den, with Ron and Hermione on either side of him. "Wow," he said.

"Yeah," Ron agreed. "I didn't remember she said all that. Hermione, can you write it down for us?"

“Already on it.” Hermione was at the desk in the corner of the room, scribbling. “Revenge and mercy,” she muttered. “Havoc alike... ancient lie becomes truth... impossible shall come to pass. There.” She picked up a sheet of parchment and blew on it. “Do you think it’s meant for us?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Dunno,” said Ron. “Are prophecies meant for certain people?”

“Well, it depends on who it’s about. So I suppose we should try to figure that out, if we can.”

“And maybe what it’s about,” said Harry, coming to look over Hermione’s shoulder. “I didn’t like that part about five spilling their blood on the ground or revenge and mercy... what was it again?”

“Wreak havoc alike,” Hermione recited. “And you’re right, it doesn’t sound at all good.”

“Eight heads are better than three,” said Ron, already halfway out the door. “Let’s get everyone else in on this.”

“Good idea.” Hermione followed him.

Alone for a moment, Harry looked around the room. “I hate prophecies,” he said to no one in particular. “I really do.”

Then he headed for the red bedroom, to get started on deciphering this latest piece of his future.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 17: Global Concerns (Year 3)

Chapter 17: Global Concerns

“Dad, I think our house needs a name.”

Gerald Lovegood looked up from the storyboard for the May issue of *The Quibbler*. “Do you, now? What brought this on?”

“The Pack has the Den, and the Weasleys have the Burrow.” Luna perched on the arm of a chair. “And now the Longbottoms have Fireflower House.” Neville never seemed to tire of welcoming his friends to his home. A smile was getting to be a permanent part of his expression. “I think we ought to have a name for our house too.”

“Well, what would you suggest, sweetheart?”

“It ought to be something special. Something that shows what kind of people we are. Do you remember how Mum used to laugh when you said you were ready in case people from outer space ever came to visit us?”

Gerald smiled reminiscently. “She laughed, yes, but she helped me get ready too. But maybe that was just because she loved me... I never could figure it out.”

“Would you still be ready now?”

“I’d need someone else to help me set out the signs and the landing lights. Even with magic, it’s a two-person job. But yes, as long as I had help, I could be ready within an hour or two.” He looked over at his daughter. “Why do you ask?”

“You want them to come land here, don’t you?”

“Very much.” Gerald nodded firmly. “It would validate several theories of mine.”

“I’d like it too. And when I become an Animagus and learn to fly, I’ll need a place to land.”

“You know you can always land here, darling. Even when you’re all grown up and married to Draco.”

Luna giggled. “I thought we could call our house the Landing Zone.”

“What a wonderful idea! The Landing Zone... why didn’t I ever think of that?” Gerald beamed. “I’ll get the forms from the Ministry first thing tomorrow. Thank you, love.”

“You’re welcome.” Luna hugged her father. “Daddy, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Do boys always act strangely when they’re thirteen?”

“Always. Why?”

“Draco’s been odd ever since Christmas. It comes and goes, but it’s always there at least a little. He looks... darker than usual. Like I was seeing him through sunglasses. Sometimes he’s just a little dark, but sometimes I can barely even see him.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Gerald sighed. “Yes, boys often feel a little dark at this age, and Draco’s likely to feel it more than most, with his past, and what’s been happening recently. I’d imagine he feels overshadowed by his father. That’s probably what you’re seeing – you know you see things that other people don’t, or only see with magic.”

Luna nodded. “There’s a funny kind of aura all around Mr. Moony and Mrs. Danger,” she said. “Shaped like their Animagus forms. Mr. Padfoot and Mrs. Letha, too, and Professor McGonagall. Do you think we’ll get that when we become Animagi?”

“I wouldn’t wonder.” Gerald regarded his daughter tenderly. “Luna, love, does it ever get tiresome to see all these things? Because if you don’t like it, we’ll try to find a way to make it stop, as soon as we can. I don’t want you burdened.”

“No, I don’t mind it. I rather like it.”

“All right, then, no more need be said. Now why don’t we see about some lunch?”

xXxXx

Draco sat under a tree in the Weasleys’ orchard, listening with half an ear to the yells and cheers of the game of pick-up Quidditch in progress. Normally, he would have been in there playing, but he just didn’t feel like it today.

I haven’t felt like flying for a while. I know I won’t play the final match, so it doesn’t matter so much if I’m in training or not. I still go to practice, but I spend most of the time on the bench. Suits me fine.

He picked up a nearby rock and rolled it between his palms. Idly, he imagined it growing, becoming larger and heavier, smoother and glossier, with deeply engraved lines which held messages and stories, if he only knew how to read them...

Suddenly dissatisfied with everything around him, he hurled the rock away and watched it bounce off a tree several yards from him.

What am I even doing out here? I have work to do. I’d better get back to it.

He stood up to head back to the Den.

Den. Stupid name, really. Makes it sound like a hole in the ground. Not quite as stupid as the Burrow, though...

“Oh, Draco,” said a voice above him. He looked up. Fred was lying full-length on his broom a few feet over his head. “Knut for your thoughts.”

Draco glared at him. “Bugger off.”

“That’s polite,” said George, swooping around the nearest tree and pulling up expertly. “It was a perfectly civil question.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t answer questions from weasels, no matter how polite they are.”

“You don’t answer questions from what?” said Fred, sitting up in indignation.

“Weasels. That’s all you are, both of you. Short, thick, freckly weasels.” Draco was a little surprised by the venom behind the words, but it was obscurely satisfying to watch the identical faces go through the process of shock, offense, and determination.

Wait a second. Determination?

“You know, I think you need to learn some manners,” said George from his broom, dropping to the ground.

“And I think I know how we can teach you those manners,” said Fred, doing likewise on Draco’s other side.

“See, it takes one to know one.”

“Or one to know two, in this case.”

“So if we’re weasels, you know what that makes you?”

“I know what it makes him.” Fred grinned. “After you, George.”

“No, after you, Fred.”

“If you insist.”

Draco realized, belatedly, that he really should have got his wand out while they were talking. He grabbed for it now, but it was too late.

The world spun, shrank, and went a funny color, and for a second or two, he itched like crazy. He’d felt similar to this before – in the basement of the Den, when he’d been ten years old...

Oh, hell.

He wasn't a fox, he knew that much. His shape was all wrong. He was long and lithe, with short legs and a thick tail. He twitched his nose, and saw it move. His face must be awfully long and pointed for that to happen.

“So now what do we do with him?” said one of the twins over his head.

“Don't know. We'll think of something, I'm sure.”

The ground rumbled under Draco's feet. He squeaked in alarm, then realized it was just people coming. Lots of people.

“What's this?” said Ron's voice, and Draco turned to see the red-haired giant pointing down at him.

Grand. Not only did they turn me into something, but now the entire Pride's here to see it. His only comfort was that Luna wasn't there – and it's not exactly a comfort, because she might have been able to see through this and shame the twins into turning me back...

Draco tried to run, but Fred Summoned him. “Nothing,” he said with what was probably a winning smile from the human point of view, but looked positively demonic to Draco.

“Looks like a white ferret,” said Harry.

“It is a white ferret,” said George.

“Then why did you say it was nothing?” asked Ginny.

“We meant, nothing important,” said Fred patronizingly. Draco writhed in his hand, trying to get away, then had a brainstorm. Squirming to get himself into the proper position, he bit down hard.

“OWW!”

Fred dropped him, and Draco took off running again, only to be Summoned by George this time. He was ready to repeat his performance, but George seemed to have learned from his twin's mistake and held him at wandpoint, dangling in midair, legs and tail flopping about. “That was very naughty of you,” he said. “I think we need to teach you a lesson.”

Draco was irresistibly reminded of his dream over Christmas as George bounced him up and down. *Didn't I just leave this party?* To add to his misery, the Pride was laughing and clapping. They obviously had no idea who he was. *And I think I'd rather have it that way...*

Meghan used a wanded healing spell on Fred's hand once she'd cleaned the bite out, and the twins led a procession back to the Burrow, tossing Draco between them with their wands. Three-quarters of the way there, Harry said, “Where's Draco got to?”

“Oh, he's around,” said George. “Somewhere.”

“We saw him back at the orchard,” added Fred.

“All right.”

And you call yourself my brother.

But Draco refused to try to attract attention – this was humiliating enough without begging for help. If he could just get away from the twins, he could get home and make himself understood to one of the Pack-parents, get turned back, and this would all be over with.

He’d reckoned without Mr. Weasley. The twins’ father was tinkering with a toaster in the front yard of the Burrow, and looked up as the procession approached. “Hi, Dad,” chorused Fred, George, Ron, and Ginny, with the rest of the group chiming in, “Hi, Mr. Weasley.”

“Hello, all. Fred, George, just a moment. What’s that you’ve got?”

“Ferret,” said Fred.

“I can see that. Where did you find it?”

“Orchard,” said George.

“And was it a ferret when you found it?”

The twins glanced at each other, looking suddenly nervous.

“That’s what I thought.” Mr. Weasley pointed his wand at Draco.

This is going to be awkward. Draco managed, at the last second, to get his feet under him and land more or less upright, dropping to one knee, but he knew he still looked a right idiot, with his hair all over the place, his clothes in disarray, and his face probably bright red by now.

I just need something good to say. Something really cutting, something even the twins can’t miss.

And then, suddenly, he had it. It wouldn’t be so much what he said, but the way he said it. Style was everything.

He stood up and brushed himself off. “Mr. Weasley,” he said in his politest tone. “May I please kill your sons?”

Mr. Weasley looked consideringly at the twins. “Well,” he said slowly, “since we seem to have a spare...”

The twins exchanged panicked looks and took off running. The Pride burst into laughter.

“No,” finished Mr. Weasley, smiling. “But if you’d care to get them back for this, I can’t say I’d mind.”

“Thank you. I’ll do that.” Draco felt a brief flare of triumph, but it was quickly drowned by a flood of humiliation. The Pride’s laughter was dying down, replaced by uncomfortable looks and shuffling feet.

I can’t believe they saw that. All of them. And they laughed... they thought it was funny...

“I’m really sorry, Draco,” said Hermione earnestly. “We didn’t know it was you.”

Draco forced a smile. “It’s all right. You couldn’t know.”

“We shouldn’t’ve laughed,” said Harry. “It wouldn’t even be funny if it was an animal, because then it would just be mean. We’ll help you get back at them if you want.”

The smile felt stiff on his face. “Thanks. I might take you up on that.” The words came out woodenly, as if he’d never met these people before and didn’t know them. “Actually, I was just heading home. A lot of work to do.” He suddenly couldn’t stand the thought of walking back to the Den with everyone’s eyes on him. “Mr. Weasley, can I use your Floo?”

“Of course. You know where it is.” Mr. Weasley was looking at him with concern in his face. “Are you all right, Draco? Not hurt anywhere?”

Nowhere but my pride. “I’m fine, sir. Thank you.” Quickly, Draco ducked inside. Mrs. Weasley turned to him, smiling, but stopped, looking surprised, when she saw him. He didn’t bother to wonder why, just taking advantage of her silence to cross the room, take some Floo powder from the flowerpot, and toss it into the fire. “The Marauders’ Den!”

The music room was deserted, as was the kitchen, the front hall, and the stairway. He made it all the way up to the boys’ bedroom without a single person seeing him, and shut the door firmly behind him before throwing himself down on his bed, seething, burrowing his head into his pillow.

I hate them. I hate them. I hate them. It was an easy mantra to chant silently, over and over, working itself into the rhythm of his heartbeat and his breathing. He sat up, lifted the globe from where it rested on the nightstand, and stared into it. His eyes drifted half-shut as he felt his pulse throbbing against the glass, inside his hands.

I have to get them back. Really get them back, no silly playing around. I’ll make them pay for this.

What’s something they care about a lot? Something I could get at, mess up, destroy even?

One possibility came immediately to mind. The twins had talked for years about having their own joke shop someday, developing their own line of trick sweets and prank-related items. Their work was probably the source of most of the explosions heard in the Burrow on a daily basis when they were home, and the ones in Gryffindor Tower when they were at school.

What if I could find their notes? All the information they’ve collected, on everything they’ve ever done? Bet they’d make a lovely bonfire. He grinned, fingers tracing the familiar lines of the runes. *I’ll get Ron and Ginny to work out what they’ve done to their room, Hermione to research how to*

get around it, and Harry to help me with the actual work. And then I can laugh at them when everything they've worked for goes up in flames...

Vaguely, he heard the Floo go off downstairs.

They'll be sorry then. They'll be really sorry. But it'll be too late. I'll stand beside that fire, I'll look them in the eye, and I'll tell them, this is why you don't ever mess with a...

Someone knocked on his door.

His concentration broken, Draco hastily set the globe aside. "Come in!"

Luna opened the door. "You're angry," she said, looking at him. "I'll come back later."

"No, don't go," said Draco, standing up hastily. "Did you want something?"

"Just to see you. What happened?"

"Nothing."

"It doesn't look like nothing. The shadow is very dark."

"What?"

"You have a shadow all around you," Luna elaborated. "It gets lighter and darker depending on your mood. And it's very, very dark right now. I can hardly see the real you inside it."

Something in her matter-of-fact tone pierced Draco's mood. His anger drained away.

What was I thinking? They embarrassed me, but that was all. They didn't hurt me, they didn't take anything from me, and they didn't do it to be mean. They did it for fun. Hell, if I'd been in a better mood, I might have thought it was fun.

Burning their notes would be a major overreaction. Not to mention the trouble I'd be in for destroying other people's things. That was out of line.

"It's much lighter now," Luna remarked. "You look almost normal."

Draco smiled. "I feel a lot better too," he said. "I think I need to do something different. Would you like to play together?"

"Yes, very much. Thank you."

"No, thank you." Draco crossed the room and offered Luna his arm. "My lady."

She took it with her sweet smile, and they descended the stairs together, headed for the music room.

xXxXx

“Moony, can I talk to you?”

“Of course, Harry. What’s on your mind?”

“The prophecy you told me last summer,” said Harry. “Who made it?”

It wasn’t quite the last thing Remus had expected, but it was fairly low on the list. He set aside his quill and turned to face Harry. “Why do you ask?”

“I... just want to know.”

“As do I.”

Harry looked out the window. “Ron heard Professor Trelawney say something that might have been a real prophecy,” he said. “And Hermione went back to old school records and found out she was hired right before I was born. Was it because she made that prophecy, and Dumbledore wanted to keep her safe?”

Remus made a mental sound of amazement and exasperation. **It’s official. They’re too smart for their own good.**

What, you didn’t know that?

I knew. I was just in denial. “Yes.”

Harry sighed, as if hearing news that was expected but still bad. “Hermione will be happy,” he said. “She was convinced she was right. Ron was convinced she was bonkers.”

“So Ron won’t be happy.”

Harry shrugged. “Can’t have everything.” He took a scroll out of his pocket. “Hermione wrote it down for us.”

“How, if she didn’t hear it?”

“She heard it.”

“You said Ron heard it.”

Harry explained about traveling into Ron’s memory. Remus vacillated for a moment between being proud and being stern, and went with the former. “But in the future, it might be a good idea to do untested magic somewhere safe,” he said.

“We were safe,” Harry protested. “We were...” He stopped.

“Yes?”

“Somewhere safe,” Harry finished lamely.

“Somewhere safe. You’re sure.”

“We’re sure. The Map said so.”

“The Map said so? Harry, we made the Map. There’s no place on there that we don’t know about. Where is it?”

“I think this is one. Wait here.” Harry took off running before Remus could say anything, and returned in under a minute, panting and flushed, with the Map. “Watch,” he said, handing it to Remus and activating it. “Map, what happens if I say...” He leaned in and whispered something to the Map. “...to the wall near the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room?”

A hole opens in the wall, exposing a stone chute, the Map printed. This chute leads to an area of the school that has been forgotten for centuries, until you and your friends, Harry Potter, rediscovered it in your first year.

“Oh, so you’ve been using it since your first year,” said Remus.

“Traitor,” Harry muttered under his breath. “Is it safe for us to go there?” he added in a normal tone.

Perfectly safe. And I am no traitor. I merely respond to the wishes of the person or people holding me.

Remus smiled. “Did your creators know about this area of the school?” he asked, just in case James or Sirius, or Peter, had been holding out on him.

They did not.

“Then how do you know about it?”

One of my creators was a blood Heir of one of the Founders of the school. Through him, I have access to knowledge about the school that he did not, on his own, possess.

For one second, the world seemed to slow. Remus could see and feel everything around him with perfect clarity – the sunlight coming in through the window, the breeze on his skin, the parchment in his hands – but only one thought occupied his mind.

One of the Map’s creators.

One of us.

“One of you was an Heir?” said Harry in awed tones as time resumed its normal flow. “Why

didn't you ever tell us?"

"Harry, we didn't know. Not until just now." Remus shook his head, staring out the window. "Go put the Map away. Turn it off first."

Sirius, was his first thought. It has to be Sirius, as the Heir of Ravenclaw. That would account for Meghan's talent.

But what if it's not? What if it was James? If it was – that means –

Harry poked his head back into the room. "Should I tell the others about this?"

"No," said Remus emphatically, making up his mind. "Absolutely not. We don't know nearly enough, and this will only lead to wild speculation. Let it be our secret for now, until we learn more. All right?"

"Fine by me." Harry's head withdrew.

Remus put his head down on his desk, then picked it up again as he felt ink adhere to his forehead.

Everything was going so well... why do we have to have complications now?

Because he had a horrible suspicion he knew which of the Marauders had been an Heir, and which Founder he'd been Heir to.

James.

James would have made a perfect Heir of Gryffindor. He was Gryffindor House personified – all the strengths, all the weaknesses – hell, when we go upstairs for the boys' birthdays, Paul Gryffindor even acts like James used to. It has to have been James.

And Gryffindor said that his current Heir had his powers bound as a baby by his father, but that his father was dead now, so there was no one to take the bindings off...

He stared out the window.

So we're raising the Heir of Ravenclaw, friends with the Heirs of Hufflepuff, and now it's possible we also have the Heir of Gryffindor here.

Why don't we just move into the castle and be done with it?

Sirius walked into the room, humming, and stopped, staring at him. "Is there a reason you wrote your name backwards on your forehead?"

xXxXx

"Are you telling me it's going to be done before they go back to school?" asked Danger, watching

Aletha measure out the potion into eight parts and put seven of them into storage vials.

“It should be.”

“But I thought it wouldn’t be finished until the end of this month!”

Aletha grinned. “Don’t tell the boys, but I asked Severus Snape for some tips.”

“Ah. And he didn’t wonder why you were making this particular potion?”

“He gave me that sour look he’s so good at, but he didn’t actually say anything. I have a feeling he knows, but he has no proof, so he won’t be telling anyone.”

“Not to mention, he’d have to admit helping you to account for how he knew, and that would implicate him in it as well.” Danger peered into the cauldron. “So what did he tell you?”

“Well, it seems shredding the yarrow leaves crosswise instead of lengthwise speeds it up by a few days. So does boiling the carrot flowers in water spiked with ground mica. But the real timesaver in this case was the powdered dragon’s teeth.”

“That sounds rare.”

“Not terribly, but it is fairly expensive. Luckily, you only need a pinch. It brings liquids to the boil faster, and lets them boil hotter, so they finish their required boiling time about ten percent faster. It doesn’t sound like much, but when you have a potion that has to be boiled for most of its twelve-week brewing period...”

Danger shook her head. “I’d never be able to do the maths right.”

“They include a conversion chart for all the usual boiling times,” said Aletha, nodding her head towards her workbench. “The only drawback is that once or twice, because of the time cutback, I’ve had to get up in the middle of the night to tend to it.”

Danger laughed. “Always something, isn’t it?”

“Always. But in this case, it’s a fine something. If Hermione’s not an Animagus by the end of the year, I’ll eat my cauldron.”

xXxXx

The potion was boiling furiously as Hermione stirred it, cautiously, counting seconds under her breath between each stir. “Any minute now,” murmured Aletha comfortingly, checking the clock in the corner. “Any minute...”

The liquid in the cauldron turned clear.

“That’s it!” Hermione jumped out of the way as Aletha quickly doused the fire and drew the

potion into a goblet with her wand. “Now we’ll just let it cool...”

Hermione danced up and down with excitement. “Can’t you cool it with a spell?” she begged.

“I don’t want to risk ruining it. This is tricky stuff – too much other magic applied to it, and it turns useless. Don’t fuss, Neenie, you have ten minutes, and there’s nothing going on...”

The Floo chimed.

“Let’s see who that is.” Aletha led Hermione into the music room and stopped dead.

Minerva McGonagall had just climbed out of their fire.

Of all the people to come visiting right this very minute. She’s an Animagus herself, she knows what this potion smells like, and she also knows that all the adults in this house are already Animagi...

“Hello, Aletha, is Sirius around?”

“He’s upstairs. Hermione, will you run and get him?”

“Of course. Hello, Professor.”

“Miss Granger-Lupin.” Minerva nodded to the girl distractedly.

“Can I take your cloak?” asked Aletha.

“Oh, yes, certainly.” Minerva shrugged out of the garment, and Aletha noticed as she hung it on one of the hooks on the mantel that the older witch was clutching a book.

It’s Sirius’ latest – is she here about that? She must be...

“Hermione said someone’s here to see me...” Sirius trailed off as he saw who it was. “Hello, Minerva.”

She faced him squarely. “Sirius, don’t lie to me. Is or is not Athena McElheny in this book meant for me?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say she’s meant for you,” Sirius temporized. “She’s... a lot like you, she does things the way you would, I suppose you could even say she’s based on you... yeah, she’s meant for you,” he confessed finally, looking very much like a naughty boy in front of his Head of House.

“That’s what I thought.” Minerva set her book aside, moved forward until she was directly in front of Sirius –

And stood on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice suspiciously choky. “It’s probably the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me...”

Sirius seemed to be unsure whether to look amazed or appalled. “You’re... welcome?” he faltered, staring at her. “I mean... you’re welcome, Professor. Minerva. I mean... oh, never mind.” He shook his head, grinning. “You’re welcome. I always thought you’d make a good heroine if you just had the chance.”

“A good heroine? Is that what you call her? Threatening people with Muggle metal wands, sneaking around listening at doors, piecing things together and nearly getting herself killed – is that how you see me?” Minerva had obviously recovered fully from her momentary lapse.

“Well, I’ve never seen you do any of that,” Sirius admitted. “But I’m sure you would. If you had to. You are Head of Gryffindor House.”

“Indeed I am, and I hope I have more sense than to do foolish things like that. Prancing around in the dead of night to rescue people. Really. As if I didn’t have more than enough to do.” But Minerva was smiling as she picked up her book and cloak, Aletha noticed.

She started to step back into the fire, then paused, sniffing the air. Aletha gritted her teeth. *Damn it, she noticed...*

Minerva turned to face Aletha. “Do I want to know?” she asked.

“No,” said Aletha quickly. “No, you don’t.”

“Then I won’t ask.” But she was still smiling, and her eyes darted quickly to Hermione before assuming a questioning look.

Aletha gave a fraction of a nod.

Minerva’s smile broadened. Then she looked perplexed for a moment, as if trying to decide how to put something.

“Hermione’s a lot like you, Minerva,” said Sirius casually. “Getting more so every day.”

Minerva’s eyes brightened. “I see. I’m very proud of her, of course, in class. She’s one of my best students.”

“Thank you, Professor,” said Hermione politely, but her eyes kept wandering to the door of Aletha’s workroom.

“Whatever you have in there that’s so interesting, go and do it,” said Minerva briskly. “I won’t keep you any longer. I just had to ask – thank you again, Sirius – and good luck.”

Aletha breathed a sigh of relief as the green flames died down in the fireplace.

“She knows,” said Hermione in awe. “And she’s not going to get us in trouble for it.”

Sirius laughed. “She admires your courage for trying it,” he said. “She told me so herself, when she found out what James and Wormtail and I had done.”

Aletha looked at him in amusement. “Was this before or after the reading of the riot act?”

“After.”

“Thought so.”

“Can I please go drink it now?” asked Hermione with carefully obvious patience.

“Yes, I think it should be cool enough. Let’s go see.”

“Hang on, I’ll get Moony and Danger down here,” said Sirius, hurrying out of the room.

“That’s a good idea,” said Aletha, retrieving the potion-filled goblet from the workroom. “Do you want Meghan and the boys here as well?”

Hermione looked torn, but nodded.

“I’ll get them.” Aletha set the potion carefully on a table, drew her wand, and thought hard about seeing Frank and Alice again, then mentally spoke the incantation. A silver dog leapt from the end of her wand, and she directed it with a quick thought to fetch her daughter and Pack-sons.

Surrounded by her Pack and well within the ten-minute limit, Hermione Granger-Lupin became the first of her Pride to drink the potion that would make her an Animagus. She downed it in three long swallows, then made a face. “That’s awful. Like... like vinegar, but greasy. And salty, too.”

“You only have to drink it once,” said Remus, conjuring a cup of water for her.

“Yeah, but the taste lasts for days,” muttered Sirius.

“You’re so encouraging,” said Danger.

“Too late for her to back out now, isn’t it?”

“Not for us,” said Harry. “Not that I would, but it’s tempting.”

“I’m thinking about it,” muttered Draco.

“No way,” said Meghan firmly. “I’m doing it.”

“So you are,” said Remus. “You’re holding your own, too. Minerva should have no complaints about your performance in her class when you start school next year.”

“It’s hard to remember she hasn’t already started,” said Aletha, leaning over to hug Meghan.

“With you being gone all the time, Pearl, I tend to forget you’re not the same age as these other three.”

“Could I be?” asked Meghan, obviously seizing the moment. “It would just be an Aging Potion, that’s easy to make, and it wouldn’t be a whole lot for just three years – and then I could take it back off once I started getting old, a little at a time...”

“No,” said all four Pack-parents at the same time. Meghan pouted as the other cubs laughed.

“There are some things even we won’t let you do,” said Sirius, making a face back at Meghan. “Contrary to popular opinion.”

“No fair.”

“Yes fair. I’m your father, and I say it’s fair, therefore it is. End of argument.”

Meghan tilted her head to one side. “You look funny sitting on a slant like that,” she remarked. “Why don’t you slide down the floor?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you?” Sirius drew his wand and hit Meghan with a quick Tickling Charm, making her squeal and giggle madly. Within a few seconds, a full-fledged spell fight was going in the music room, making Aletha very glad all the furnishings had been chosen for comfort and ease of cleaning.

This is what life should be like, she thought comfortably, ducking Danger’s Twitchy Ears Hex and firing back a Nose-Hair Ringlets Jinx. This is my idea of heaven.

xXxXx

Draco lingered a bit after Care of Magical Creatures on the Monday that started term. “I was just hoping to say hi to Buckbeak,” he told Hagrid.

Hagrid beamed, setting aside a bucket of frozen Ashwinder eggs. “Yer gettin’ ter be great friends with him, aren’ yeh? All the rest of his herd headed back ter the Forest weeks ago, but he’s still hangin’ around. I’d bet that’s because yeh tol’ him yeh’d be back ter see him.”

“Or maybe it’s just because you feed him,” Draco retorted with a grin. “I think he’s lazy. But I wouldn’t say that to his face. I do like him.”

“An’ he likes yeh back. I kin tell. Come on, then, he’s out behin’ the house...”

After the exchange of bows, Draco sat on the paddock wall and stroked Buckbeak’s feathers for a while, until the hippogriff got bored and started rooting around for worms. “I like you, Buckbeak,” he said quietly. “You’re nice to be around. You don’t want anything from me. Except a little politeness and some scratching, and I can do that.”

Buckbeak turned to look at Draco, then went back to digging. Draco rolled a small rock between

his palms, watching the great creature burrow. “Do you ever get tired of trying to be what people want you to be, Buckbeak? Do you ever feel like saying, ‘Well, it’s been fun, but now it’s time for me to do my own thing, so long, everyone’?”

Buckbeak pulled up a worm and gulped it down. Draco smiled slightly. “No, I suppose you don’t. It must be nice to be an animal. No worries, no responsibilities. Just find food and don’t get eaten yourself, and do whatever you want for the rest of the time. No one to fuss over you or try to make you do things. And you’re even luckier, because Hagrid takes care of you, and all you have to do in return is behave yourself for some of the classes.” He sighed. “I could almost wish I was you.”

Buckbeak looked over at Draco, then trotted up to him and took some of Draco’s hair in his beak, drawing it away. He did this several times, then laid his head gently against Draco’s shoulder.

“I think he likes you,” said a quiet voice behind Draco.

He jumped, as did Buckbeak. “Hermione! You scared me!”

“Sorry. Just coming to see where you got to. Hi, Buckbeak.” Hermione bowed, and the hippogriff made a grumbling noise in his throat but bowed back. “Are you all right?” she asked Draco.

“Fine. Just fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You’ve been a bit standoffish lately. Are you still mad at the twins for the ferret thing?”

“No, not really.” Draco smiled reminiscently. “That was brilliant, what Harry thought up to get them back. I didn’t even know you could do that. Did you find that spell?”

She nodded. “It was a good thing Moony was willing to help us, though. We’d never have been able to do it on our own.”

“Probably not. But it was pretty funny, watching them walk around stuck to each other. Joined at the hip. And when they tried to get it off...”

Hermione grinned. “I loved when George made it so they were stuck front to front instead of side to side. But the best was when Fred tried, and the spell he used unstuck them but turned them both into Siamese cats.”

“And then they fought.” Draco punched at the air in front of him. “And you could just tell from the way they were yowling at each other that if they’d been able to talk, they would have been saying something like, ‘This is all *your* fault!’ ‘No, it isn’t, it’s *your* fault!’”

They were both laughing now. Draco caught his breath once they’d finished. “Thanks,” he said.

“What else are sisters for?” Hermione smiled at him. “Do you remember how we used to twin-talk?”

“Used to? We still do it.”

“Not for a while. I wonder why.”

Draco shrugged. “I hadn’t noticed we’d stopped, so I don’t think it’s me.”

“Maybe it’s me, then. Or maybe it’s just something we outgrew.”

“Could be.” Draco hoisted his schoolbag. “See you later, Buckbeak.”

The hippogriff fanned his wings in farewell.

xXxXx

The Quidditch final was exciting, noisy, and exceedingly dirty. Slytherin was determined to make Gryffindor lose at any cost, and Gryffindor was determined to win at almost any cost. This led to some interesting fouls on both sides, and some plays that weren’t quite fouls but came close.

Harry’s flying between Slytherin Beaters Derrick and Dursley and causing them to collide led to much cheering on the non-Slytherin side of the stadium, but he hadn’t done anything to them, so it wasn’t illegal. Meanwhile, Fred and George were able to monopolize the Bludgers and pick off the Slytherin Keeper, allowing Gryffindor to score twice.

Gryffindor had to be sixty points or more ahead before Harry caught the Snitch, or they’d win the match but lose the championship. Wood had been hammering that point home to the entire team for weeks. Harry sometimes heard “You *must not* catch the Snitch before we’re *more* than fifty points up!” in Wood’s anguished voice in his sleep.

The current score was fifty-ten, and Harry had seen the Snitch once but been fouled by Marcus Flint, the super-seventh-year Slytherin Captain, and lost sight of it. It was just as well, he thought, glancing over his shoulder at his opposite number, Terence Higgs. He’d find it again at some point, and even if the older boy saw it first, with his Firebolt and superior flying skills Harry could fly rings around Higgs and force him off track.

A burst of cheering made him whip around – Alicia had just scored again. Sixty-ten. One more goal and the Snitch, and the Cup would be theirs.

“Come on,” Harry whispered, watching Slytherin Chaser Warrington speed down the pitch with the Quaffle. “Come on, drop it...”

An idea occurred to him. He aimed the Firebolt ever so carefully and dived. Katie Bell, far below him, screamed, as did much of the crowd. He was gathering speed, faster and faster he went –

He pulled up sharply and looped Warrington, startling the Slytherin into a yelp and making him drop the Quaffle. As he’d hoped, the Gryffindor Chasers had realized what he was up to, and were hovering just below. Angelina snatched the Quaffle and pelted off up the field with it, tossing it back and forth to Alicia in the move that had so successfully baffled Ravenclaw’s Chasers at the last match – but Montague and Flint were coming up fast, one of them for each girl –

And Katie flew out of nowhere, intercepting the Quaffle in mid-pass, and took off with it, momentarily unopposed –

Something hit Harry in the head. He thought for a confused second it was a Bludger, then realized that although Dursley was flying nearby, the Slytherin hadn't hit anything towards him, and anyway Bludgers weren't that soft. Nor were they white and papery.

It was a little bird made of folded parchment, and it fluttered frantically at him, pointing its beak up the field – Harry looked that way and saw, with a shock of fear, Higgs in hot pursuit of a glimmer of gold –

The faces in the stands turned into blurs as Harry threw himself forward on his Firebolt. His world had narrowed to just those two things – Higgs and the Snitch – and the goal of keeping the one away from the other, but not catching it until –

“KATIE BELL HAS BEATEN THE SLYTHERIN KEEPER!” roared Lee Jordan's voice jubilantly. “THE SCORE STANDS AT SEVENTY-TEN GRYFFINDOR – AND THERE GO THE SEEKERS!”

Harry felt his face breaking into a huge grin – if there was such a thing as an anti-dementor, he was under its effects now. The Firebolt was not a separate entity but part of him, carrying him effortlessly past Higgs, over and around two or three other players, and straight up to the tiny golden ball.

The hand he closed around it, he saw with mild surprise, still held the little parchment bird.

xXxXx

Draco yanked a quill from his robes, tapped it quickly with his wand to load it, and began scribbling frantically as screaming, sobbing people rushed past him.

Harry –

Whatever you do, DON'T MENTION THAT BLOODY BIRD I SENT YOU JUST A SECOND AGO. To ANYONE. It was cheating, I know it was cheating, but it gets us what we want, right? So if you want to stay at Hogwarts, DO NOT MENTION IT TO ANYONE.

– Draco

He folded that note quickly into eighths and joined the screaming throng, letting his spirits rise.

We won. We really, truly won. We honestly – well, semi-honestly – won.

He managed to shove his way through the crowd long enough to get to Harry's side and push the note into his hand. Harry unfolded it, scanned it, then dropped it, looked up, and rolled his eyes. *I won't*, he mouthed, just before the crowd hoisted him onto its shoulders.

“But do me one favor!” Harry shouted over the noise as he was carried off towards the stands where Dumbledore awaited with the Quidditch Cup. “*Keep them from shouting my name all over!*”

Draco laughed, and took a deep breath, setting his voice into projection mode.

G-R-Y,

F-F-I,

N-D-O-R Lions!

More people began to pick up the chant, an old favorite.

G-R-Y,

F-F-I,

N-D-O-R Lions!

Now most of the stadium was chanting it.

Lions rule!

Lions rule!

We’re the masters of the school!

Who just won? shouted the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws.

We did! screamed the Gryffindors.

Who just won? The second time was louder.

We did! Draco was sure his ears would never be the same.

Gryffindor just won at

QUIDDITCH!

Harry hoisted the Quidditch Cup above his head, grinning madly. Wood was sobbing openly, as were the girls. Fred and George looked like their faces might fall off any minute from smiling too hard.

Hermione caught Draco’s eye and pointed. Percy was jumping up and down and screaming, just like everyone else. Ron and Ginny were laughing at him in between cheering for Harry and the team. Neville had Meghan on his shoulders, where she was waving an enormous Gryffindor banner, and Luna’s lion-head earrings made her three times as noisy as anyone else. Draco

appreciated that.

In the stands, Padfoot and Letha were kissing. Danger and Moony had their wands out. As Draco watched, they pointed them skyward. Twin fireballs streaked upward from them and met in midair, producing a great, fiery lion which roared realistically, then exploded into letters reading “GRYFFINDOR: QUIDDITCH CHAMPIONS!”

The screaming couldn't possibly have got any louder, except that it did.

xXxXx

“All right, Ron, your turn,” said Harry, taking another handful of candy from the bowl in the middle. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth.”

“Greatest wish,” said Neville.

“An owl of my own.”

The boys all laughed.

“It's true!” insisted Ron, looking put-out. “That's all I want, and it's simple enough, and what do I get for my birthday? Socks. Maroon socks.” He pulled a face. “You're up, Draco. Truth or dare?”

“Er, truth.”

“Who d'you fancy?” asked Dean Thomas.

The other boys groaned. “That's an easy one!” protested Harry. “Everyone knows he's sweet on Luna!”

“Do I still have to answer?” asked Draco around a mouthful of Bertie Bott's (peanut, apricot, leaf, salt, cloth, and coconut, he'd said).

“New question,” said Seamus Finnegan. “Greatest fear.”

Draco inhaled sharply and choked. Harry thumped him on the back until he spit out the offending beans. “Nearly dying when a great stupid prat like you startles me,” he wheezed, wiping his streaming eyes on his sleeve. “Someone else go.”

Harry watched his brother out of the corner of his eye. Draco seemed all right, but every now and again something small, like this, would suddenly set his back up, and it would take him a while to calm back down.

And it's been like this a while. Ever since Christmas, or thereabouts...

He'd watch a while longer, Harry decided. But he was probably being stupid. Draco had been home like the rest of them for Easter, and the Pack-parents hadn't seen anything wrong with him.

And they would if anyone would.

He returned to the game, where Dean was now attempting to balance three Chocolate Frogs on his nose.

xXxXx

Out on the Quidditch pitch, a green-robed figure walked amid the litter of the day. He was seeking one piece in particular.

I think it might be useful. Especially now that daddy's not-so-good little boy has been scared off his game. He grinned. *This could be my big break.*

Wand lit in his hand, he continued searching.

xXxXx

"This will be a full-class mock test," announced Snape. "You will do everything precisely as you will do it on your final exams, three weeks from today. Cheating will not be tolerated. You have one hour to complete the theoretical portion. Begin."

The parchment in front of Harry suddenly filled with writing. He read the first question while dipping his quill. It dealt with substitutions for ingredients, asking when it was and wasn't allowable. It wouldn't be easy, but he thought he could come up with a decent answer.

If the whole test is like this, I might have a chance...

Suddenly, a parchment bird landed on his desk. This one, unlike the one at the match, was fairly large – it looked like it had been folded from an entire sheet of parchment. He was about to unfold it when Ron poked him and handed him a note. Harry frowned at the two pieces of parchment in front of him, then slowly started to unfold the grubby note in his hand.

"Potter!" snapped Snape from beside one of the Slytherin desks. "What do you have there?"

I'm so dead. Harry swallowed and got to his feet. *But I'm not taking Ron down with me.* Wordlessly, he showed Snape the two notes.

"Fifteen points from Gryffindor," said Snape, sweeping over and taking possession of bird and note. "Sight unseen." He unfolded the note, looked inside, then looked again. Slowly, he looked from note to bird, then turned away from Harry. "Black," he said silkily. "Come with me."

Draco looked up from his test, startled. "Me, Professor?"

"I see no one else of that surname in this class. Yes, you."

Draco looked at Harry suspiciously. Harry shrugged, hoping his innocence showed on his face – he had no idea what was in either of those notes, or where they had come from. He hoped it got sorted out soon. They had real exams to study for.

xXxXx

Albus Dumbledore looked up as his door opened and Severus Snape entered, Draco Black behind him. “Headmaster, I would like to meet with you, Minerva McGonagall, and Remus Lupin and his wife immediately, if possible.”

“Is something wrong, Severus?”

“It is.” Severus tossed two sheets of folded parchment onto Albus’ desk. “I have just caught Black cheating in my class.”

xXxXx

Remus felt his heart sink to somewhere near the level of the Slytherin common room. “It does look like his handwriting,” he said carefully. “Draco? Did you write this?” He held up the folded note.

Draco glared at it. “Yes,” he said. “But not today, and not about this. And I never stole that answer sheet.”

“Then how does it come to be on Harry Potter’s desk?” demanded Snape. “I think I can follow this story, if you’ll allow me. Black breaks into my office before class today and steals the answer sheet to the mock test. He has time to memorize them himself, and as the test begins, he decides to share his good fortune and sends the answers to his *brother*.” The word dripped sarcasm. “He waits, of course, until I have my back turned to send them by air mail.”

Draco was obviously bursting to say something, but Remus shook his head.

“But just as the bird leaves him,” Snape continued, “he realizes that Potter, being rather more simplistic and idealistic than he is himself, may blurt out his good fortune to the entire world. So he sends another note, by more Muggle means so as not to attract too much attention, warning Potter not to say anything about the bird. Fortunately, one of my other students noticed the unusual traffic near the front of the class and mentioned it to me, and here we are.”

Minerva shifted in her seat. “Mr. Black,” she said in what, for her, passed as a kindly voice. “Please, tell us the truth. Were you cheating in Professor Snape’s class today?”

“No.” Draco stared balefully at Snape. “I’ve never seen that answer sheet before. I’ve never even been in your office – I’m not even sure I know where it is! I was *not* cheating, and neither was Harry!”

“Draco, please try to understand,” said Danger. “We want to believe you. But when you tell us you wrote this note to Harry, admitting to cheating, but you won’t tell us when or why... can’t you see

it's a little hard to believe you?"

"You think I'm lying, don't you." Draco's breath was coming faster. "You all think I'm lying. Let me tell you something, *Professor*." The title was loaded as much as Snape's earlier use of the familial title for Harry. "If I did want to cheat in your class, I wouldn't need to steal your answers. I know them all myself. And I wouldn't have been so stupid as to send them to Harry for the *mock* test, or in a big bloody bird like that, when I know half that class is just dying to find anything they can to get me into trouble!"

"Draco, no one is trying to get you into trouble," said Remus. "But if you've cheated on something, we have to know. What was it?"

Draco shook his head. "You'd hate me if you knew," he said. "You'd..." His eyes widened, darting from one adult to the next. "You do hate me. All of you. You hate me! You think I'm lying, and you hate me!" He pointed at Remus and Danger, his voice rising hysterically. "You don't want me – you've *never* wanted me! *You just took me because you had to!*"

He bolted from the office.

"Teenagers," said one of the portraits in a raspy, disgusted voice.

"Indeed," said Dumbledore with a sigh. "Where is he likely to go?"

"Back to the Tower, I'd guess," said Remus. "Why don't we see if we can find out when this note was written, and work out what we can on our own before we try to confront him again..."

xXxXx

Draco tore through the common room, startling the second and seventh years considerably, and took the stairs three at a time, mind whirling. He knew what happened to people who cheated on tests at Hogwarts. Repeating a year was for the lucky ones like Marcus Flint.

And after what I just did, I don't think I'm lucky.

I wonder what I'll get apprenticed into. And where I'll live, when the Pack kicks me out.

He was so lost in frantic thought that it took him several seconds to realize he was trying to push aside a hanging that wasn't there anymore – he'd ripped it down in his haste. With a groan, he kicked it aside and sat down on his bed.

The globe sat on his nightstand, a familiar, comforting presence. Quickly, he picked it up and began to caress it. *Tell me*, he thought towards it as the smooth red calm flowed over him and filled him. *What should I do now?*

Slowly, a plan began to float into his mind, and as he thought it over, he began to smile. Of course, it was brilliant, perfect. It would save him – save him? It would turn him into the savior of the entire wizarding world! Then he'd be the celebrated one, not Harry – who cared about Harry,

anyway?

You do.

He tried to banish the troublesome little voice, but it persisted. *You care about Harry. You care about him a lot. You were trying to make sure he wouldn't get in trouble for cheating when he didn't.*

Well, Harry would be fine without him. They'd all be fine without him. He was going to do what he should have done in the first place. He was going to leave. Only this time, he was going to take everything with him that he was entitled to have. He'd go to his house – Malfoy Manor was his, after all – and wait there. His father shouldn't take too long to find him. They'd be outcasts together, until the day they forced wizarding society to take them back...

“Ow!” Draco pulled a finger around from the underside of the globe and stared at it. A drop of blood was welling up on it.

Must have found a rough spot. Reflexively, he stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked. He'd go right away, as soon as he could get packed, and as soon as he could get out to Hogsmeade...

A knock sounded on the door. “Draco? Are you all right?” called Luna's voice from the other side of the door. “You came running in – at least I thought it was you, I couldn't see you because of the shadow...”

The door opened. Luna stepped inside. “Draco? I know you're in here...”

She came within sight, took one look at Draco, and screamed.

Shut her up! Now, before she brings everyone running and you lose your chance! Draco supported the globe on his lap and groped in his pocket for his wand, preparing to strike the brat down –

What? No! I don't want to hurt Luna!

Don't argue with me. Do it!

NO! Draco forced his fingers open from where they'd clenched around his wand. *I won't!*

He felt his hand yanked back to the globe. ***You'll do as I say,*** growled what he could now clearly discern was a voice different than his own. ***You'll do as I say, or I'll make you!***

Draco got to his feet, staring furiously down at the globe his hands were now clutching without his wanting them to. ***I will effing NOT!***

He screamed himself as lightning coursed from the globe through his body, sending him into convulsions, triggering his every nerve so that he was burning and freezing and crushed and in agony all at once. He would have dropped the globe, but he couldn't move. He was vaguely aware

that he was no longer upright, that he'd fallen to the floor between the beds, that there were other people in the room, but his attention was focused inward, on the raging battle –

Obey me! Do as I say, and the pain will cease!

Piss off and die! I bow to the people I choose, and no one else!

Choose me, then. Or you will die.

The pain intensified. He screamed again, and thought he heard his scream echoed in a higher register –

And then it was gone. There was nothing between his hands, no false messages sent to his nerves, his muscles were blessedly limp. In his last instant of awareness, he felt two fingers on his cheek, and knew who they belonged to.

Neenie.

The darkness claimed Draco Black with a smile on his lips.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 18: Despair and Curse (Year 3)

Chapter 18: Despair and Curse

“Harry, we’re going to get in trouble,” said Hermione worriedly, hurrying to keep up with her brother. “We shouldn’t have left class – we should have kept going with the test, like Professor Snape told us to...”

“You want to go back, you go back,” said Harry, his steps never faltering. “Draco’s in trouble. I’m going to help him. You do whatever you want.”

“Well, if you put it that way.”

“Where are we going?” asked Ron.

“Dumbledore’s office. That’s where Snape most likely took him.”

“Look!” cried Hermione, pointing upward.

Feet pounded the steps two stories above. Harry caught just a glimpse of pale blond hair before the person vanished up the stairs. “He’s headed for the Tower,” he said with certainty. “Come on!”

Meghan hurtled out of a secret passage to join them on the fifth floor. “What’s wrong?” she gasped out. “I know it’s Draco – what happened?”

“Snape thinks he was cheating,” panted Neville, running with a hand pressed to his side. “Thinks he tried to send Harry answers.”

“Splinters!” shouted Harry to the Fat Lady as they came into view.

“You and your family, always hurrying,” she said as her portrait swung open. “Don’t you ever walk anywhere?”

Harry practically dove through the portrait hole. His foot snagged, and he only missed landing on his face by taking the impact on his shoulder. Ginny was at his side in a moment, helping him up. “What’s going on?” she asked. “Draco ran through here just now like a referee with his broom tail on fire, and his carving’s been glowing for a good five minutes.”

“Snape thinks he cheated in class,” said Harry. “But he didn’t.”

“I couldn’t even see him when he ran through,” said Luna. “The shadow covered him too well. It was like he was under a Cloak of Darkness.”

“Shadow?” said Ron.

“He’s been under a shadow for a few months now,” said Luna. “It gets lighter and darker, but it’s always there.”

“Remember, she can see through Animagus,” Ginny reminded her brother. “She can probably see when things are wrong with people too.”

“I’m going to go upstairs and see if he needs any help.” Luna began to climb the boys’ stairs.

“Shouldn’t you be in class?” said Percy, coming over to their group.

“No teacher,” said Harry shortly, rubbing his sore shoulder. “He left to do something. Should we go up too?” he asked the rest of the Pride.

“Let Luna handle him to start with,” said Hermione. “She’s good at it. She’ll find out what’s wrong, and then we can help figure out what to do next.”

“Snape’s probably going to be right behind him,” said Neville. “If Draco ran out on him. We might have to stall him off.”

“Even Snape can’t get him in trouble for cheating if he wasn’t, though,” said Ron. “I’m sorry about this, Harry, I should have thrown that dirty old note out when Parvati gave it to me—”

High above, Luna screamed.

Harry attacked the stairs, Hermione and Ron only an instant behind. Halfway there – three-quarters – Luna’s screams hadn’t let up –

Harry slammed the door open just as Draco screamed as well.

For one instant, what he saw froze him in horror – lightning lashing from the globe Draco held, writhing all over his body. Draco’s back was arched, his eyes closed, his yells of pain now coming through clenched teeth.

Harry’s paralysis ended. He charged into the room, clearing the doorway for others. “Get help,” he said over his shoulder to Ron, and felt rather than saw the taller boy start back down the stairs at a run.

“Move!” he yelled angrily, and his voice was joined by another.

“Come on, off those stairs, out of the way now!”

Percy?

But Harry didn’t have any more time to listen to that. Meghan and Ginny had followed him in and were holding Luna, who was cowering away from Draco, sobbing and pointing at him. Neville shut the door behind Hermione, who was staring at Draco. Tortured moans were escaping him now as he thrashed on the floor, his face a mask of pain and stubbornness.

“We have to get it away from him,” she said in a rush, darting to Draco’s trunk and flinging it open. “I think I know how – get ready...”

Draco screamed again as the lightning coming from the globe increased in intensity. Hermione leaped onto his bed and down again, landing neatly beside him, and screamed herself, in fury, swinging the back end of Draco’s Nimbus Two Thousand and One down hard and smashing the globe out of his hands. Harry snatched up the discarded bedcurtain lying in the middle of the floor and dived on top of the globe as it rolled free, wrapping it up in the curtain’s red folds.

An eerie silence fell on the room, broken only by Luna’s sobs. Harry set the globe quickly on the end of Dean’s bed and hurried to Draco’s side. Hermione was kneeling beside him, her fingers still on his cheek in the end of a scent-touch. “He smiled at me,” she said quietly. “I think he’ll be all right. What was that?”

“A snake,” said Luna unsteadily from across the room. She was staring at Draco. “It was a black and red snake, and it came out of that thing.” She pointed at the wrapped globe. “It had its coils all around him, and it was about to crush him and eat him. And he was going to let it.” The loathing was audible in her voice. “But then he saw me and he started to fight it. It was trying to crush him when he was screaming. He was fighting against it. That’s why it hurt him.”

“Is it still there?” asked Harry urgently.

Luna shook her head. “There’s still a shadow,” she said. “But I don’t see any snake.”

“Let me see if he’s all right,” said Meghan, standing up. “Harry, move over?”

Harry stood up and moved back onto the bed behind him, which was his own, and Meghan stepped into his place, kneeling down beside him. She reached towards Draco’s face –

“Meghan, NO!” screamed Luna, but it was too late. Without making a sound, Meghan collapsed over Draco, her hand still resting on his cheek.

“Get her off, get her off!” Luna shrieked. “The snake, it’s still there, it’s trying to hurt her, *get her away from him!*”

Harry leaned down and grabbed his little sister around the waist, thankful beyond words that she was so small for her age. Hermione lifted from the other side, and together they got Meghan up and onto the bed with Harry. Within a second or two, Neville was there, staring intently into Meghan’s face, checking her pulse at her wrist, holding his other hand over her mouth to see if she was breathing.

Luna had her face buried in Ginny’s shoulder. “I don’t want to see any more,” she was sobbing. “I don’t want to see. Don’t make me look at it any more, please, don’t make me.”

“She’s alive,” said Neville, looking up. “But she doesn’t look good.” He glanced over his shoulder at the red-wrapped globe, a look of pure hatred.

“But it didn’t hurt me,” said Hermione, staring down at Draco. “I touched him, and nothing hurt me.”

Harry wanted to hide under his bed and never come out again, all the more because he knew what was about to happen. In a moment, everyone would be looking at him, and they would all want to know what they should do next. And they would expect him to know, because he was the alpha – because he was the leader –

“What’s going on in here?” asked a voice from the door.

Harry let out a breath he hadn’t been aware of holding. Moony had come. Everything would be all right.

“Draco’s hurt,” he said. “And Meghan – we don’t know why, but it seemed to come from that globe Draco got for Christmas...”

“Is this it?” Moony pointed to the red bundle on the end of the bed.

Several people nodded. “It was shooting lightning all over him,” said Ginny. “And Luna says she saw a snake coming out of it, trying to crush him.”

“Meghan collapsed when she touched him,” said Hermione. “Luna saw the snake on her too.”

“Luna?” Moony knelt beside her and touched her arm gently. “How are you feeling?”

She looked up at him. “I want my daddy,” she said tearfully.

“I’m not surprised. Danger’s going to get him right now. Are you hurt anywhere?”

Luna shook her head.

“Good.” Moony stood up. “Hermione, come out of there.”

“But I touched him already!” Hermione objected. “I scent-touched him right after I knocked the globe out of his hands, and nothing bad happened to me then!”

“I meant, please move so I can see him,” said Moony calmly.

“Oh.” Hermione climbed back onto Draco’s bed, and Moony knelt where she had been, pointing his wand first at himself, then at Draco.

When he stood up, his face was grave. “Draco is under a curse,” he said. “No one is to touch him until we can figure out what exactly its parameters are, who it will and won’t attack.” He conjured a stretcher and lifted Draco from the floor. “I’d also ask you to please stay in the Tower for right now. We might need to find you in a hurry.”

“What about Meghan?” said Neville, looking up from her.

Moony twitched his wand. Another stretcher appeared, and Neville laid Meghan gently on it. "I want to stay with her," he said, facing Moony squarely. "Until you know what's wrong with her."

"Very well." Moony looked once more around the room. "We'll tell you as soon as we know anything," he said, then directed the two stretchers out the door in front of him, pausing almost as an afterthought to pick up the bundle containing the globe and hand it to Neville. Ron stepped into the room from the landing and shut the door behind them.

Hermione stared at the door. "What's going to happen to him?" she whispered. "What *was* that?"

"Dunno," said Ron, sitting down on Draco's bed beside her. "Professor Lupin said it was a curse, but I never saw a curse do that." He grimaced. "Not that I saw much. What happened?"

"More of the same," said Harry, swallowing against a feeling of dread. "He was screaming, there was lightning all over him, then Hermione knocked it out of his hands and it all stopped."

"But when Meghan touched him, it got her too," said Ginny, still holding Luna. "She just fell over, like someone had Stunned her."

Hermione's breathing was harsh and ragged. Awkwardly, Ron put an arm around her, and she leaned against him, beginning to cry into his shoulder. Harry climbed across the beds and sat on Hermione's other side, putting a hand on her back, holding onto his own emotions tightly. One crying alpha was all the Pride needed at this point.

Feet pounded on the stairs, and the door slammed open. "Luna!"

"Daddy!" Luna catapulted to her feet and dashed into her father's arms. "Daddy, I don't want to see anymore. I don't want to. I don't want to see things anymore. Make it stop. Please, make it stop."

Mr. Lovegood held Luna tightly. "It'll be all right now," he said, stroking her hair. "It'll be all right. Daddy's here. We'll get it all worked out, you'll see. Everything will be all right. Come on." Soothing and cajoling her by turns, he led her out of the room and down the stairs.

Danger stepped into the room and looked at each of them, her eyes grave. Hermione let Ron go and ran to her sister, throwing her arms around Danger and holding on hard. "Oh, love," Danger murmured over Hermione's sobs. "Oh, little love. Hush now. It'll all be over soon, and we'll be laughing at how silly we acted. You'll see."

Ron was sitting with Ginny now, talking quietly to her. Harry saw with a shock that tears were sparkling on her cheeks, and more were spilling from her eyes even as he watched. Ginny never cried.

He looked back at Danger. She was still holding Hermione, but with only one arm – her other one was free, and she was looking at him, beckoning to him –

He crossed to her and hugged her, her and Hermione both, hard. "What's going on?" he asked,

knowing she would know.

“They’re both all right for the moment,” said Danger, carefully aiming her words both at the Weasleys off to one side and at the bushy head buried against her chest. “Madam Pomfrey’s been examining them, and she says they’re not hurt, simply unconscious. Aletha’s on her way here with a Healer, a specialist in curses, and Sirius will come as soon as he can get away. Remus is seeing what he can make of the globe.”

“A suncatcher,” muttered Ron. “A really ugly one. And then give it to Snape, he never sees the sun anyway.”

Ginny and Harry laughed weakly, and Hermione turned partway around and gave Ron a watery smile. Danger gave him a thumbs-up. “I suggest you four stay nearby,” she said. “You’re excused from the remainder of your Potions class this afternoon. Why did you leave, by the way?”

Harry shrugged. “We wanted to help,” he said. “I thought I might have been able to explain things to Professor McGonagall or Professor Dumbledore. And the pendants weren’t cooling off the way they should have if things were going all right. They just kept getting hotter. What was that note?”

“Didn’t you read it?”

Harry shook his head. “I didn’t have time. Snape saw me before I’d opened it.”

“It was addressed to you, from Draco,” said Danger. “It told you not to mention the bird he’d sent you to anyone, that he knew it was cheating, but it got you what you wanted. Draco admitted he’d written it, but he said it wasn’t about the test today, and he wouldn’t tell us why or when he did write it. Can you?”

A lump of ice seemed to form in Harry’s throat. “Is he in trouble?” he said around it.

“He won’t be, if you can confirm he hasn’t cheated on any schoolwork. Harry, this is very important – please, if you know anything, tell me...”

“It’s the Quidditch Cup,” Hermione said into Danger’s robes.

The ice slid down Harry’s throat and into his stomach. Ron and Ginny were both staring at Hermione. “I beg your pardon?” said Danger, letting her sister go.

“Draco saw Higgs going after the Snitch and sent a parchment bird to point it out to Harry,” said Hermione chokily, scrubbing at her cheeks with her sleeve. “He was afraid Harry might not see in time. And then he was afraid it would be cheating, so he wrote that note. Someone must have picked it up after Harry read it.”

Danger frowned. “I don’t know about this,” she said, her eyes shading rapidly more blue. “Give me a minute.” She shut her eyes and leaned against the wall.

“Nice going,” Harry hissed at Hermione.

“Someone had to tell them! Draco could have been expelled if they’d thought he was cheating in class!”

“We’re going to lose the Cup, Hermione!”

“No, you’re not,” said Danger, opening her eyes, which whirled and drained back to brown. “Draco’s a member of the team, even if he wasn’t playing that day. The rules state that team members may give advice to one another, spoken or unspoken. So strictly speaking, what he did was legal, but I wouldn’t advise trying it again. Or noising it around that it happened this time.”

“But you’ve got to tell Snape that’s what happened, don’t you?” asked Ginny. “Because he thought Draco was cheating in his class. You’ll have to tell him where he was cheating – or thought he was cheating – and that’s as good as telling the whole of Slytherin House. They’re bound to make a fuss.”

“A fuss?” said Ron in amazement. “They’ll demand a rematch!”

“Bring it on,” said Harry. “We can beat them any day.”

“Nothing of the sort will happen,” said Danger firmly. “Gryffindor won the match, and the Cup, fairly. End of story. Now, you all seem fully recovered, so I should go. If you wait down by the fire, we’ll send you word as soon as there’s any news.” She gave Hermione another hug, embraced Harry quickly, and nodded to Ron and Ginny before opening the door and starting down the dormitory stairs.

Ron scowled. “I hate waiting,” he said. “Why do we have to stay here, anyway?”

“So we’re not underfoot,” said Ginny. “There’s nothing we can do. None of us are Healers. Except Meghan, and she needs a Healer herself right now. So we wait.”

“I still feel like we should be there,” said Ron. “Maybe we could find another miracle cure.” He waved an imaginary wand. “*Cursus Removus!*”

“I wish you could,” said Hermione. “I think I’d kiss anyone who could help Draco.”

Ron turned away, his ears going red.

“I just wish there was some way we could know what was going on,” said Harry, sitting down on the nearest bed. “Without having to sit here and wait until somebody remembers us and throws us a few scraps.”

“You mean, like a place we could go and listen to what’s going on in the hospital wing,” said Ginny. “Without anyone seeing us, or knowing we were there.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe a place with a direct connection to the hospital wing, so we wouldn’t have to use any

magic to hear.”

“Right.”

“And a place where we could be comfortable, but still be in easy reach of the common room if one of your parents starts coming back.”

“Exactly.”

“Just say it, already,” said Ron. “You’ve obviously got something in mind.”

“The Den. The Hogwarts Den. The library.”

Hermione’s eyes brightened. “Of course! It has the slide to the hospital wing – but we don’t have to open it all the way, just enough to let some sound come through! And then we can hear what’s going on, and if one of them leaves to come and get us for something, we can be back in the common room before they get here! That’s perfect!”

“You’re brilliant, Ginny,” said Harry, grinning at her.

She blushed. “Thanks.”

xXxXx

Luna cried herself to sleep in her father’s arms. She wasn’t surprised, when she opened her eyes, to find herself in a misty place, facing a dark-haired woman dressed in blue. “Hello, Brenna,” she said.

“Hello, Luna.” Brenna Ravenclaw inclined her head. “Was there something you wanted?”

“There’s something I don’t want,” corrected Luna. “I don’t want to see anymore. I don’t want to see what other people don’t.”

“Are you sure? It’s a useful talent. You might help people with it.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want it anymore. I want you to take it away.”

“I can’t do that,” said Brenna. “Only you can. And it will cost you another of your jewels to do it.”

Luna looked at her pendants. She had spent one Ravenclaw jewel making the Pride able to talk to each other, the night the boys had got rid of Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback. Another jewel gone would leave her with one Ravenclaw and one Gryffindor. “Done,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Are you sure? This can’t be undone without using up your last jewel. And once they’re gone, they’re gone. You won’t get any more.”

“I’m sure. Please, tell me how.”

Brenna sighed. “Hold the jewel between your fingers, think hard about what you want to do, and say ‘*Nolo videre novi* .’ That will take it away. If you ever want to get it back, say ‘*Volo videre novi* .’ But if you do that, you will never be able to reverse it again. Are you sure you want to do it now?”

“Yes. Very sure.” Luna took the gem in her hand. “*Nolo videre novi*, ” she said precisely, and the gem flared with blue light, then subsided.

“So it is done,” said Brenna quietly. “I wish you joy of it.”

“Thank you.” Luna turned away, and the scene faded.

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Alone, Brenna sat down. “I’m sorry, Alex,” she said as the mist blew away to reveal a sunny day on the grounds of the Founders’ Castle. “I did what I could.”

“It’s all right.” Alex stood up from where he’d been lurking in the bushes. “I didn’t think you were actually going to be able to persuade her. Not after what she saw today. She’ll need to grow up some more before she figures out that being able to see things like that is worth a little pain and fear sometimes.”

Brenna tilted her head, regarding Alex. “You really care about them, don’t you?”

“Who?”

“The Pack. And the Pride.”

“No, of course not.”

“Don’t lie to me, Alexander, you’re no good at it.”

Alex grumbled deep in his throat. “Yes.”

“And you’re mad about Rick’s ban that he put on you when he found out what you did over the summer.”

“Yes.”

“So you’re trying to find ways to get around it.”

“How many times do I have to say it – yes!”

Brenna laughed. “Don’t worry too much,” she said. “They always seem to get out of things somehow, those people.”

“How they’ll manage this time, I haven’t a clue,” grumbled Alex. “Without even a decent warning...”

“You watch,” said Brenna in satisfaction, arranging herself to do just that.

xXxXx

Aletha wished heartily that she could have had an hour or two to herself and the use of some of the school’s Quidditch equipment. It would have done her good to go out for a fly and smack a Bludger to hell and back. The best part, of course, would have been imagining Lucius Malfoy’s sneering face on the black ball just before she slammed her bat into it.

But she couldn’t just go gallivanting off because she felt like it. Two of her cubs had been struck down by a curse, and she had to help them. And in this case, helping them meant coming to the school as quickly as possible, staying nearby, and bringing a Healer who specialized in curse damage with her.

Though she would have given almost anything if the most qualified Healer of curse damage on call at the moment hadn’t happened to be Healer Albertus Young.

“Can I see the object?” Healer Young asked, and Remus pushed the glass globe across the table, careful not to touch it with his bare skin. The older wizard peered at it, looking at the runes incised deep into the surface, nodding to himself. “Have you been able to get a reading on these?” he asked. “What they are, and some possible meanings?”

“Yes.” Remus sounded very controlled, which, Aletha knew, meant he was furious. “Here it is.” He handed across a scroll.

Healer Young began to scan it. “Blood,” he muttered. “Secrecy, obsession, compulsion... power, strength, pride... draining, stillness, and...” He looked up. “This is quite a complicated curse, the most complicated I’ve seen in a while. I’ll need a few minutes to get it worked out entirely.”

“Of course,” said Remus.

Healer Young took the scroll off to a corner and walked up and down, mumbling to himself, making jabs at the air with his wand. From time to time, he would tap it on the parchment.

“What else did you see?” Aletha asked Remus quietly.

Remus turned the globe over. “Look carefully, right here,” he said, pointing at a corner inside one of the runes. “Do you see it?”

Aletha squinted. “I think so. It’s a sharp edge, but hidden inside that smoother edge there. How could you do something like that, and why would you want to? How, of course, I know, with magic, but why?”

“To draw blood,” said Remus. “I think blood may be necessary for the final stage of the curse.

There's certainly the rune for blood on there. And Poppy said Draco had a small cut on his finger. Perhaps he'd reached some critical point this afternoon – maybe it was even triggered by emotion. But that's just guesswork.”

One of the double doors swung open. Danger closed it behind her and hurried over to sit at the table. “Do we know anything yet?” she asked, looking at Healer Young.

“No, nothing,” said Aletha. “Except that Poppy says they seem to be all right for the moment.”

“Unfortunately, ‘seems like’ and ‘is’ are two completely different things,” said Danger. “We still don't know anything about this curse. Except what's on there.” She indicated the parchment Healer Young was holding. “And what we've heard. And we could drive ourselves up the wall trying to figure it out, so let's just wait.”

“Except that waiting seems to be driving us up the wall just as effectively,” said Aletha, trying a smile and stopping halfway through as she realized it wasn't working. *God, I wish Sirius was here.*

Remus reached across the table and pressed her hand. “We'll get through this,” he said. “It's not our first hard time.”

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Neville sat beside Meghan, holding her hand. He'd heard that great disasters often made people understand things about themselves, or admit them, but he had never thought it would happen to him.

But no one ever thinks it will happen to them, until it does.

And it had. Seeing Meghan collapse that way, obviously not by her choice the way her Healing trance had been last year, had felt like having a large icicle nailed into his chest, and he had realized what had happened to him.

I love her.

It should have been so obvious. Everyone had assumed it. His gran had been disapproving of their close friendship for just that reason. His parents seemed to understand that he didn't want to talk about love – love was something that happened to old people, people in their late teens and even (horrors) early twenties. It was mushy and sappy and stupid, and he didn't want anything to do with it.

But loving Meghan didn't seem mushy or sappy at all. It seemed as normal as breathing, and it was sometimes hard for him to remember that until he'd started Hogwarts, he hadn't known she existed, and that for his first year, they had communicated only in letters.

She doesn't expect me to be great. She just wants me to be me. But she won't settle for anything less than the best me there is.

He smiled, looking down at her. *I think I just defined love.*

The old Healer had come to look at her, and given him a look that clearly said “teenage boys have no place being by the bedside of not-even-teenage girls who aren’t their sisters or cousins.” Neville didn’t care. He was used to that look by now.

But knowing I love her doesn’t really change anything, does it? We were already good friends. Now I just know that there might someday be something else, if we both feel the same about it when we grow up. And didn’t Dad tell me over the holidays that the best person to marry is your best friend? The memory of his father talking with him, like normal fathers and sons did, still made him beam.

I think Dad knows. And Mum. They smile, sometimes, when they see us together. But it’s not a nasty, “I know what you’re doing” smile. It’s a “You go on, you’re doing fine” smile. I wonder if they were friends like us before they fell in love?

But there would be time to think about his parents later. Right now, Meghan was unconscious. And if Neville knew her, she would be furious over every minute she had spent that way, especially with Draco hurt. Even if she couldn’t use her Ravenclaw talents on him, she could still watch the Healer treat him, and find out what exactly were the treatments for exposure to a curse like this.

So maybe I can help her wake up faster. Like everybody else did for us, when we were asleep after healing Mum and Dad. It won’t be quite like that, because there’s only me to take the load from her, but I can cut it in half. That’ll be something.

He eased Meghan over in the bed and lay down beside her, pulling out his pendant chain. Carefully, he draped it over her head as well, then laid his arm over her so that he could hold her hand.

I want to share my energy with Meghan, he thought carefully. I want to share the time she has to spend asleep. Let her have half of what I have, please, and please do it right away. He knew there was a more formal phrase, but he didn’t want to demand anything. Asking politely had always worked for him.

A kind and worthy request, said a woman’s voice in pleased tones. **Granted, grandson, and gladly so.**

Neville fell asleep before he had quite worked out who was talking to him.

xXxXx

Healer Young lowered the parchment and approached the table. Aletha looked at his face, and was suddenly struck by how old he was. She knew that he’d been working at St. Mungo’s for over seventy years, but it hadn’t really struck her just how very old that made him.

“I believe I understand the workings of this curse,” he said, sitting down. “It seems to be designed to do several things simultaneously. Its first function is to ensure that it has come to the proper recipient, a pureblood teenage boy.”

“It can tell he’s pureblood?” asked Danger in confusion. “I thought that didn’t matter to how good your magic was.”

“It has nothing to do with how *good*, as you say, his magic is,” said Healer Young, sounding very like a teacher rebuking a slow student. “The blood divisions of pureblood, half-blood, and Muggleborn are discernable by magic, but they mean nothing to the quality or quantity of magic possessed by any one individual.”

“It’s like... oh, say, color,” said Aletha quickly, since Danger still looked confused and Remus didn’t seem much better off. “If you have two chairs, and one is shabby and beaten up and one is strong and sturdy, one could be red and the other blue, or one blue and the other yellow. It wouldn’t change how strong they are. Blood status is like color – discernable, but it doesn’t make any difference to the structure.”

“Indeed.” Aletha might be imagining it, but she thought Healer Young sounded faintly impressed. “Once it had determined that it had come to the proper person, it began to conceal itself, by making its owner hide it, forget to talk to people about it, not want to show it to anyone.”

“Probably means Draco never wrote that thank you note,” said Danger. She had stopped off on her way to the hospital wing in Minerva’s office to use the Floo there for a private firecall to Tonks, confirming what she’d already suspected, that the Auror-trainee hadn’t sent Draco a Christmas present and had never seen or heard of the globe before in her life. “To the person who was supposed to have given it to him,” she added for the Healer’s benefit.

“Yes. After its secrecy was thus assured, it made itself indispensable by creating feelings of well-being in its owner, then, under cover of those feelings, began to insinuate a complicated message into his mind. It began with great pride in his appearance, progressed to pride in his blood ties and the traits common to that bloodline, and culminated in the wish to cultivate blood ties, especially close ones, to the exclusion of all other ties.”

“Also makes sense,” said Remus with a weary sigh. “You know who he is, and who he was, I presume.”

“And who his father is.” Healer Young nodded. “In my turn, I presume that you believe his father sent him this item, and the curse embedded in it.”

“I can’t think of anyone else who would have done it,” said Aletha, after rejecting at least three ways to say this which were far less diplomatic.

“It makes a great deal of sense out of an otherwise senseless attack on a teenager. The final stage of the curse is blood-dependent, as I believe you had already concluded,” he said to Remus. “Once the owner of the item had accepted its message, the sharp edge would emerge and shed his blood,

beginning the final stage of the curse. To put it in layman's terms, this item had a personality of its own. Had your son been as accepting of its message as he seemed to be when the final stage was invoked, that personality would have taken hold and overridden his own."

Someone swore under their breath.

"But he wasn't," said Remus, with a note of triumph in his voice. "He fought."

"Yes." Healer Young sighed. "He fought."

Something's wrong. "Was there provision made in the curse for his fighting it?" asked Aletha, although she suspected she knew the answer already, and that she wouldn't like it.

"Yes. And not a pretty one. The personality embedded in the object, as I said, attempted to overtake him, and might have succeeded had the object not been forcibly removed from contact with him. Once that had occurred, though, the curse's final set of instructions took effect. Should the personality fail utterly in its attempts to conquer, the curse begins to shut down its victim's body, beginning with simple unconsciousness, but proceeding quickly to coma and from there..."

A choked gasp was audible. "No," whispered Danger, staring at him. "No, you can't mean this."

"The process, once begun, is irreversible." Healer Young met their eyes with composure forged over seventy years and, Aletha suddenly knew, far too many deaths. "I'm sorry."

"It's so like him," said Remus quietly. "If he can't have Draco, no one can."

Aletha forced her tears away for a moment. She couldn't break down yet. There was another person depending on her. "What about Meghan?"

Healer Young gave her a small smile. "I'm glad you asked. The curse was able to strike at her due to a blood tie, I would assume – how closely are they related?"

"Second cousins."

"As I thought. That relationship is just close enough to allow the curse to harm her somewhat, but not to allow for any serious degree of harm. She has been rendered unconscious only, and should awaken within a few hours, unharmed."

"Good," said Danger, blinking fast and angrily to clear her eyes. "One is enough to lose to an idiot like Lucius Malfoy. I'm going to find him, and when I get through with him, there won't be enough left even to identify magically."

"No, you're not," said Remus roughly. "Not before I get my turn."

"Leave enough for Sirius and me," said Aletha, finding a smile coming to her lips now, of all times, in this awful situation. "We'll want a few licks before the end. And I don't think the cubs are just going to sit there and let us have all the fun, either."

“Hell, no,” someone muttered.

Remus nodded once in agreement, then looked at Healer Young. “How quickly is quickly?” he inquired, the utter control smoothing his voice again. A stranger would have thought he was asking about when something he had ordered in a shop would come in. “How long do we have?”

Healer Young looked over his shoulder and pointed his wand at Draco, murmuring something. After a moment, he turned back to Remus. “Minutes,” he said. “I can’t be any more specific than that, I’m sorry.”

Without a word, Remus stood and went to Draco’s bedside, kneeling down beside his Pack-son. He took one of the boy’s hands in his own and bowed his head over it. Aletha turned away as she saw his shoulders begin to shake, but the expression on Danger’s face wasn’t much better – her friend looked lost, lost and frightened, as though hope had left her for good, and the sniffing reaching her ears wasn’t helping either. Carefully, Aletha stood up, helped Danger to her feet, and led her to the bedside.

She should have a chance to say goodbye...

Even thinking the word almost choked her. As Danger, too, slowly knelt beside the bed, Aletha looked down at Draco’s still form, hating it as she did but knowing she’d hate herself even more in the future if she didn’t.

The future. He’ll never have one. And ours will be so much poorer without him.

She bit her lip hard, pressed on the corners of her eyes, and made herself look at her Pack-son, really look at him, as if it was the last time she’d see him.

It is. The last time you’ll see him alive, anyway.

Patience with the negative side of her mind evaporated. *Will you just SHUT UP?*

Wisely, it did so, and Aletha finally got her look at Draco. He could have been sleeping, except that Aletha knew from years of den-nights that he usually slept curled up on his side. It seemed unnatural to see him lying flat on his back. A slight smile lingered on his face, and the ring and little fingers on his right hand were curled under, with the thumb holding them there, giving him the look of a priest about to administer a blessing. His hair was spread across the pillow.

It’s getting a little long. We’ll have to get him a haircut soon...

She exhaled softly. *All right, stupid optimism is not an improvement.*

Gently, she stroked a wayward strand of hair out of Draco’s eyes, then let her hand linger on his forehead. His skin wasn’t as smooth as it had been in previous years – he was growing up, she reminded herself, as they all were –

But his growing ends here. He’ll be thirteen to us forever, and we’ll never know how much of the

way he's been acting these last few months was him and how much was the damned curse...

She bent and kissed his cheek, then scent-touched him. "I love you, Draco Regulus Black," she said quietly. "I always have, from the first moment I saw you at Malfoy Manor. I thought, 'Now there's a little boy I could love.' And I was right." She straightened up. "Goodbye," she whispered, and turned away quickly, before the tears could fall.

Healer Young was watching her with something in his face that looked almost like amusement. Cold fury flowed through Aletha, drawing her up to her full height and setting her shoulders.

"Enjoying seeing me fail?" she asked spitefully, drawing closer to him in three precise steps. "When I succeeded so well with other cases?"

"I'm sorry you think that of me." His level tone destroyed what she had been thinking of as a very righteous anger. "I know I wasn't as polite as I should have been over the Longbottom cases. I am terribly sorry about that, and I was actually hoping to offer you, as little as you may care to accept it, sympathy."

Aletha looked at the floor, heartily ashamed. "Thank you," she said, barely audible even to herself.

"I know what it's like, Mrs. Freeman-Black."

Aletha looked up at him again, surprised that he hadn't called her by her title as he always had before.

But that was Healer to Healer. This is human to human.

"I know what it's like to be able to save lives, all the lives you want. Except the one that really matters."

And for just a moment, pain showed in his eyes, pain that bore a close resemblance to the anguish tearing her heart to pieces at the moment.

Of course, he's been a Healer for all those years, he must have had so many patients die even he's lost count –

But she knew deep inside her that he hadn't, that he could probably tell her precisely how many patients had died under his care, and certainly how many had died because of it, because of some mistake he'd made.

And a man of his age has to have lost people – friends, family members – possibly even a child of his own...

"Tell me something," she said, to drown out the quiet weeping she was beginning to hear from behind her. "If this... was treatable. There have to be curses like this that don't end this way. How would you treat it?"

“Well, the best way is to transfer it.” Healer Young led her to the table, where they sat down. “Another person is found, willing to suffer the effects of the curse, and fitting the original description of the person the curse was laid on. Most curses are laid only very generally, so a member of the family or a close friend is usually willing and able to take the transfer. This curse, though – specifically targeted to a pureblood teenage boy – although he has a brother of the same age, does he not?”

“Half-blood,” said Aletha bleakly. “Harry’s mother was Muggleborn.”

“I see. Well, perhaps a friend would have been willing. After the curse was transferred, the original victim would recover almost immediately, and the new victim – the transferee – would recover more slowly, as the curse tried to take effect and failed. Once curses are established, you see, they are only truly effective on that one person. A transferred curse invariably fails, and the transference is accomplished by a simple spell.”

“But it only works with curses that don’t have this as their end result,” said Aletha bitterly, looking at the bed with her two best friends kneeling beside it, racked with grief.

“That’s correct.”

There had to be some kind of strange acoustic quality to the hospital wing, Aletha decided. There was no other way she could account for hearing crying coming from two different places – one beside Draco’s bed, and the other somewhere in the vicinity of the fireplace...

She rested her head in her hands, knowing she was about to lose her battle with tears and not caring.

God, Sirius, where are you when I need you?

xXxXx

“Will that be all, sir?” Sirius asked in a monotone for the tenth time. He’d finally told his pendants to leave him alone, since his neck and chest were starting to show signs of first-degree burns.

I know, I know, I know. I shouldn’t be here. I should be at Hogwarts, helping them deal with whatever just happened – Danger said it was a curse, and something about Tonks’ Christmas present, but Tonks wouldn’t curse Draco, would she?

“No, I need a few more scrolls.” Calmly, Rufus Scrimgeour ran his quill down a list. “Let’s see now... I’ll need the Vampire-Human Agreement of 1672 and the list of amendments, the Decree on the Growing of Magical Plants from 1974, and the arrest reports from last April...”

Sirius slammed his fist down on Scrimgeour’s desk. The older Auror didn’t even flinch. “With all due respect, sir, this is ridiculous,” he said tightly. “This is work for a secretary, not an Auror.”

“The work of an Auror is whatever I say it is, Black. Now run along.”

“No, sir, I will not run along.” Sirius stared into Scrimgeour’s yellow eyes. “What do you have against me? You’ve been hostile towards me since the day I took my tests, you’ve been watching me ever since you got back from St. Mungo’s, and now you’re deliberately keeping me from a family emergency to play your stupid little parchment treasure hunt. What did I ever do to you?”

“You made my Aurors look ridiculous,” said Scrimgeour, matching him glare for glare. “A criminal evading capture for nearly nine years, that certainly boosted our image with the public. Not to mention that stunt you pulled at your trial. Having your famous godson produce the true criminal in front of the entire Wizengamot – very pat, I thought. Very smooth. A little too smooth.”

“What are you saying?”

“How do I know you didn’t have Pettigrew tucked away all those years, ready to trot out at a moment’s notice as evidence of your innocence?”

Sirius kept his mouth closed by a major effort of will. “Why wouldn’t I have turned him in earlier, then?” he countered. “It’s not like I was in hiding for my health. Harry and the others found him just in time to save my hide, and that’s all there is to it.”

“So you say. But I still find it hard to accept you as a shining soldier of the light.”

“I never claimed to be one. I’m just an Auror, like any other, doing my part to keep the world safe.” Sirius threw some dopey three-bags-full inflections into the last phrase. “Will *that* be all, sir?”

“No, Black, it won’t. If we’re going to have this out, we might as well have it all out at once.” Scrimgeour stood up. “I’m also highly suspicious of your tests falling on the day that Lars Vilias was killed and Amelia Bones and I were poisoned.”

“Oh, for...” Sirius censored himself quickly, just in case his career still had a faint chance of continuing. “...crying out loud. That was a *coincidence!* ”

“There are no coincidences in our line of work, Black.”

“News flash, sir – yes, there are. You’ve just encountered one.” Sirius stood up himself. “I’ve had enough of this. That *will* be all, *sir* . I’m leaving.”

He turned towards the door. A memo fluttered in through the mail slot and landed in his hand. Quickly, he ripped it open. Another note was inside, this one addressed in Harry’s handwriting. He tore that open as well and scanned it.

As in a dream, he heard Scrimgeour’s furious voice. “Black! If you walk out of this office, you’ll never work as an Auror again!”

Sirius turned back. “And if I don’t, I’ll never see my child again,” he said roughly. “Not a very difficult decision to make. Have a nice life, *sir* . ”

He shoved the door open so hard it slammed into the opposite wall and stalked down the hallway. Within a few paces, he was running.

The note in Harry's writing was crumpled in his right hand.

Padfoot –

Come right away. Draco's dying.

xXxXx

"I sent it," said Harry dully, walking back into the library. "I don't know if it'll get through, though. I don't know if you can Floo things without people."

Ron nodded. "Think you can," he said in a voice that sounded nothing like his usual cheerful tones. "It should get there."

Harry fell into a chair. "Anything happen?"

"Nothing yet," said Ginny. "Except Mrs. Letha and the Healer talking. The Healer said maybe, if the curse hadn't... you know... they could have transferred it to somebody else and saved Draco like that."

"But they can't." Hermione lifted her head from her hands. Her eyes were brimming, but none of the tears had yet escaped. "They can't do anything. And now, any minute..."

A horrid sound, half howl, half heartbroken wail, echoed down the stone chute. It was Danger's voice, but so distorted by grief that it was barely recognizable. Hermione stared at the opening in the bookshelves, then shut her eyes as two fat tears dripped out of them. "That's it," she whispered. "That's it. He's gone."

Ginny was kneeling beside a hassock, her head laid on it, soaking its cushions with her tears. Ron knelt next to her, his face bewildered as he put a hand gently on her back. He seemed to be trying to say something, but he obviously had no idea what.

Harry stepped closer to Hermione, hoping he wasn't about to make an enormous mistake. As close as he and Draco had been, he knew that Draco and Hermione had been even closer, coming near to really being the twins they had pretended to be.

"Hermione," he said. "I'm still here."

"Right," said Hermione furiously, looking up at him. "Because you're the important one, is that it, Harry Potter?"

"No," said Harry, as a lump rose in his throat. "But he was my brother too."

Then the word he'd used came back and hit him in the chest.

Was.

Within seconds, he was holding Hermione, or she was holding him, and they were both crying. Every tear hurt, burning as it left Harry's eyes, etching a line of fire down his face and his neck to his chest, where they puddled against the other line of fiery heat...

xXxXx

The howl was what woke him. It sounded terrible, and it was right in his ear.

“Shut up,” he said. Or tried to say.

His mouth wouldn't move, and no sound came from him.

That's odd.

He tried opening his eyes. That didn't work either.

This is very odd.

Now he could hear words in the howl. “No, no, no, no... Draco... Draco, please no...”

Please no what? I'm not doing anything. I can't do anything. Draco tried, experimentally, to wiggle his foot. Nothing doing.

“Remus, he can't be... not Draco, not our fox... he can't be dead...”

Dead? I'm not dead...

I don't think. Whatever the globe did to me, it hurt a lot, but I don't think I died because of it. He scoffed inwardly. *No way. I can't be dead. Danger's just made a mistake.*

“He's not breathing, love,” said Moony's voice, with a pain-filled edge in it that Draco had only heard once before, at the Quidditch match where Harry had so nearly died. “He's not breathing.”

I'm not? Draco thought about it. *No, I'm not. I haven't breathed once since I woke up. And my heart's not beating either. I'd be able to hear it. And I can't move at all...*

Icy cold fear began to trickle down the back of his neck. He tried to swallow nervously, and couldn't do that either.

Is this what it's like to be dead? People talk about seeing a bright light, and going on to something better, and seeing everyone you love again... but no one who's really died has ever come back. Is that all just delusions, and this is what it's really like?

The trickle of fear had increased to a flood. *I'm dead. I'm dead, and this is all there is. No afterlife, no bright light, no happiness. Just... being stuck in a body that won't work anymore, and*

listening to people cry for me...

They'll bury me. They'll have a funeral, and stick me in a coffin, and bury me, and I'll rot, and stink, and turn into a skeleton, and I'll still be stuck in here...

NO! The scream seemed to echo around the inside of his head. *NO! I won't believe it!*

It was a trick, that was what it was. It was another part of what the globe had done to him – it was a hallucination, a bad dream, and he would wake up soon in a bed in the hospital wing, and be able to tell everyone about this horrible dream he'd had, and they would all laugh...

Or maybe it's something else. His mind, free of the need to maintain his body, was running at warp speed. *Maybe this is real, but it's not normal. Isn't this the kind of thing your father would do, if he thought you'd got away from him for good? Make you suffer like this, trapped in your own dead body forever?*

He wasn't sure when he'd realized the globe had to be from his father. Probably when it had started hurting him. Or maybe when it had tried to make him hurt Luna.

Luna. She'll think I'm dead. She'll cry for me. And Hermione and Harry and Meghan will cry, and Ron and Ginny and Neville, and the Pack-parents... I can still hear Moony and Danger, and Letha and Padfoot have to be around here somewhere... God, if I could only tell them I'm in here, maybe they could help me...

SOMEBODY HELP ME! he screamed inside his mind. *SOMEBODY HEAR ME, PLEASE! I'M NOT DEAD! PLEASE, SOMEBODY – I'M NOT DEAD!*

But he knew no one could hear him, and no one ever would.

And my pendants feel like they're going to burn my robes right off my chest.

It was his last coherent thought before he surrendered to panic.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 19: Amoenus Somnium (Year 3)

Chapter 19: Amoenus Somnium

Remus wondered dully how empty one man could feel.

He'd mourned before – for friends lost to the first war, James and Lily, his mother and his father – but it had never been like this. There had always been some comfort. For those who had died in the war, there was the sense that they had died in a good cause, as they would have wanted to. His mother's death had been an accident, no one's fault, and his father's almost a relief, a release from the constant sorrow and guilt for having survived the fire that killed his wife.

This, though – this was a deliberate killing, the murder of an innocent boy, done through trickery and stealth. There was no reason, no sense to it, except one man's insane determination that no one else should have what he could not. And the result was the death of someone Remus loved dearly, more dearly than he loved himself or any other except two.

Draco.

My son.

Not born to him, not of his blood, but ten years his, and dearly beloved every day of those years. Sometimes provoking, sometimes maddening, but always, always his.

And now he's gone.

The thought had created a void in his heart, into which all emotions vanished, leaving behind only pain. Danger was weeping into his chest with a quiet hopelessness that was almost worse than her earlier howls of grief. Her heart, too, ached with the void where Draco once had been, and Remus wished for a moment that he could fall into that void and cease to hurt, cease to feel – it would be so easy...

But he couldn't. Draco had been dear to him, but there were others who needed him still. Others like Danger, and Hermione.

Hermione. God, what is she going to do without Draco?

His Kitten and their Fox had been close since the Pack's move to Devon, when Harry had become good friends with Ron. There had been days Remus had forgotten, or let himself forget, that they weren't what they claimed to be, that Draco was another man's son and Hermione his wife's sister, and looked at them with all a father's love and pride.

He had imagined their lives as they grew older together – Draco becoming a scholar or a musician or even an Auror alongside Harry, Hermione accepting a teaching position at Hogwarts or a place in the Department of Mysteries. He had dreamed of marriages and children, raised in love as the

Pack's cubs had been, playing every day with their "cousins" and running freely from one house to the next, since he was certain they would wish to live near one another. It had become unthinkable that they could ever be parted.

But now they had been parted, irrevocably so. And Hermione didn't even know it yet –

Remus bowed his head, his throat tightening further still, as he realized what he'd done. He'd told Harry and the others that he would tell them as soon as there was news – he'd practically promised – and then he'd forgotten about it, and now it was too late...

One broken promise led his mind to another. That night, so long ago, when he had placed a sleeping Draco between Harry and Hermione, and promised him silently that there would be a happy ending to his story. There was no possible way this ending could be described as happy. He'd failed, as a father, as an alpha, as everything.

The muscles of his back and shoulders burned with tension, and a hot, hard knot of misery had lodged itself directly under his breastbone. Danger's weight against him seemed to be pushing it farther in, so that it hurt more with every passing second, growing until he thought he might scream –

And then someone did scream.

"GET OUT OF MY WAY!"

xXxXx

"Hot in here," grumbled Ron, holding Ginny against him. "Stuffy. Making my eyes water."

"Oh, stop it," muttered Harry. "Just go on and cry, it's not like we aren't."

"He's right, though," said Ginny, shifting her head against Ron's chest. "It is hot."

"Hot," repeated Hermione in a small, distracted voice, rubbing at her neck. "So hot – it must be from us..."

"From all of us, I guess." Harry understood what Hermione meant. He wished he had some of Moony and Danger's imperviousness to fire, or at least knew how to stop his pendants burning against his skin. *Maybe getting them out of my robes would help.*

He brought them out, letting them hang loose against his chest. Most of the carvings were glowing, but one shone brighter than the others, like a miniature star.

Whoever feels the worst over this, I guess. Though I can't see how they could tell.

Hermione suddenly stiffened in his arms. "My God," she breathed. "Oh my God, oh my God—"

"What?" Harry demanded as she pulled away. "What's wrong?"

Hermione fumbled at her neck, swearing under her breath, until her pendants came free of her robes. She flipped through them frantically and stared at the brightest carving with a horrified expression, then leaped to her feet. “Move!” she shouted at Ron and Ginny, who were beside the opening in the bookshelves. “*GET OUT OF MY WAY!*”

“Hermione, no, don’t–” Harry protested as Ron scrambled away from the opening, dragging Ginny with him.

Hermione darted across the room and vanished into the chute.

xXxXx

Remus jerked his head around. The scream seemed to have come from the direction of the fireplace –

Hermione?

As he watched, a section of the stone wall slid aside, and Hermione shot out of the passage thus revealed. Her face was blotchy and tear-stained, but alight with frantic haste. She ran across the room, falling to her knees on Draco’s other side, her hands already on her pendant chain.

“What are you doing?” Remus asked hoarsely. “Hermione, don’t... he’s...”

“No, he’s not,” said Hermione, yanking at her chain to make it larger. “He can’t be. He can’t.”

“Kitten, denying it won’t help–”

“I’m not denying it, it’s a fact! Feel them!” Hermione shook her pendants hard. “They’re *hot!* Hot, not cold! He *can’t* be dead!”

And before Remus could do anything to stop her, she had thrown her chain over Draco’s head and pulled it between his head and the pillow, so that it rested around his neck.

Her face screwed up, as in pain. “Draco!” she half-shouted, twitching the pendants so that the chain tightened ever so slightly. “Draco, it’s all right, it’s all right now. It’s me, it’s Neenie, yes, I’m here, I can hear you, you don’t have to yell.” Her hand sought his and held it. “Yes, yes, I know, me too – no, don’t worry, I won’t let them – I don’t have to, they understand now, they know. It’s going to be all right. I know. I know.” Tears were falling from her eyes, but her face was radiant with joy. “I figured it out just a second ago. No, not only me, everyone helped.”

Remus didn’t want to look away from what was either a miracle or his Kitten losing her mind, but he could hear noises behind him. Danger solved the problem by knuckling the tears out of her eyes and looking over his shoulder. **The other three just climbed out of that hole by the fireplace, she reported. Wherever Hermione was, they were with her.**

“Ron was saying how it was hot, and Ginny agreed with him and moved her face away like something was hot right against it – she was leaning on him, on his chest – and then Harry took his

pendants out of his robes, and I saw your carving glowing so bright, and I realized that they ought to have been cold if you were dead, and if they were hot it meant something else was wrong...”

She’s right, said Remus, not taking his eyes from the cubs. **She’s right. Hot is for distress, for anger and fear, not for death. This is some kind of trick. Draco’s alive.**

Danger took one shuddering breath and let it out. **That’s the best news I’ve heard in years. What do we do now?**

“Move over,” said Aletha from behind them. Her face was tear-stained, but her voice brisk and businesslike, and she had her chain out already. It joined Hermione’s around Draco’s neck. “How are you feeling, love?” she asked, then smiled wryly. “I’m sure. But other than that. Are you in pain?”

Remus stood up and stepped away. **You stay with him**, he said. **I need to get another look at that globe.**

The door slammed open and Sirius charged in, looking panicked. Harry ran straight to him. “I was wrong,” he said quickly. “I was wrong, we were all wrong, I don’t know what’s happening but I think Draco’s going to be all right...”

Sirius’ shoulders sagged in relief, and he hugged Harry hard. “Lo, Moony,” he said, looking over at Remus. “What’d I miss?”

“A hell of a scare,” said Remus. “Go see if Letha needs you. She was looking pretty shaky a minute ago, and I think she could use your help.”

Sirius nodded and hurried toward Draco’s bed, Harry beside him. Remus went to the table holding the globe, where Healer Young was still sitting, looking utterly lost. “You probably think we’re crazy,” he said conversationally.

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

Remus pulled out his own pendants. “Magical amulets,” he said. “Charmed to allow speech mind to mind when two people wear them at once. Also charmed to tell us if someone’s upset or hurt, or in danger of dying, and they were activating for the former and not the latter, if we had only noticed it.”

“Thank you,” said Healer Young, most of the confusion clearing from his face. “I’ll admit I couldn’t make heads or tails of that little goings-on.”

“Understandable. Can you show me where the runes are that led you to believe Draco was dying?”

Healer Young pointed out a group with his wand. “These three, here. You see how they’re intertwined, meaning that if one of these things happens, they’ll all happen. This one for failure, this for unconsciousness, and this for death.”

Remus looked closely at the death rune, directing a beam of wand light into it. It seemed just like all the other runes on the globe... and yet...

He held his left hand close to the globe and shone the light directly into the globe. It reflected back out, so that his hand was illuminated in patterns that looked like the lines of the rune – but there seemed to be patterns within some of the lines as well.

I think I'm onto something. Remus pulled the globe closer to himself and peered directly within the engraved lines, shining the wand light from above his head.

Deep in the recesses of the lines, so tiny they could barely be seen, were carved a series of other runes.

Lucius Malfoy, you slippery bastard. Nice try.

Grinning to himself, Remus pulled over parchment and quill. Since he wrote with his wand hand, he summoned a ball of fire to be his light, using his wand to conjure it so as not to alarm the Healer. Then he began to copy the runes, trying to strike a balance between fast and accurate.

Healer Young came to peer over his shoulder. "I've never seen that done before," he said in mild surprise.

"Nor have I," said Remus. "First time for everything."

xXxXx

Draco had no idea how long he'd spent screaming before Hermione's voice had pierced his panic. It had felt like hours, but he was fairly sure now that it had only been a minute or two. The moment she had called his name – not like she was grieving for someone who was lost, but like she was calling someone who was found – would probably rank high on his lifetime list of moments he never wanted to relive but was unbelievably glad had happened.

"Draco!"

His mental screams cut off instantly as he snapped back to some form of sanity. If someone was calling him, they must expect a response – but they had to know he couldn't move or say anything, or he would have already...

"Draco, it's all right, it's all right now."

He felt a twitch around his neck, a second line of heat like the first – *pendant chain!* – and thought hard towards the speaker. **Please, whoever you are, TELL ME YOU CAN HEAR ME!**

"It's me, it's Neenie, yes, I'm here, I can hear you, you don't have to yell."

Relief swamped him, drowning his fear and floating him high on its tide. If his body had worked, he would have burst into tears. **Neenie, oh my God, thank you** – He felt her hand close around

his, an anchor into life. **I was so scared, so scared, they thought I was dead –**

“Yes, yes, I know, me too–”

They’re going to bury me, please, tell them not to, I’m not dead –

“No, don’t worry, I won’t let them–”

Tell them, please, tell them, I don’t want them to think I’m dead –

“I don’t have to, they understand now, they know. It’s going to be all right.”

I hate this, I hate it, thank you so much, I thought they were going to bury me alive –

“I know. I know.” He could hear her crying, but her mind’s touch was unadulterated joy.

You just saved my life, thank you, but *how the hell did you know?*

“I figured it out just a second ago.”

Draco sent her a mental grin. **All by yourself, right?**

“No, not only me, everyone helped. Ron was saying how it was hot, and Ginny agreed with him and moved her face away like something was hot right against it...”

By the time the explanation was finished, Draco was beginning to feel normal again. **Oh, no, nothing else was wrong,** he said dryly. **I was just stuck in my dead body and couldn’t make anyone understand I was alive, nothing was wrong at all.**

Idiot, she shot back mentally. **Letha’s coming.**

“Move over,” said Letha’s voice, and Draco felt a chain pass under his head and settle around his neck. “How are you feeling, love?” she asked.

Pretty good for a dead man.

He felt her amusement. “I’m sure. But other than that. Are you in pain?”

No, nothing hurts. I just can’t move. And it’s freaky as hell not to be breathing.

“I can imagine.”

Can you really?

“Actually... no, probably not. I’m going to run a few diagnostics on you. I’ll warn you if anything is supposed to hurt, and you tell me if anything does.”

Draco heard a door slam open. **What’s that?**

Padfoot just got here, said Hermione. **Harry's telling him you're all right.**

Am I? Is there any way to recover from this – whatever it is?

“There should be,” said Letha absently. “Most curses are reversible if caught early enough. Can you feel this?”

Oi ! That tickles!

“Good, it's supposed to.”

“What's going on?” said a deep voice.

Say hi for me, would you?

“Draco says hello,” said Hermione aloud. “The curse on him made us all think he was dead, but he's not.”

“Going to be all right now, fox,” said Padfoot comfortingly.

Draco felt a large hand muss his hair. He growled mentally. **I'd bite you if I could move.**

“Now, now, no violence,” said Letha. “Everyone be quiet for a minute, I think I've almost got something...”

Danger wants to talk to you too, said Hermione silently. **Do you mind if she puts her chain on?**

I'm going to look like a jewelry festival at this rate. Why don't you all just use mine?

That sounds like a good idea. Will you make it expand for me?

Just pull it out. Draco felt Hermione's hand slide under his robes and extract the chain, now warm with only the warmth of body-heated metal. *Grow,* he told it, and heard a small chorus of giggles. **What?** he demanded.

There's a lot of it now, said Hermione. He heard her moving beside him, probably handing the chain around. **Probably more than we need. But it's not so bad.**

How much is there?

Let me put it this way, said Harry's voice. **You could probably talk to all of Gryffindor Tower with this thing.**

Hello to you too.

You scared us pretty good there, said Ginny. **It's a good thing Luna wasn't here.**

Where is she?

Her dad's here with her, said Harry. They went somewhere, I think a private room. She kept crying about seeing a snake on you, that it was trying to crush you and eat you. She was pretty broken up.

So she won't know about any of this?

Not unless somebody told her. Maybe one of us should go find her and make sure she knows you're all right.

More or less.

Oh, for heaven's sake, said Ginny, and Draco felt her fingers flick his ear lightly. I'll go. And I'll try and get her to come back with me, how's that?

No. Please don't. Draco spoke quickly, hoping to catch Ginny before she ducked out of his chain. **She won't like it – it'll scare her to see me like this –**

If she knows you're all right, I don't think she'll get scared, said Ginny. I'm going.

No—! But Ginny was already gone. Draco swore to himself.

You're just vain, said Harry. You don't want her to see you like this, with your hair all messed up.

Is it all messed up?

Well, just a little over there.

Over where? He heard Harry laughing. **Damn it, Four-Eyes, this isn't funny!**

Your hair looks fine, said Danger's voice soothingly. Or it will in a second. And Remus and the Healer are close to finding out what actually happened to you. I can't make promises, but things are starting to look up, fox...

Things started to look up the second Neenie called my name.

This once, I'll let you get away with that out of den, said Hermione, finger-combing his hair back into place.

Oh, so that's what you have to do, said Harry. To get her to let you do things she won't normally. Die.

Giggles erupted all around.

xXxXx

“Here's what I found,” said Remus, placing the parchment between himself and Healer Young.

“First off, there are null runes in all four corners of that death rune. It would never have worked. But then there’s this whole other series, written up and down the lines...”

“Which are for an effect I have seen before,” said Healer Young grimly. “And should have recognized this time, except I was fooled by that blasted big death sign staring me in the face. But that’s what it’s meant to do. Now this, this is the real thing. And if I’m reading it right, he’s still alive, and still in there.” He looked over his shoulder at the people surrounding Draco’s bed. “But his body’s responding, and reading to all the usual spells, as dead. If we left it, it would probably even start to counterfeit damage. Decay and the like.”

“Counterfeit?”

“That’s what this is about.” Healer Young tapped another line of runes. “This sequence here keeps his actual body in perfect condition – equivalent of a stasis spell – indefinitely. Until it’s removed. There’s a command to remove it, but it’s probably locked to one specific person.”

“Most likely the curse’s originator.” Remus nodded. “What about these?” He pointed to a third line.

“Now those are strange. Something I’ve never seen before. According to this, the curse was supposed to let him awaken as soon as the death-counterfeit began, give him three minutes of full awareness, and then knock him out again, and keep him unconscious until it was removed.”

“But he’s already been awake longer than that.”

“Yes, and there’s the other catch. The knock-out order was tailored towards his emotional state. It could only take effect if he was in a state of panic, or close to it. And when your girl did what she did – called to him, told him she knew he was alive – that must have stopped him panicking.”

Remus savored Hermione being “his girl,” even as he asked his question. “Why would it do that?”

“Offhand, I don’t know. But I have a guess. Being trapped in what seems to be a dead body, unable to communicate in any way, reads to me as a perfect template for madness. If the curse’s originator wanted your boy sane, he wouldn’t want him aware for too long. Just long enough to understand what had happened to him, and want to get out so desperately that he’d accept anyone or anything that would help him.”

“Including his blood father,” said Remus coldly, though he did notice that Young had just matched his reference to Hermione with one to Draco. It seemed the Healer had accepted the Pack’s status as a family.

And he also seems to have a problem using names for some reason...

“So, what do we do now?” he asked.

“Well, his prognosis is unknown at this point,” said Healer Young uncertainly, looking at the bed again. “I doubt he’ll recover on his own.”

“But he’s not going to die.”

“Not from the curse... but this isn’t a good situation. An active young man, suddenly confined to bed – more than that, unable to move at all, even to open his eyes – and his body’s basically shut down, he’s running on magic only at this point. It’s not a workable situation long-term.”

“Excuse me,” said a hesitant voice. Remus and Healer Young both turned to see Ron standing beside their table. “Ron Weasley, sir,” he said, offering his hand to the Healer. “I’m a friend of Draco’s.”

“Albertus Young – Weasley, eh? You have the look. Any relation to Arthur Weasley, Misuse of Muggle Artifacts?”

“He’s my dad.”

“I’ve met him. A few years back now, to-do over a cursed book. Burned some poor witch’s eyes out.”

“I remember that. Dad told us about you – he said you were the best curse Healer at St. Mungo’s.”

“Did he, now.” Healer Young looked pleased. “What can I do for you, then?”

“We were listening earlier, sir,” Ron admitted. “When you and Mrs. Letha were talking about how you’d heal the curse if it wasn’t going to kill Draco. And now it isn’t. So can’t you do what you were talking about? Transfer it to somebody else?”

“I suppose we could,” said Healer Young slowly, thinking as he spoke. “Yes, we could do that. Transfer a curse to someone else, and it wears off gradually,” he said for Remus’ benefit. “The only snag is, this curse was set for a male pureblood teenager. Whoever we transferred it to would have to be the same, or it would just bounce back.”

“What would it be like, sir? For whoever took the curse, I mean?”

“I’d imagine it would be a lot like what Mr. Black’s experiencing now. He’s obviously unable to move or speak, or he would have let us know he wasn’t dead on his own. That wouldn’t last, of course, but a curse this comprehensive would be at least a month wearing off fully. That’d mean a few weeks in bed, probably not even being able to tend to yourself, and maybe a week or two where that’s all you can manage, is tending to yourself.”

“But it won’t wear off Draco like that.”

“No. On him, it’d just stay. Curses are funny that way – tenacious as bundimuns on the person they’re cast on, but swap them over and they drain right away like water off a dragon’s back...”

Young could probably go on for hours about curses, Remus thought. “Why do you ask, Ron?” he said, though he had a feeling he knew.

“I’m pureblood,” said Ron. “And I’m a couple months older than Draco, but we’re in the same year.” He seemed to nerve himself up. “What about me?”

“You?” Healer Young looked surprised. “Well, I suppose it would work – I can’t see any reason why not – you’d have to undergo an examination beforehand, but if that checked out...”

“Healer Young, I’ve got something,” said Aletha from the direction of the bed. “You may want to see this.”

Young was on his feet and crossing the room immediately. Remus looked at Ron. “You don’t have to do this,” he said. “We can find another way.”

Ron shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “I know Draco and I don’t always get along,” he said. “But this is *wrong*. It’s disgusting. It made H – everybody cry. And I’d get better from it. Draco won’t. Not on his own.” Then he grinned. “Besides, if it takes a month to recover, I’d get out of exams.”

Remus laughed, his first real laugh since this mess had started.

Not terribly difficult. Do you realize it’s only been about half an hour?

My God, you’re right. It feels like years. “Certainly a praiseworthy reason to do anything,” he told Ron. “We’ll need to talk to your parents, of course, but as long as they agree, I’m with Healer Young – I don’t see why not.” **Are you keeping track of this?**

You bet. But I’m not telling Draco. Not until we have something definite.

Good idea. False hope at this stage would be very bad.

Speaking of hope, a certain fox was hoping you could be tempted over here at some point.

On my way. “I’m going over to say hello to Draco,” Remus said. “Care to come?”

“Sure. Should I tell him?”

“Not yet. Not until we know for certain.”

Ron nodded and followed Remus to the bedside.

“Excellent work,” said Healer Young to Aletha as they approached. “Magical confirmation of what I’d worked out from the cursed object with Professor Lupin’s help – a stasis spell counterfeiting death, and the soul still inhabiting the body. You’re really rather talented.”

“It helps to know exactly what I’m looking for.” Aletha looked up at Remus and Ron. “Hello, there, come to get in on the party?”

“You could say that. Are we welcome?”

“Very much so,” said Danger, holding out a loop of the immense gold chain that circled everyone’s shoulders. “Come on in.”

Remus slid the chain over his shoulders. **Hello, fox, how are you feeling?** he asked.

Alive, thank you. And hoping to stay that way.

Sounds like a plan. Remus reached down and pressed Draco’s hand briefly. It was cold and limp, but he knew that was the spell working. **We’re doing our best.**

But I have to go somewhere to make it happen, said Danger. **Excuse me a few minutes, Draco? I’ll be back.**

Sure. Didn’t want you here anyway.

Fine, I won’t be back.

Suit yourself.

“You don’t even stop being smart when you’re dead,” said Ron in amazement. “I guess some people really never change.”

Who asked you?

Danger kissed Remus on the cheek and slipped out of the room.

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Ah, the things we get to tell our neighbors. Let’s see.

First, there was “One of us is a mass murderer, but not really.” Then we had “One of us is a werewolf.” After that came “Your children are risking their lives with ours.” Then was “One of our children is risking his life for yours.” And now we have “One of your children wants to die – but not permanently – to get one of ours out of the same condition.”

Why can’t we just complain about their pets getting into our garden like normal people?

Danger Flooed to the Burrow, where she was lucky enough to catch Molly just coming in from marketing. The Weasley matriarch heard her out with only a few exclamations, most of them directed against the person who had sent the cursed globe to Draco. She was properly horrified by what it had done to him and looked quite proud, if a little worried, when Danger revealed that Ron had volunteered to take the curse on himself. “You’re sure he wouldn’t be hurt?” she asked. “That it won’t harm him any?”

“I’m not sure of anything, but that’s what the Healer says.”

“Well, I’ll want to ask Arthur – can you wait a minute or two?”

“Of course.”

Molly returned a very few minutes later, looking satisfied. “He says it’s all right,” she said. “Apparently he’s seen curse transference done before, and he says there’s no risk whatsoever that it would take permanent effect on Ron. So the worst that will happen is he spends some time in bed. Maybe it’ll slow his growth – I swear, the boy is a weed, every time I turn around he’s an inch taller...”

“It gets worse, I hear,” said Danger sympathetically. “Just remember, whatever Ron puts you through, we get double from our two.”

“And worse, I’m sure. But I’m used to it by now. Go on, back to the school with you, the faster you go the faster this is over with.” Molly shooed her towards the fireplace. “I’ll be by as soon as I have supper started, an hour or less, I’d guess.”

Danger Flooed directly back to the hospital wing, and stumbled out of the fireplace on the end of a burst of laughter. Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were sitting on or near Draco’s bed, the chain around their necks, laughing with abandon. Sirius and Aletha were nowhere to be seen.

They’re with Meghan. Neville seems to have done their little sharing trick again, so both of them are asleep at the moment, and Sirius and Letha are sitting with them. And probably getting rid of some tension.

Crying their eyes out with relief, you mean.

Why, yes. Remus stood up from his seat at the corner table, where Healer Young was working on something on a piece of parchment. He’s getting the transference spell ready. I told him it was good news. And no, I didn’t eavesdrop. But the tone of your mind went about five notes higher and several shades brighter when – I assume – Molly told you this was all right with her.

Her and Arthur both. She hopes it’ll slow Ron’s growth to be dead for a while.

Remus laughed aloud. **It might indeed do that. Oh, have you noticed who’s not here?**

Yes, where’s Luna?

She fell asleep after that little crying fit up in the Tower, and no one wanted to wake her. Gerald promised to tell her that Draco’s all right as soon as she wakes up.

If we get right to this, she might be able to see it for herself.

Then let’s get to it.

They walked over to the bed, waited out another burst of laughter, then ducked under the chain together. “We’re back,” said Remus.

Oh, no, not you again, said Draco. **Bouncers, remove the undesirables.**

“Yes, sir!” chorused Harry and Ron, as Hermione and Ginny giggled. “Right away, sir!”

They’re not moving, are they?

“No,” said Hermione, still giggling. “Not at all.”

Story of my life. No one listens to me.

“What did Mum say?” Ron asked.

“She said yes,” said Danger. “Do you want to tell everyone, or should I?”

“I’ll do it.” Ron faced his friends and squared his shoulders. “Draco, you know how we were talking about how to get the curse off you. And the best way was to put it on somebody else, but it has to be a pureblood teenage boy or it won’t take. And you said it was a shame Neville was asleep, since you could talk him into anything.”

Merlin’s beard, Ron, I was kidding.

“I know. But it doesn’t matter.” Ron pulled at the collar of his robes. “I’ve said I’ll do it.”

Hermione made a sound of joyful amazement, Harry stared at his friend, and Ginny looked bewildered. “Mum said yes?” she asked Danger. “Does she know what this is about?”

“Not only does she know, but your father has seen it done,” said Danger. “And he says Ron would be in no real danger at all. He’ll be inconvenienced for about a month, that’s all.”

“And you’ll be better by tomorrow, Drake,” added Ron. “Just in time to start studying for exams.”

Oh, of course, that’s why you’re doing this. To get out of exams. I should have known. But there was an undercurrent of surprise and genuine gratitude in Draco’s voice. **Thanks, Ron. I won’t forget this.**

“Don’t worry. I won’t let you.”

“You’re nuts,” said Harry. “Wish I was a pureblood, I’d do it.”

“Well, you’re not. So I get to do something you can’t. Suck it up, hero-boy.”

Harry shoved Ron off the bed.

Hermione hadn’t moved since the announcement. Now, as Ron picked himself up off the floor, she suddenly jumped up, threw her arms around him, kissed him on the lips, and ran out of the room.

I have a feeling I’m really going to regret not being able to see that as soon as someone tells

me what it was.

“It’s all right,” said Harry, staring at Ron, who was standing completely still and looking dazed. “I’ll show you my memory later. How do we do this?”

“We don’t do anything,” said Healer Young from behind him, making him jump. “You, young man – Ron, is it? – you lie down over here, and get comfortable. You’re going to be here for a while.”

“Yeah, a while,” said Ron, lying down on the indicated bed. “A while, like a month. I must be out of my mind.”

If you back out now...

“I never said I was going to back out.”

Yeah, but you acted like it.

“Would you two stop?” said Ginny. “Draco, you’d better take your chain back. It might interfere with the spell.”

“Good thinking,” said Healer Young approvingly. “I’ll get Trainee Freeman-Black in to observe while you’re doing that.” He moved to the other end of the room, where the screens had been drawn around a bed.

Remus took Draco’s chain off, but Danger didn’t bother, letting it slide through her neck as Draco called it home. It vanished through his robes, and Remus swallowed in sympathy. He knew, too well, the feeling of being entirely alone.

“I’ll be right here,” Ginny said, taking up a station beside Ron as Aletha and Sirius emerged from behind the screens. “And I’ll get my chain on you as soon as the spell goes through. That way, you won’t have time to get scared.”

“I’m not scared.”

Ginny made a motion indicating what she thought of that.

Where did a nice girl like her learn language like that?

They all get corrupted so young these days. Remus tossed in an image.

Well! If you show them things like that, I shouldn’t wonder!

Hermione stuck her head into the room. Remus beckoned her closer. She trotted in, followed closely by Luna. “I heard about the curse,” said the blonde girl, rubbing sleep out of her eyes. “What’s going on?”

“Healer Young is just going to transfer it from Draco to Ron,” said Danger.

Luna nodded and walked quickly to Draco’s bedside. Hermione did the same, and Harry, tapping two fingers against his brother’s cheek and muttering something to him, stepped across the aisle to the other bed. Ron looked pale, but resolute, though he was holding Ginny’s hand.

Please. Allowing Ginny to hold his hand, so that she will not be frightened by the terrible spellwork about to take place.

Remus’ response was lurid and impolite, making Danger laugh.

The curse transference was indeed a simple spell, but the gestures were large and impressive, and it obviously needed careful handling to make it work right. Healer Young was not quite sweating when he took his wand away from Ron for the last time, but he did look relieved. “You should be able to use those now,” he told Ginny, nodding to her pendants. “The active magic’s over, there’s nothing for them to interfere with.”

In the other bed, Draco drew a long, wheezing breath, then began to cough. Remus thought he’d never heard a more beautiful sound.

Luna waited until Draco was breathing more or less normally and had opened his eyes, and until Hermione had hugged him tightly, blinking away tears again. Then she leaned over and kissed him full on the mouth.

“Is it my birthday and I just haven’t noticed?” Sirius asked.

“Wow,” said Draco hoarsely when Luna straightened up. “I have to get killed more often.”

“I don’t *think* so,” said Danger tartly. “Once is quite often enough for me, thank you very much.”

“Yes, do think of us poor old folks,” added Aletha. “We’re getting gray hairs fast enough because of you. Do you really need to speed it along like this?”

“Oh, right,” Draco scoffed. “Show me one gray hair on your head from today.”

“Does it have to be *my* head?” Aletha looked smug. “Because I can see several from where I’m sitting, and I’m pretty sure they weren’t there yesterday.”

“Where?” asked Sirius in alarm.

“Don’t fuss, they’re barely visible. Besides, they make you look debonair. The dashing Auror, no longer in his first youth but now a man of experience.”

Sirius was about to respond to this, but Healer Young cut in. “The curse seems to have transferred perfectly,” he said. “There’s only regular hospital care needed now, which Poppy Pomfrey is entirely capable of – where is she, by the way? I haven’t seen her since I got here.”

“In her office,” said Aletha. “She said she was out of her depth and in the way when it came to curses, and she wasn’t going to interfere in things she didn’t properly understand.”

“I’ll go in and have a word with her, then, and Floo back to the hospital straight from there. I’ll be by tomorrow to check, but if nothing goes wrong between now and then, nothing will.”

“Thank you for this,” said Aletha, rising and shaking the Healer’s hand. “For everything.”

“Not at all.” Healer Young knocked at Madam Pomfrey’s office door and was admitted, closing it behind him.

“Now where were we?” said Danger. “Oh yes, something about a dashing Auror, a man of experience.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not an Auror anymore,” said Sirius. “Not after this afternoon.”

“What happened?” asked Remus, surprised.

“I basically told Scrimgeour to go to hell. He was playing with me, making me go fetch papers for him, even when he knew I had a family emergency to get to – I think he thought I was making it up – and then he told me he still doesn’t believe I’m not a Death Eater, and he thinks I may have been responsible for the poisonings. And then your note got there, Harry, and I just lost it. I was about to leave anyway, but that really clinched it. He told me if I walked out of his office, I’d never work as an Auror again, and…” Sirius shrugged. “I did.”

“He’s bluffing,” said Aletha. “He can’t afford to fire you. You’re too high-profile. Especially if you go public with why you left. Come on, you know how people think. Rushing off to see sick child – good. Keeping someone from rushing off to see sick child – bad. He’d take an enormous hit on that one.”

“Sick, hell, I thought he was dying,” said Sirius. “Harry sent me a note about it.”

“Yes, I think some people have some explaining to do about their part in this afternoon,” said Danger, looking over at the bed which held a motionless Ron, with Harry and Ginny on either side of it. They both looked up at this. “Are we going to learn exactly where you were that you could, apparently, hear everything that went on in this room?” She nodded to the hole in the wall by the fireplace.

“I think we’re due an explanation first,” said Harry, standing up. He looked straight at Remus. “What happened to ‘we’ll tell you as soon as we know anything’?”

Remus took a breath to begin a chain of explanations – all of them perfectly valid reasons why he hadn’t told Harry and the others what was going on – but then let it out again. Harry deserved better than explanations which were, at the end, more than half excuse. “I’m sorry, Harry,” he said. “I did tell you that, and then I didn’t follow through on it. I’m very sorry.”

“Oh, come on, there wasn’t time,” objected Draco. He looked at his watch. “Hell, it hasn’t even

been an hour since this whole thing started! We're supposed to still be taking that mock Potions test!" Danger laid a hand on his shoulder, quieting him.

There was still hurt in Harry's eyes, but it was fading, and there was also respect, and thanks for being treated like an adult. "I understand," he said. "It did blow up awfully fast. And it's not like we weren't listening anyway." He looked at the hole in the wall. "Do you have to know about it?" he asked a little wistfully. "It was a secret."

"Is it the safe place we were discussing over holidays?"

Harry nodded.

"That's where you den, isn't it?" said Sirius. "I'd bet anything there's an entrance like that in the Gryffindor common room."

"What happened to 'there's no way they den together,' Padfoot?" Remus asked.

"I never said that."

"Yes, you did."

"Prove it."

Remus shook his head. "Never mind."

Sirius grinned. "I win."

"Oh, really?" said Aletha. "And just what do you think you win? You think I'm going to stick around with a big fat liar?"

"I am not fat!"

"But you are a liar," said Remus, recognizing the opening of a classic double-team when he saw one. "You lie like a magic carpet."

"Magic carpets don't lie. They fly."

"Which is what you'll be doing, out that window, if you don't start telling some truth right now," said Aletha.

"I thought throwing people out the window was your threat," said Sirius, looking at Danger.

"I'm not getting involved in this," said Danger, backing away. "You three fight it out yourselves." **Actually, I have something I want to do,** she told Remus silently. **Have fun beating up on Sirius.**

I always do. You have fun doing whatever you want to do.

Oh, I think I will.

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In the Defense teacher's quarters, Danger lay down on the bed. **I want to use my wild magic**, she said, carefully shaping her words to reach other mental ears than Remus'. **When I had so much of it that it was bursting out, I remember that I could change and shape dreams. I want to do that again.**

I see no problem with that, answered another. **In fact, if it is your own dream you wish to shape, or that of one connected to you in blood or in soul, you need no special magic at all. Dream-shaping is not a magical gift per se – even some Muggles have it. Your mother was one. It is in your blood.**

Danger filed that little piece of information away for later reference. **But the one I seek to help is not related to me**, she said. **It is the boy called Ronald Weasley. He will be unable to move or speak for several days because of a kindness done to my Pack-son. I wish to make his nights, at least, more pleasant. Can he be given a dream in which his friends can also choose to participate, in which they can all do what they please?**

Certainly this can be done. The price to you is six hours. You may wish to wait until nightfall before you invoke the magic.

Thanks for the advice. What do I do?

Think of your goal, and pronounce “*Amoenus somnium.*”

Danger laughed. **“Sweet dreams”?**

Would you prefer something more complicated, more portentous?

No thanks, that should work just fine.

The communication ended, and Danger was about to sit up when, without warning, it reactivated. She was suddenly falling down a long tunnel, whirling with color and sound.

This hasn't happened for years – what the hell...?

It ended. She was standing in a hallway, pressed against a wall, listening to a conversation in the room within.

“–not bloody fair, Rick. I know they're not puppets, and they deserve a chance to live their own lives, but cutting them off like this was cruel.”

That's Alex!

“You should have taken that into account when you made that unauthorized communication

during the summer,” said Godric Gryffindor testily. “We’ve been over this – nursemaiding them was allowable when the cubs were young, but they’re getting older now, more able to handle their own challenges. The adults as well. And you broke the rules, Alex. The consequences are clear – since you warned them about something you shouldn’t have, they have to weather two major events with no warning from you. And they have been warned about the next one.”

“If you’re talking about Weena’s pet Seer, the woman’s a total imbecile. She’d predict rain in the middle of a drought. There’s no way they’re going to believe her. And it’s coming up so soon – at least let me tell them when!”

“They do believe her, as you would have known if you’d bothered to watch them instead of whining about them all the time to me, and if they have any intelligence at all, they’ll know when. They know what their enemy knows, don’t they?”

“Yes, but – it’s still not *fair!* ” **Best I can do**, Alex’s voice continued silently. **Good luck.**

Danger opened her mouth to speak, to ask what was going on, but the tunnel enveloped her first.

All in all, she pondered as she fell, that was probably a good thing. If Alex was being punished just for telling her to get to Draco quickly during the summer...

I don’t even want to think about what kind of punishment he’d get for bringing me there without permission.

So we’re in for more trouble, and soon. Not that we didn’t know that. And we have to think about what our enemy knows, and that will tell us when it will come...

As she landed in her body again, she had to laugh.

Isn’t that just like a Slytherin, though? Doing something by complaining that he’s not being allowed to do it?

I think I’d better keep this one to myself. Or, better yet, act like I came up with it myself. “I was just thinking, Malfoy’s likely to try something else soon now that this has failed. We ought to be ready.”

She got up and started back to the hospital wing. The Pack had some serious planning to do.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 20: Recovering and Returning (Year 3)

Chapter 20: Recovering and Returning

Remus stood by the door of the hospital wing, waiting. As Danger came into view, he stepped out to intercept her.

This is very nice, she said after a moment, **but we need to get inside. We need to talk – I've just thought of something –**

I know. But tell me this. Is there any immediate danger? Besides you, I mean.

I can't see how there could be. But –

But nothing. I am the alpha of this Pack, and I am invoking my authority. I am going to take some time off, and you are coming with me. Understand?

Danger made her mental voice high and squeaky. **Yes, Master Remus. Danger will do whatever you says, Master Remus.**

Remus tickled her side, making her squeal and pull away, then took advantage of her being off balance to sweep her off her feet and carry her down the corridor.

No, wait, she protested, clinging to his neck. **What about Draco?**

I've said hello, so have you. The rest of the Pack is in there with him. He'll be fine without us for a while. Remus opened his mind to her, showing her the places where fear had rubbed him raw and the mental shakiness he was beginning to feel as the euphoria of Hermione's revelation and the curse's successful transference wore off. **Unless you want me to collapse in public.**

No, I think that we can do without. At least this happened at the best possible time for you, moon-wise. It's new tomorrow, I think.

You're right. We have two full weeks until den-night. So we don't have to be at all restrained right now...

Danger's Animagus form might be a wolf, but there was plenty of cat in her nature as well, Remus reflected, as a happy growl, almost like a purr, resonated through both of them. He whistled at the door of their quarters, which sprang open, and carried her inside.

The door closed behind them of its own accord.

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Sirius didn't care for sitting around and doing nothing, except for times when he had a lot to think

about.

But I think this qualifies.

Aletha had examined Ron and shown Poppy how to work through the layers of illusion the curse had laid down to make its victim seem dead, confirming by their spells and by Ron's own words through his chain that he was comfortable. Molly would be along soon to check on him, and Arthur might well find time to drop by after he got home from work.

He was also highly curious about the large hole in the wall beside the fireplace, out of which Hermione, Harry, Ron, and Ginny had apparently appeared earlier. But Remus had told the cubs he'd let it stay a secret, and Sirius was willing to honor that. He wished some of the teachers he'd known at Hogwarts had been so understanding – but no, they'd wanted to know every single detail of everything he and James had ever been caught doing...

But those were memories for another day. Harry had closed the hole with a muttered password and was now sitting silently next to Ron, his expressions changing as if he was having a conversation, which he was, Sirius knew. Ginny was curled up on the end of Ron's bed, snickering occasionally, and Hermione was sitting on his other side, a book in her hands, probably tossing in her two Knuts' worth every so often. Luna, having reassured herself that Draco would be all right, had gone to say goodbye to her father before he went home.

Draco himself was sitting up in his bed with a look of long-suffering nobility as Aletha and Poppy poked and prodded at him. Sirius could sympathize. He'd always hated the hospital wing when Quidditch injuries or backfiring pranks had landed him there.

"I really do feel fine," Draco was saying now, with obviously forced patience.

"I'm aware of that. You're still not allowed out of this bed." Poppy took Draco's hand in hers and tapped it three times with her wand. "Circulation is back to normal, excellent."

"I don't want to go very far. What about just over to the window?" He looked wistfully at Aletha. "I'd like to sit in the sun."

Aletha laughed. "You do love to bask. But I'm afraid I'm siding with Poppy on this one, fox. You may feel fine, but your body's still recovering from the shock of shutting down and starting up again. You need to stay where you are for the time being."

Sirius stood up. "He can stay in bed and still be over by the window," he said. "Like so."

He drew his wand and levitated the bed. Draco brightened up and looked at the nurse hopefully.

Poppy folded her arms and glared at Sirius. "In all my years here, Sirius Black, I have never met anyone more determined to turn my infirmary into a circus. I have three more tests I wish to run and a potion for Master Black to drink, and then – and *only* then – I will allow you to play these silly games."

“Not a sleeping potion,” said Draco quickly as Sirius lowered his bed to the floor again. “Please?”

“No, it’s a restorative. But until you have taken it, you,” she rounded on Sirius, “will remove yourself. To the other end of the ward. Go and see your daughter again, if you like. Heaven knows I’d rather have her here than you, she’s much better company and a thousand times more cooperative...”

“I’m going, I’m going,” said Sirius, beating a hasty retreat up the ward. Poppy and Aletha’s laughter followed him.

Meghan was still asleep, lying peacefully in her bed with Neville next to her, his arm draped over her possessively. Sirius felt a twinge of jealousy.

She’s only ten. I ought to have had her to myself for years yet. Who do you think you are, little Longbottom – you can’t just come flying in and steal my baby...

But the situation wasn’t nearly as bad as he thought, he told himself. Meghan was only ten, and a sensible ten at that, and Neville was by far the steadiest of the boys. This was just a childhood romance, with both parties mimicking the actions of their elders. Not for the first time, Sirius blessed his good fortune in finding Aletha and having the intelligence to hold on to her, and in living with Remus and Danger.

Pearl has some good role models there, if I do say so myself. And I don’t know what couples Neville’s known, but he has to have heard stories about his parents, and now he has the real thing to watch. We’ll just keep an eye on them, and not try and fix anything that isn’t broken.

He bent down and kissed his daughter’s cheek. “Love you, sweetheart,” he told her, adding a scent-touch to the same spot. “You’ll need to be more careful about what you try to heal, though.”

As his fingers rested on her cheek, he could have sworn he heard her blow a raspberry at him.

Draco was just setting aside the goblet, making a face, as Sirius stepped back out into the main ward. “Is there some rule that all Healing potions have to taste really nasty?” he asked as Sirius levitated his bed again.

“You’re the ace potion maker. You tell me.”

“He hasn’t got to that level yet,” said Aletha from behind him, where she had two chairs suspended in the air with her wand. “But yes. It’s in the *Big Book of Potions Rules*. ”

“There is no such thing,” said Draco, but his voice wasn’t as sure as his words. “Is there?”

Aletha nodded soberly. “Of course there is. There’s a *Big Book of Rules* for everything. They define life and all the actions therein.”

“For instance, there’s the *Big Book of Villains’ Rules* ,” said Sirius. “It states that all villains must gloat when they catch the heroes in their evil strongholds, in the process explaining all their evil

plans, and then they must leave the heroes alone to give them a chance to escape and use their new knowledge to destroy them. The villains, that is.” He set Draco’s bed down in the beam of sunlight coming from the window.

“That’s not true.”

“Or the *Big Book of Heroes’ Rules*, ” said Aletha, giving Sirius one chair and taking the other herself. Sirius spun his around and straddled it. “Always, always, always help the cute little animals, the old women in trouble, and the children with big eyes. Pick a good sidekick – make sure he’s willing to take a bullet for you. Or a spell. He should also have a cute sister or cousin you can fall for.”

“You’re making this up.”

“And then there’s the *Big Book of Parents’ Rules*, ” said Sirius. “Number one on the list – always give your child as hard a time as possible.” He leaned forward, resting his arms on the back of the chair. “How’re we doing?”

Draco punched him in the shoulder and suggested something which made Aletha clear her throat. “I’ve done my share of swearing,” she said, “but if I ever hear you say *that* again, I think I’ll have you give it a try and find out just how uncomfortable it would be.”

Draco immediately sat up very straight and folded his hands, looking entirely prim and proper. Sirius leaned over and poked him in the side, making Draco yelp and glare. “Nothing too far wrong with you anymore,” he said in satisfaction.

Draco shuddered and looked back down the ward, to the bed where Ron lay. “That was horrible,” he said with true conviction. “I don’t ever want to do it again.”

“Nor do I,” said Aletha. “Though I’m glad it was what it was, little fox, and not what it looked like. I don’t think I could stand losing you.” She shifted from her chair to his bed and opened her arms to him, and Draco scooted down the bed and let her hug him.

“Do you think that’s really what it’s like when you die?” he asked hesitantly when Aletha had moved back to her chair. “Being trapped like that, just stuck, and not ever being able to do anything again?”

“No,” said Sirius and Aletha in chorus, then smiled at each other. Sirius motioned Aletha to continue.

“We know that we’re not just our bodies, that there is such a thing as a soul,” said Aletha. “And that what we consider our ‘selves’ – the things that make us who we are, like our magic and our memories and our ability to love – reside in the soul. What we call ‘death’ is actually a twofold process. The body stops working, and the soul departs from it. As we’ve just had proved, you can have one without the other, though I doubt it could happen without magic.”

“We already knew you could have one without the other,” said Sirius. “From the Dementor’s Kiss. That yanks the soul out, but the body’s still working.”

“True enough,” said Aletha, giving him a *look*, “but perhaps not the most appropriate topic of conversation at this time.”

“It’s relevant.”

The *look* intensified for a moment. Then Aletha turned back to Draco. “But the fact that the soul *departs* – that a truly dead person is invariably without a soul – makes me sure that what you just experienced is nothing like real death, Draco. That is still one of the greatest mysteries of life.”

“So what are we supposed to do, then?” asked Draco a touch bitterly. “Just live for the moment, because we could die any time and we don’t know when?” He turned onto his side, facing away from them. “And we don’t know what’s going to happen when we do, either,” he said to the wall. “We could go on to some great wonderful place, but we could also just go pop like a bubble, and that’s the end. What are we supposed to do?”

Sirius looked at Aletha. *I have an idea*, he told her in hand-sign. *Let me try?* She nodded, and he rubbed his fingers against the back of the chair, feeling the grain of the wood, putting his words together.

“All I can tell you is what I’ve come up with,” he said finally. “And I don’t claim to be any kind of expert. But to my way of thinking, it really doesn’t matter so much what happens after we die. Not in the sense of changing how we’re going to act day-to-day.”

Draco turned over to stare at him. “Huh?”

“If we do go on to something else – and I tend to believe we do, but I’ll get to that later – if we do go on, there’s probably an entrance fee. Not in money or anything like that, but in how we’ve spent our lives. We only have so much time here on earth. If there is Someone up there watching us, I don’t think He cares to see us wasting that time. Having fun, relaxing, sure, but not out-and-out wasting it. Not just playing around when there’s work that needs to be done, work that we can do. Work that makes a difference.”

Aletha was watching him with a knowing smile. Draco sat up again, listening.

“If we don’t go on – if we just go pop like a bubble, like you said – well, everybody leaves something behind. Wouldn’t you rather leave something good and valuable and have people remember you by it? Even if they don’t know your name, they’ll still be remembering you every time they use that spell, or that road, or whatever it is.”

“Or when they fall in love with one of your descendants,” added Aletha. “Or have their lives touched by them in some other way.”

Draco was nodding, his face relieved and understanding. “So you’re saying we can hope for a

better world after we die, but what we really ought to be thinking about is making this a better world while we're still alive."

"That's the Snitch," said Sirius. "Would you care to be bored a little longer with why I think there probably is something beyond this world we live in?"

"I think I can take it." Draco clung to the edge of his bed as if he expected to be blown away. "Go ahead."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Funny. You know, I was pretty stupid when I was young..." He looked over at Aletha. "Insert comment here."

"No thank you," said Aletha, shaking her head. "He thinks he's funny," she said to Draco. "Despite everything I've tried to teach him, he still thinks he's funny."

"Are you quite finished?" Sirius demanded.

"Yes, go on. Don't worry about me, you'll hear me if I have anything to say."

Sirius sighed. "I get no respect. As I was saying – I acted pretty stupid while I was at Hogwarts, and when I was an apprentice. Right up until someone I knew died. He was a clerk who worked in the Auror Office, an older wizard. His name was Charles Hartman, and he was always kind to everyone. He kept a bowl of candy on his desk, for anyone to help themselves. He knew everyone's name, and all about them, and would ask after their families and their pets. And then one morning his desk was empty, and we found out he'd been killed by Death Eaters because he was Muggleborn."

He hadn't thought about Mr. Hartman in years, but the man's face – fringe of white hair around a shining bald crown, crinkled eyes, rather large nose, cheerful smile – rose in his memory as easily as if he'd seen him yesterday.

"I couldn't believe it. None of us could. How could he be gone? It wasn't possible. It wasn't right. But it had happened, and none of us with all our pride in our magic and our strength could bring him back. I think that's when I started believing there was something beyond this life, was when Mr. Hartman died. Because that much caring, that much kindness, that much love couldn't just vanish into nothing."

He looked over at his wife. "And then I got my head on straight where Letha was concerned, around the time James and Lily got married. And I felt it again, about both of us, all of us. One lifetime wasn't enough to hold all the love we felt. There ought to be something more."

"And then came Harry," said Aletha. "And you knew there had to be something more."

Sirius nodded. "This is probably sounding stupid and ridiculous," he said. "But it's the honest truth. We've seen for ourselves that the effects of love can even outlast death – Lily's been dead for years, but her love is still with Harry, keeping him safe."

“And your mother’s love is what anchors the wards around the Den,” added Aletha, touching Draco’s hand gently. “Love has its own magic, beyond anything we know or understand. So it doesn’t seem like a bad thing to put our faith in.”

Draco’s cheeks were a little pink, but he was smiling. “Thanks,” he said. “Now I can die happy.”

“What?” Aletha looked alarmed.

“Of an overdose of sugar.” Draco leaned back in his bed, flung one hand dramatically against his brow, closed his eyes and let his mouth hang open slightly.

Sirius snickered. “Don’t encourage him,” said Aletha severely, then drew her wand and tapped Draco’s hand once.

Sirius stared as the hand molded itself to the forehead, as though all the bones had been removed from it. Draco opened one eye and examined his hand at close range. “See?” he said, then pitched his voice several tones higher. “I’m melting, I’m melting...”

Sirius had known Draco was a wicked mimic, but this was too much. He stood up and went quickly behind the screens where Meghan and Neville were sleeping, put up Silencing Charms, and fell onto the chair beside the bed, feeling the last of his tension release itself in his laughter.

When he emerged, Aletha had restored Draco’s hand, and they were chatting about school and other things. “Ron’s going to miss the Combat Club final,” said Draco. “It’s in just about two weeks, right before finals start. Oi, Ron!” he shouted down the ward. “Should have thought – you’ll miss Combat Club!”

“He says good,” Ginny shouted back. “He says we’re overdue to be partners with Slytherin, and he doesn’t want to have to do that.”

“That’s true, Gryffindor and Slytherin haven’t been partners all year,” said Aletha. “I wonder why not?”

Draco and Sirius snorted identically, then looked at each other in surprise as Aletha cracked up. “What were you going to say?” Draco asked.

“I was going to say I thought Moony and Danger have been rigging the draws. What were you going to say?”

“Same.”

“Then we agree,” said Sirius in satisfaction. “I do love a good non-argument.”

“Because it’s the only kind you can win,” said Aletha slyly.

“Why did I marry this woman?” Sirius asked the ceiling. “All she does is abuse me. Night and day, day and night, the ill-treatment never stops. Woe is me. I dare not lift a finger without her

permission. I am the original henpecked husband.”

Aletha rose from her chair and shut him up in time-honored fashion.

“I think that’s a little more than a peck,” said Draco, staring at them.

“Get a room,” shouted Harry from the other end of the ward. Ginny whistled through her fingers.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” said Sirius, breaking off the kiss. Hermione, he saw, was ignoring them all with calm dignity.

“Harry taught me.”

“Thought so.”

The flames in the fireplace turned green. “That’ll be Molly,” said Sirius, and sure enough, a few moments later, Molly Weasley stepped neatly from the fireplace and intercepted a running hug from Ginny.

“You know, it strikes me there’s likely some fires that need putting out elsewhere in the school,” said Aletha. “Remus said there were a fair number of students in the common room when this happened. We’ll need a decent cover story…”

“Oh, you mean you’re not going to tell them that I was under an evil curse, but Ron took it on himself out of the goodness of his heart?” Draco inquired in an innocent voice.

Aletha looked down at him. “Well, if you want it back…”

Draco zipped a finger across his lips.

With a loud bang, the doors of the hospital wing flew open and Fred and George Weasley piled in, Percy right behind them, the twins already talking.

“We heard something’s wrong with Draco.”

“That’s not Draco. What’s happened to Ron?”

“Mum, what are you doing here?”

“Er, Fred, I don’t think he’s breathing…”

Madam Pomfrey, who had come out of her office to see who had arrived by Floo, threw up her hands in exasperation. “I knew it!” she said, spinning on her heel. “The circus has begun.” She cast a look at Sirius. “This is all your fault.”

“Why is it always me?” said Sirius to no one in particular as the door of the nurse’s office banged shut again.

Another bang made him look down just in time to see a house-elf materialize beside him. “Sirius Black, sir?” it squeaked, tugging at Sirius’ robes. “Kiffy has a note for sir.”

“Give it here,” said Sirius, reaching down without taking his eyes off Ginny, Harry, and Hermione. They were explaining the circumstances behind the curse and its transference to the other Weasley brothers one after another, taking a sentence apiece, as if they were reading from a script. They were probably coordinating through Ron’s chain, Sirius thought. “Thank you,” he added towards his knees.

“Wow,” said Fred in awe. “Ron’s *dead*?”

“No, it just looks like it,” said Harry. “It’ll wear off.”

“Nuts.” George snapped his fingers.

“He says he wishes he could do it to you,” said Ginny. “Because maybe then you’d shut up for a while.”

Mrs. Weasley directed a glare at all her children. “That’s enough, now. How are you feeling, Ron dear?” She came to Ron’s bedside. Hermione vacated her chair for the older witch and handed her a loop of chain.

“You put it on,” she whispered. “Then you can hear him, inside your head.”

The twins immediately picked up some of the chain themselves, only to have it melt through their hands and return to its original place. “What’s with this thing?” asked Fred, staring at it and making another unsuccessful grab.

“I don’t think Ron wants to talk to you right now,” said Ginny, giggling.

“He says he’s still angry about what you did to his wand at our last Combat Club practice,” said Hermione.

“That was an accident,” said George, looking offended.

“Totally random,” added Fred.

“We just tossed it in there.”

“How were we supposed to know...”

“That Ron would pick up the one we’d rigged to explode?”

“How’d you do that, anyway?” Draco called down the ward.

“Oh, there you are,” said Fred, turning to look. “Feel all right?”

“Fine. How’d you do it?”

“It’s easy enough,” said George. “You adjust the dye output up as far as it’ll go.”

“You can adjust it?” Draco beckoned the twins closer. “Tell me more.”

“I think we’re not going to be welcome here at the moment,” said Aletha, starting towards Ron’s bed.

“I think you’re right.” Sirius gave the twins a thumbs-up as he passed them.

“Oh, Percy, he says thanks,” Harry was saying as they got closer. “For clearing off the stairs so he could get out faster. And you kept everyone from swarming up there, too, he says. That was a big help.”

Percy nodded gravely. “Tell him he’s very welcome.”

“Tell him yourself. He can hear just fine. Better yet, come on in. He doesn’t mind.”

Percy looked a bit surprised, but pleased. “I’ll do that.” He sat down on the bed next to Ron’s and took the chain Ginny handed to him, holding it gingerly, then slid it over his head as if he’d never done such a thing before.

Well, maybe he hasn’t. A lot of men don’t wear jewelry.

“Molly, I wanted to talk to you,” said Aletha, beckoning to the witch. “Do you have a moment?”

“Of course – I’ll be back in a second, Ron, love...” Molly took the chain off and came out from between the beds. “Is something else the matter?”

“For a change, no. I just wanted to thank you for letting Ron do this.”

Molly shook her head. “I’ve long since given up being surprised at anything that happens to or with your family,” she said. “Quite truthfully, you’re more like a force of nature than anything else, and woe betide anything or anyone who gets in your way. But you’re intelligent, mature adults – yes, even you, Sirius. I know you may not care for it, but it is the truth. You behave like an overgrown teenager most of the time, but let one of these children be threatened and you’re all Auror in a second. No matter how odd the things you get up to sound, you’ve never let Ron or Ginny come to harm, and I believe you never will.”

Sirius stared at her for a second, then impulsively put his arms around her, hugged her hard, and kissed her once on the cheek. She squeaked in outrage and slapped him.

“There, now we’re back to normal.” Sirius rubbed his cheek. “I was starting to understand what Draco was talking about.”

Aletha was hugging Molly now. “Thank you so much,” she said, letting the red-haired witch go.

“And you do realize you’ve now scared me beyond my power to comprehend at this time? One mistake by any of us, and your children could be badly hurt, even killed for real. And you’ve given us your trust. It’s not an easy thing to live up to.”

“I have confidence in you, Aletha. And in your loutish husband, as hard as it sometimes is to justify.” Molly kissed her hand and patted Sirius’ cheek. “And in Remus and Danger, and in your children as well. They seem sensible when it comes to truly perilous situations, and the avoiding thereof. Getting into mischief, of course, is another story.”

“It always is.” Aletha laughed. “At least we get good stories out of it all.”

“We do.” Molly checked her watch. “Excuse me, I should spend another few minutes with Ron before I go home to start dinner.”

“Sirius, what did the house-elf want?” Aletha asked as Molly returned to Ron’s bedside.

“Oh – it had a note for me.” Sirius looked at the parchment he was still holding. “From Danger. Guess she’s too lazy to come down herself.” He ripped it open. “Let’s see here. ‘Ask Poppy if Ron can sleep through the worst of the effects. I’ve bargained to get him a dream world he can hang around in until this wears off. Don’t bother us right now, or I’ll rip off... your...’” Sirius read the rest of the note to himself and swallowed. “And you say *men* are violent,” he said, handing the note to Aletha.

“You are.”

“I’m not the one who routinely threatens to kill the toaster.”

Aletha huffed. “It’s the only way to get it to shut up! It was nice of Arthur to give it to us, but I wish he’d fixed it first!”

“He did fix it. It sings on key now. You wouldn’t have wanted to hear it before.”

Aletha shook her head. “Let me talk to Poppy for a minute,” she said. “And then we can start thinking up what happened.”

xXxXx

“Ron Weasley?” said Lavender Brown in amazement. “A hero?”

Hermione nodded. “He saved Draco’s life, probably,” she said. “And Neville’s and Meghan’s, too.”

The story Letha and Padfoot had come up with involved as much of the truth as possible – Draco accused of cheating, denying the whole story, bolting out of Dumbledore’s office, and the Pride turning up in the common room after seeing him running that way while they were headed for Dumbledore’s office themselves – but obviously had a few differences.

We couldn't exactly go telling the world about the curse.

In this version, Draco had been trying to figure out some way to prove he was innocent, and sorting through his potion ingredients, which he often did to calm himself down. Dean and Seamus were able to verify this, which helped a lot. In so doing, the story went on, Draco had accidentally opened a vial of nightshade extract and been overwhelmed by the fumes. Neville and Meghan had run in to try to bring him out and been likewise overwhelmed, and it had been Ron who finally dragged them all out of the room, getting a much higher dose of nightshade in the process, accounting for the longer time he'd spend recovering.

There was only one thing that bothered Hermione. In order to keep this story from falling apart, most of the second and seventh year Gryffindors had had to be Obliviated, to keep them from remembering that instead of remaining aloft as he would have had to in order to rescue anyone, Ron had dashed back down the stairs almost immediately, and returned only a few moments later with Moony and Danger...

They did get back quickly. I thought it took longer to get to Moony's office. Or Professor Dumbledore's, since that's where they were.

But that wasn't important right now. What was important was that her Housemates' memories had been tampered with. That was wrong. Wasn't it?

It means no one knows that your brother was almost buried alive because of a curse, murmured a voice which sounded oddly like Ron's. It means no one knows that a cursed object got through all the security on Hogwarts. Isn't that worth a little tampering with people's memories?

She wasn't sure.

And maybe does it have something to do with you not being a hero in this story?

Yes, all right, to herself she could admit it. It galled her that Ron got to be the only hero of the official story. He was a hero, of course – she wasn't sure she could have volunteered the way he had, even if she'd been eligible – but she had stopped the globe torturing Draco.

And possibly set off the final stage of the curse.

But they didn't know that for sure. Draco might have kept fighting it until that stage kicked in anyway. Or he might have given in to it, and that would have been worse.

So it all turned out for the best, right?

Right. Of course, right.

So why are you arguing about it still?

She didn't know.

Maybe she'd go to bed early so she could see Ron.

Ooh, you want to kiss him again?

On second thought, maybe not.

xXxXx

Remus padded across the lawns in lion form, sniffing the breeze to find out who, if anyone, else was out here at midnight. Danger was in a state between sleep and unconsciousness, the payment time for the magic she'd used for Ron, so Remus was free to do as he pleased for a few hours without her along. It was enjoyable every once in a while, but he wouldn't want to do it often.

He snorted in disgust as he picked up the foul stench of the dementors at the front gates.

Glide one inch within these grounds and we'll find out if dementors can die...

A black hood turned to regard him, and he knew he'd been sensed. Or possibly scented – dementors hunted by tracking both emotions and scent, using one where they couldn't find the other. He and Sirius, so long ago, had been able to avoid them by being in animal form, by their long immersion in seawater, and by using Muggle transportation, which effectively masked their scents under exhaust fumes.

His lips peeled back from his teeth, and he growled a quiet defiance at the filthy aberrations which dared linger near these hallowed grounds. Perhaps Hogwarts was not sacred to God or gods, but it was still a place set apart, a haven of good magic, where the young came to learn in safety. If he had his way, the dementors would all be destroyed, thrust back to the nether regions where such things as they belonged, never to threaten this place again.

Footsteps behind him alerted him to another presence. “Lupin,” said a precise, clipped voice. “Out for a little walk in the moonlight?”

Remus changed back to human and turned. “Hello, Severus.”

“Your lady wife is sleeping well, I trust?”

“Quite well, thank you. Severus, I wanted to thank you for not pursuing the subject of Draco's supposed cheating...”

“Don't flatter yourself, Lupin, it was nothing you said that changed my mind. One of my own students approached me to tell me privately that Black had been framed. I have dealt with the problem.”

“I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell me who...”

“No.” It was a flat, definite negative. “It is an internal affair of Slytherin House, my concern and mine only. You tend to your own, and I shall tend to mine.”

“I’ll do that. But I also wanted to thank you for agreeing not to spread the true story of what happened this afternoon.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “I’m afraid I fail to understand why I was told. I don’t believe you have such a high regard for my intelligence as to believe I would see through the other story – though I might have doubts that Draco Black, as one of my best students, would *accidentally* open a vial of nightshade extract.”

“It’s your right to know what happens with us. As it’s Minerva’s right, and Albus’, and even Hagrid’s.”

“If you’re going to cite the ridiculous distinction of being a *Pack-friend*...” Snape spit the appellation. “...you may save your breath. I am no friend to you and yours, and I never will be.”

“I doubt that,” said Remus, watching the other wizard’s outline shift. “Severus, have you ever researched the Animagus transformation?”

Snape regarded him suspiciously. “Portions of it,” he admitted.

“Has your research ever extended to discovering what your own form would be, should you undergo the process?”

“It has.”

“May I inquire as to that form?”

“You may inquire. I will not answer.”

“But I may guess, may I not?”

“If you like.”

“A raven.”

Snape stiffened for one instant. “Clever,” he said finally. “Very clever, Lupin. How did you do it – some modification of the scrying spell?”

“A prophecy I once heard spoken. And other information available to me. That information makes me sure that despite all your protestations to the contrary, if it were necessary, you would stand our friend. You might not enjoy doing so, but you would do it.”

Snape stared at him for a moment impassively. “Delude yourself if you must,” he said finally. “But do not rely overmuch on your *information*. It might fail you at a crucial moment.”

Remus smiled. “Thank you for the advice, Severus. Good night.”

xXxXx

Hermione was late arriving in the dream world, later than anyone else. Ron landed his Firebolt when he saw her, assiduously avoiding her eyes as he walked towards her.

“About the hospital wing,” blurted Hermione. “It never happened, all right?”

“Sure,” agreed Ron, looking very relieved. “Never happened.”

“Shake?”

“Shake.”

They shook.

“What’s going on?”

“Quidditch.”

“I should have guessed. Don’t you ever think about anything else?”

“Well, food’s good too.”

“I meant something—” Hermione caught the twitch of his lips. “You’re *teasing* me!”

“It’s not hard. All I have to do is act like myself and you go up like a fireworks display. Works every time.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes and hissed. “I hate you.”

“I know.” Grinning cheekily, Ron took off again.

Hermione sat down on the grass to watch.

xXxXx

Sirius returned to work the next day. Rufus Scrimgeour stared at him for a moment or two, then turned and walked away.

“Bearded the lion in his den, I hear,” said Kingsley through the window between their cubicles as Sirius dropped into his chair.

“Did what I had to. How’s the work?”

“Awful, as usual. Want some?”

“Toss it over.”

xXxXx

Surprising Healer Young, Madam Pomfrey, and himself, Ron started breathing again at some point during his second night with the curse, and could open his eyes a little by the next morning. Meghan, who had awakened soon after dinner the day of the curse, stayed by his bed most of the day, and the rest of the Pride dropped in between every class and at mealtimes, having the house-elves bring food up for them.

“I’ve never seen a faster recovery,” Healer Young told Mr. and Mrs. Weasley five days after the transference. “Usually it takes at least ten to twelve days to progress to this stage. Your son must be very hardy.”

“Strong and tenacious,” said Mr. Weasley proudly. “That’s my Ron.”

Ron turned his head to hide his flush.

xXxXx

“Why did it embarrass you?” asked Hermione later. “You are strong and tenacious.”

“I don’t even know... what that second word means.”

“Stubborn. Holding on hard. You don’t ever give up.”

“That’s supposed... to be a good thing?”

“It can be. As long as you’re not stupid about it.”

“Come on, Hermione... it’s *me*. I’ll always... be stupid about it.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “If you say so.”

Draco pushed the door open and strolled up the ward. “Ron. Neenie.”

Hermione cleared her throat significantly.

“There’s no one else here. And actually, would you excuse us for a second?”

“If you insist.” Hermione picked up her book and notes and stood. “I’ll be back later.”

“What’s going on?” asked Ron, noticing for the first time that Draco’s posture was off balance. As if he were carrying a package, though there was nothing in his hand... or nothing that Ron could see, anyway.

“Just brought you something.” Draco reached across and pulled at the air, and away came Harry’s Invisibility Cloak, revealing –

“That’s your owl,” said Ron, as Draco set the cage on the bedside table. “Morpheus.” He frowned. “Wasn’t he... darker than that?”

“Morpheus was a good name for him in more ways than one. It means sleep, and he does do that a lot, but it also sounds like morphing, changing, and it turns out he’s a chameleon owl. He can change the color of his feathers. He was tawny when I bought him, but then he turned dark – he’s been snowy like Hedwig, had the barn-owl heart shape around his face... lots of things.” Draco reached through the bars and stroked the owl’s head feathers. “But he’s not mine any more. He’s yours.”

Ron was dumbstruck for a second. “I can’t take your owl,” he protested finally. “I don’t need one. It’s not like I write... a lot of letters.”

“But you want an owl of your own, you said so. And you did save my life, or close to it. I want to do something for you.” Draco tried a smile. “Please?”

Ron felt himself smiling back. “Well... if you’re going to make me...”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Then... thanks.”

“I’ll leave him here,” said Draco, unlatching the cage door. “So you can see him for a while. He can head for the Owlery if he gets hungry. So have you heard the latest about Combat Club?”

“No. What’s up?”

“It is going to be Gryffindor and Slytherin versus Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Professor Lupin just drew the slips and announced it an hour ago.”

“Glad I’m in here,” said Ron with feeling. “I don’t know if I could handle... cooperating with Slytherins.”

“Oh, come on, they can’t all be bad.”

“Want to bet?”

“I was nearly one.”

“You were?”

“Yeah. The Hat said I’d do well in Slytherin. But I told it I didn’t want to be great, I just wanted to do well, and it ended up putting me in Gryffindor.”

Ron nodded. It seemed plausible that the Hat would consider Slytherin for Draco, because of his background, but he knew the blond boy had wanted to be a Gryffindor for years, and the Hat seemed to listen to what people want. “It doesn’t matter what you... nearly were,” he said finally. “It matters what you are.”

Draco looked at him. “That’s very philosophical,” he said.

Ron cracked another smile. “Comes from... lying flat on my back all day.”

Harry skidded in through the open door, slips of parchment flying out of his bag. “What’d I miss?”

“Not much,” said Draco. “Just told him about Combat Club.”

“Yeah.” Harry came over and sat down with an expression of deep disgust. “Why couldn’t we have missed out on it just once more? We’ve avoided it all year...”

“Maybe they’re trying to teach us something,” said Draco.

Harry groaned. “That would be just like them. Sneaking life lessons into stuff that’s supposed to be fun. Why can’t we just shoot everybody else and be done with it?”

“Because everybody else may not be our enemies?”

“I like the sound of that,” said Ron. “Shooting everybody... not the other thing.”

“Well, not that it wouldn’t be fun,” Draco conceded. “Shooting everybody. But it wouldn’t win us the match. We’ve got to take it as it comes.”

“Take it as it comes,” repeated Harry. “Is that code for ‘let them walk all over us’?”

“No. But it is code for ‘please don’t shoot your allies, even if you don’t like them.’”

Harry sighed. “For the length of the match, I think I can handle that. Not any longer than that, though.”

Ron was suddenly curious. His own time with the Sorting Hat had been brief and easy, but Draco and Harry had both taken longer. “Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Did the Sorting Hat consider putting you... anywhere else?”

“Er... why?”

“Just wondering. Drake said... he could have been in... Slytherin.”

“I talked it around,” said Draco with a shrug. “Told it I’d be miserable there, so it tried binging me in Ravenclaw. I said I’d go nuts stuck in a library all day, and it finally went to Gryffindor.”

Harry squirmed. “That’s kind of what happened to me,” he said. “It thought of a couple possibilities...”

“Slytherin?” asked Ron.

Harry nodded.

Harry in Slytherin. Ron tried to imagine it, and had a hard time. Harry could think around corners, sure, and come up with plans for things, but he wasn't really sneaky. He wore his heart on his sleeve too much.

Takes one to know one, Weasley.

That was true, but it didn't really matter. Besides, Fred and George were the sneakiest people he knew, and the Hat had had no trouble declaring them Gryffindors.

Harry and Draco are my best friends. I know them. They're not evil.

And Harry was watching him, looking worried.

"What's wrong with you?" Ron asked.

"Don't know. I guess I just never wanted to tell anyone about it, because they might start thinking I ought to be in Slytherin anyway, even though I told the Hat I didn't want to..."

"Then that's why you don't. Because you don't want to. Does the Hat ever put anyone... where they don't want to go?"

Harry and Draco exchanged wondering looks. "I don't know," said Harry. "Maybe we could ask Professor Dumbledore some time. But I don't think so – not when the whole idea of Sorting is to put you where you'll have the easiest time making friends and getting along..."

"It does tend to concentrate the trouble-makers, though," said Draco. "They're most likely to be Gryffindors or Slytherins. Ravenclaws are too busy studying, and Hufflepuffs are too nice."

"Makes it easy on the teachers," said Ron. "Makes sense."

Hermione peered around the door. "May I come back in now, or are you still doing secret boy things?"

xXxXx

He closed his fists hard, staring out the window at the swirling water.

It was the perfect plan. I remembered the bird, and the note, and I went out to find it, and did all the set-up and everything, and it was working, right until someone blabbed that I'd started the note going, not Black...

If I ever find out who ratted on me, I'll beat them so far into the ground they won't need to be buried.

But at least it made people notice me. It showed I had ideas. And now they're giving me the

important jobs, trusting me over anybody else, even Daddy's little boy...

He grinned nastily as he thought about what he'd be doing very soon.

xXxXx

It didn't matter, he told himself, if he wrote letters. Anyone could write letters.

And there was no harm in relating the latest school gossip. It wasn't as if it was secret. Anyone could find out about it.

He didn't have to be responsible for what happened to his letters after they left him. Once you sent a letter, it stopped being your property or your problem. And as long as he wrote with his special quill, no one could ever trace it back to him.

But a small part of him still rebelled every time he sat down to write another letter.

He'd become very good at ignoring that part.

xXxXx

Dear Colleen,

I was very glad to get your latest letter. You must be intelligent, to complete your homework so quickly and still have time to write such long letters. I always feel happier when I see your handwriting on the outside of an envelope.

Quite honestly, I have little idea what I would like to do after I leave Hogwarts. I have always loved reading, so I've toyed for years with the idea of becoming an author. My teachers often compliment my essays, and I've been told I have a way with words, but I don't know if that in itself is enough to equip an author.

Healers and mediwitches are always in demand. I'm certain you would have no problem finding employment. I understand your reservations about your temperament, but I doubt you would have been sorted into Gryffindor if you had no courage. You must find it and use it to overcome what you call your "horrible shyness."

Personally, I see very little wrong with the way you usually act, except with the way you interact with other people. I know you may not be comfortable with it, but lifting your head and making eye contact with the person you are speaking to will help a great deal. Practice with your friends, and with teachers you like, and gradually work your way up to Professor Snape. (He even frightens me sometimes.)

I hope to hear from you again soon. Your letters brighten my days.

Sincerely,

Your Secret Admirer

xXxXx

Danger was writing a note on the calendar hanging in Remus' office when she noticed something odd. She frowned, then closed her eyes. **Are you aware we've scheduled the last Combat Club match on a full moon?**

Yes. Don't worry, the match will be over well before dark. It's timed, so there's no possibility of it going too long.

You're sure?

Positive. Danger, it's the only day we can have it – all the teachers want this over with before exams begin, so the students aren't distracted, and there's Hogsmeade the day before, and you know we'd never get them to give that up.

Danger sighed. **Well... all right. I suppose you're right. And it's not like you're incapacitated that day.**

Not with you by my side, O queen of my heart.

You can't see it, but I'm swooning with delight.

Shall I come in and catch you?

If you'd like. Danger smiled. **I could make it worth your while...**

On my way.

xXxXx

He walked into the same alleyway he'd entered on Halloween, and began the same process he'd used then – scratching his head while writing his note, then folding it and leaving it under the stone.

I'm going back to the castle alone at 3:00 . I'll come here first, around 2:45 . The people I've been hanging around with recently are going back at 5:00 .

Slipping out of the alley, he smiled to himself.

I knew showing a little initiative wouldn't go wrong.

xXxXx

Luna knelt in her place at a cross-corridor on the third floor, listening carefully for any sounds of footsteps down the hall. As far as she knew, there weren't any echo-eaters at Hogwarts, so sounds

should carry a normal distance. She wished she could have had her own wand for a moment, though, so she could check. If there were echo-eaters, the Ravenpuff army could be right around that corner and she'd never know.

There were no fancy rules for this match – the army with the most territory, the most prisoners, and the fewest losses would win. The Gryffindor and Slytherin Combat Club Captains, after a few sessions of glaring at each other, had come up with a plan. The fifth, sixth, and seventh years would form small teams and scout territory. Then an attack force of all years would move in to take the scouted section. Finally, the first through fourth years would set up to guard prisoners and perimeter, and the whole process would begin again.

It was working beautifully, Luna thought. Even if she did have to share her guarding duties with a Slytherin. She wished she could have been partners with Draco, but he was just one section over with Hermione, and Harry and Ginny were on her other side.

She looked steadily at her Slytherin partner for a few moments. *I think I know him. Or I've seen him before.*

That's right. He's Harry's cousin. Mr. Moony brought him to the train in the Weasleys' car, my first year. And I've seen him around the school. I don't think he likes Harry very much.

As if he'd felt her eyes, the Slytherin's head snapped around. "Watch the hall!" he hissed at her. "Stupid girl, they could sneak up on us while you're busy staring at me!"

Well, there's no need to be rude. Luna looked at him for one more moment, fixing his image in her mind so she'd be sure to know him again, then turned away.

Her last sensation was a sharp pain in the back of her head.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 21: Unwilling Sacrifice (Year 3)

Chapter 21: Unwilling Sacrifice

“Draco!”

“Luna! What are you doing here? Get back to your post, quick, we’re not supposed to leave–”

“I can’t, I just can’t – I need your help, you and Hermione both, it’s dreadful.” Luna wrung her hands. “Please, I need you now. It’ll only take a minute, and they’re nowhere near here. Please come, please...”

“You need both of us?” Draco looked at Hermione. She shrugged. “Luna, what’s wrong?”

“I *can’t* explain!” Luna wailed. “*Please!*”

“Shh, you’ll have everyone coming to see what’s going on if you’re not careful.” Draco wondered why his next neighbors hadn’t already come to see what was happening – surely Luna’s cries would have drawn their attention by now.

“But you *have* to come. I *need* you.” Luna looked at him soulfully.

“It’ll only take a minute?” asked Hermione. “You’re sure?”

“Positive. It’s important – I think he’s hurt badly...”

“Hurt? Why didn’t you say so?” Hermione was on her feet. “Where is he?”

“Right back this way,” said Luna, starting off. Draco wondered at the faint note of triumph in her voice. “Just along here.”

They jogged along a hallway, passing the statue of Gunhilda of Gorsemoor along the way, and turned the corner into Luna and Dudley Dursley’s sentry point. Dursley lay on the floor, a puddle of red liquid spreading around him, and Draco thought for one shocked instant –

But no, the liquid had a very definite orange tint to it.

“Luna, he’s not hurt,” said Hermione with careful patience. “He just fell on your wand or something, he’ll have to leave the match, but he’s not really hurt.”

“I know.” Luna was smiling, not in her usual aimless, friendly manner, nor in the focused joy Draco found so dazzling when she was truly happy about something – no, this was distinctly nasty, it would have looked absurd if it hadn’t been so frightening –

And now that Draco looked, she was standing between them and the exit to the corridor, with her

wand in her hand...

He turned just in time to see Dursley sit up abruptly and point his wand at them.

Several things happened at once. Draco's pendants went freezing cold, and Hermione's shriek was cut off in the middle as Dursley's Stunning Spell hit her. Instinctively, Draco dropped to the floor, and Luna's spell shot over his head – he thought of running for an instant, but he couldn't leave Hermione, and the wand he held was useless for real combat –

The last thing he saw was the smirk on Dursley's face, and the knowledge that he'd seen it before, but not on Dursley...

xXxXx

“Oh God.” Harry leaned against the wall, one hand on his chest, feeling his heart beating wildly under the icy chill at his breastbone. The Combat Club match had just taken a turn for the worse, and Draco and Hermione needed his help...

He turned to his sentry partner. “Ginny, you have to get help. You have to run. Go, now.”

“But what about you?”

“Don't argue with me! *Go!* ”

Ginny took a breath to continue the argument, but screamed instead. “*Look out!* ”

Harry spun and dropped in the same motion, hearing the hiss of a near miss over his head –

That's a live spell!

He brought his wand up and sprayed dye across his attacker's eyes, and only as she recoiled in surprise and pain, yelling, did he recognize her –

Luna?

He stared at her in shock for an instant, but even that instant was too long.

“Worthless fool!” shouted a furious voice, and another figure appeared around the corner –

Dursley?

Harry brought his wand up again, but Dursley disarmed him with an insultingly casual flick, and hit him with a second spell in almost the same motion –

He fell, and waited for the blackness to hit, and it wasn't until he struck the ground with a thud that bruised his back and shoulder that he realized he hadn't been Stunned.

Petrificus Totalus – the Body-Bind...

“You imbecile!” Dursley stormed at Luna, who was wiping dye away from her streaming eyes. “You let her get away! They’ll know we’re here any second, we’ve got to move! Get Potter!”

Luna levitated Harry, a pouty expression on her face. “Why did I have to be the girl, anyway?”

“Because Draco trusts her above anyone, as you saw.” Dursley smirked. “Besides, I think it rather suits you. Don’t make such a fuss, it’s only an illusion. You can take it off as soon as we get back.”

Of course, that’s not Luna – she’d never do this, not in a million years – but then, who...

Harry’s captor dropped him to the floor in the long hallway and tapped the stone hump of the one-eyed witch. “*Dissendium !*”

But the only people who know about that passage are the Marauders...

Dursley came into Harry’s field of view now, levitating Draco and Hermione, both unconscious, and still smirking. As Harry watched, Dursley stretched out a hand and stroked Draco’s cheek, caressing him.

Eww . That is so wrong.

Unless this isn’t Dursley either...

And then everything locked together, and Harry knew beyond a doubt who was taking them prisoner.

It was not comforting knowledge.

“I knew I was right to do the Silencing Charms for the perimeter myself,” said Lucius Malfoy, still running his hand along Draco’s face, as Peter Pettigrew levitated Harry again, lifting him above the stone slide and letting him drop. “You’d have–”

Harry lost the rest of the sentence, but it didn’t matter.

Run, Ginny, he willed her as he careened down the chute. Run as fast as you can...

But he knew even that might not be enough.

xXxXx

Remus was sitting in his office, monitoring the match through a modified version of the Marauder’s Map he’d created. Instead of the complicated spells that showed every person on the grounds, each combatant touched the map before the match started and stated his or her name and team. The map registered them by their touch and showed their locations throughout the match.

There were also territory markers which team members could mark with dye after they had taken an area, which changed that area's color on the map.

The Slythindors were doing surprisingly well – a few of them had “killed” each other, but not nearly as many as he'd expected. They seemed to be able to put their differences aside for the duration of the match. “I guess we shouldn't have worried,” he said. “Gryffindors and Slytherins can cooperate after all.”

“If you twist their arms sufficiently...” Danger's laughing response trailed off, and worry crept onto her face, escalating rapidly into fear.

Remus was about to ask when he felt it too. A trickle of ice. It started at the back of his neck, then ran rapidly around both sides and down his chest.

Somewhere, one of the Pack was in danger of death.

He pulled the chain out, spread the pendants, and felt his breath catch in his throat. On the last pendant, the wolf cub glowed brightly, and the fox flickered fitfully for a moment before settling down to a steady, faint gleam.

No need to panic. It's probably one of Harry's wild schemes gone a bit wrong, with Draco not sure if he's in or out yet. But I should check just to make sure...

Remus flipped the medallion over.

The carving of the cat shone like a flame, brighter than both the others put together.

A giant hand grabbed Remus' lungs and squeezed. The room darkened, and a monster roared in his ears.

Hermione would never be part of any of the boys' crazy ideas, especially not ones that involved the possibility of death. This was no game. Somewhere, something had gone deadly wrong.

Thinking he was losing one of his cubs had been torture.

Losing three of them would destroy him.

Somewhere nearby, he could hear Danger's harsh breathing. Her panic was adding to his own, and his was fueling hers, creating a feedback loop, worsening every second – Remus knew they had to stop it, had to do something, but the recirculating fear held them paralyzed –

The door slammed open. “Professors!” Ginny Weasley dashed in. “Something's wrong, it's Luna – she shot at me, she had a real wand, she tried to Stun me...”

With a wrench, Remus closed the mental connection, breaking the loop. A good half of the fear he was feeling vanished, and he shoved what was left to the back of his mind. “Where?”

“Third floor – Harry told me to run, and now his carving’s glowing – I don’t know what’s going on.”

“What part of the third floor?” Remus grabbed the girl’s arm and pulled her over to the map. “Show me.”

Ginny stared for a moment, then put her finger down. “There. Look – there’s Luna now.”

A dot marked *Luna Lovegood* was indeed under Ginny’s finger, Remus saw as she moved her hand. But it was curiously unmoving for a living thing – and it seemed to be inside the wall – and there were no other dots for combatants in that area...

Remus shoved his fear away again. *You’re not useful. I need to think clearly, and you’re not going to help.*

Danger was beside him now, staring at the place Ginny had identified, running her finger along the hallways. “Ginny, who set up the postings for sentries?”

“The captains. The Slytherin captain put us all there, but it wasn’t supposed to be very dangerous – there were Slytherins to both sides of our group–”

“But you and Harry, and Draco and Hermione, were all here,” said Danger, still inscribing circles around the space. “Map, locate Harry Potter.”

Combatant not found, the map printed in a margin.

“Locate Draco Black and Hermione Granger-Lupin.”

Combatants not found.

Despite his best efforts, Remus’ fear was creeping back on him. The only reason for the map not to find the cubs was if they were no longer in the castle...

“And look what’s right here,” said Danger. Her finger landed on something in one of the hallways, and Remus frowned.

“What does that have to – *oh.*” He gave a shaky laugh. “Danger, don’t be silly – I warded those passages at the start of the year, nothing can get in that way.”

“Could something get out?”

Out.

The floor dropped away from Remus’ feet.

Something could get out.

“Yes.” The word left him in a harsh whisper. “Yes. Something could... get out.”

Someone’s just left the castle. With my cubs. Meaning to kill them.

The passage takes them straight into Hogsmeade, and they can Apparate anywhere from there...

This is all my fault.

He barely heard Danger talking to Ginny, until suddenly the red-haired girl was gone and Danger was kneeling in front of him, looking him in the eye. He wondered when he’d fallen to the floor.

Remus.

He ignored her voice in favor of his own, closing his eyes as tears forced their way out. *Hermione, sweet Kitten, forgive me – Draco, I’m so sorry, twice in the same month I’ve failed you – and Harry, dear God, did I take you from your relatives only to lose you now?*

Remus John Lupin, listen to me!

With the mental shout came a yank, a sudden forced rapport, and Remus’ eyes opened without his conscious intent. Danger was staring into them, and Remus found himself listening to her, as she had commanded.

Yes, you made a mistake. Yes, it was a bad one. And yes, now our enemies have our cubs. But you cannot do this to yourself!

Why not?

Because people still need you. The cubs need you – Sirius and Letha need you – I need you. If you lose control, so will I, and we cannot afford that. Doubly tonight.

Tonight, Remus repeated dully. He looked over her shoulder at the clock. It was an hour until sunset.

It would be a relief to be lost in the beast, tonight – to rip and tear and rend and kill, to be free from this torment of thinking –

Stop it! A mental blow jolted him from his thoughts. **Blame yourself all you want, but after we have them back safely! Now, please, help me. I can’t think this through all by myself...**

I can’t think it through either. I don’t want to think anything through – it won’t help anyway – damn it, Danger, they could already be dead!

Danger bristled and tried to say something, but Remus silenced her with a mental hand over her mouth. **And if they are, it is my fault. Do you understand that? My fault. I could have stopped whoever’s taken them – Malfoy, obviously, it has to be him – I could have stopped him getting away with them, and I didn’t, I forgot, and that’s the same as if I’d killed them**

myself –

“I have never heard such unmitigated bullshit!” Danger shouted aloud, making Remus pull back from her, since she’d been about two inches from his face. “You make one bloody mistake and suddenly everything is your fault? And that gives you the right to sit here and wallow in self-pity? I don’t *think* so!”

She got to her feet, staring down at him. “Fine. You sit on your arse and feel sorry for yourself. I’m going to find Sirius and Letha – they should be here any minute – and then we’re going to find our cubs, and rip apart whoever took them. We’ll do it fast if the cubs are still alive when we get there, and slow and painful if they’re dead. You can stay here – I’m sure somebody will find you a nice secure room to hurt yourself in – because tonight, I’m helping the people who need it most, and they aren’t you.”

She turned her back on him and started for the door, then turned back. “I never thought you were selfish before. I guess I was wrong.”

She had her hand on the doorknob before Remus found his voice. “Danger – wait. Please.” He got shakily to his feet, crossed the office in a few steps, and pulled her into his arms. **I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m just so scared...**

I know. Me too. They were holding each other so tightly Remus was surprised either of them could still breathe. **Let’s go do something about it.**

Yes. Please.

They kissed once, then left the office at a run.

xXxXx

If he really strained his eyes, Harry found, he could see his watch.

He was grateful for that piece of luck. He knew from den-night stories that under stress, a person’s time-sense fell apart, so that they might think they’d been lost or under fire or in the dark for hours when it had really only been a few minutes.

He had a better excuse for not recalling the passage of time; he’d been unconscious. He’d hit his head at some point going down the chute, or possibly at the bottom. In any case, the chute was the last thing he remembered, and according to his watch, it was now fifteen minutes later.

His head hurt like anything, and he was still under the Petrificus. At least his eyes could move. He rolled them to their fullest extent, taking in what he could of the room where he was lying. There were no windows, and the shaky light of one candle didn’t show him much. As well, he was finding it a little hard to focus his eyes, and his mind kept wandering.

He did manage to notice, before darkness sneaked back up on him, that the room had the looks of a place that had been thoroughly trashed a long time ago, then hastily cleaned up. Something

about the destruction looked familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on it...

xXxXx

Neville paced up and down the hospital wing. The Combat Club match had been canceled as soon as Ginny had told Professor McGonagall what had happened, and all students had been sent back to their dormitories immediately. He, Meghan, and Ginny had installed themselves in the hospital wing to wait for news.

Madam Pomfrey had just a little while ago forced Ron to take a Sleeping Potion, after catching him trying to get dressed and sneak out for the third time in twenty minutes. Luna had been found unconscious in a secret passage close to her sentry point. She had told her story, and was now lying impassive in the bed next to Ron's, staring at the ceiling. Ginny sat between their two beds in a chair, hugging her knees to her chest and hissing between her teeth with every breath.

Meghan was curled up on a bed at the other end of the ward. The last few times Neville had come near her, she had lashed out with a fist or foot, snarling. This time, as he got near, she didn't react at all.

I think that's good. He sat down on the bed. "Pearl? You awake?"

"No."

If he hadn't been so miserable, Neville would have laughed. "All right. Why are you mad?"

"I'm *not* mad!"

"You sound mad."

"I'm *not!* Why won't you just leave me *alone?* "

"Because I'm scared. I was hoping you would sit with me."

A moment passed. Then a pair of eyes peered out from under an arm. "You're scared?"

Neville nodded. "An awful lot."

Meghan hiccupped. "Me too."

"I know." Neville moved up the bed and gingerly put his hand on Meghan's back. They stayed that way for a long time.

Finally, Meghan sat up. "It's not *fair*," she said petulantly, looking at Neville. "It's not fair – I'm supposed to fix things. Make wrong things right. But this is the wrongest thing I've ever felt, and I can't *do* anything about it!" The last half of the sentence came out as a wail.

Neville swallowed, thinking of all the nights he'd spent crying in his bed after visiting his parents

in St. Mungo's. "Sometimes you can't," he said quietly. "Sometimes you have to trust other people to do it for you. And sometimes there's nothing anyone can do. But I don't think this is one of those times. I think this is one of the times where you have to trust other people. Your parents are smart and really good wizards and witches. They'll find them. They'll bring them back."

"But what if they don't?" Meghan clenched her fists and stared at the wall. "What if Harry and Hermione and Draco all get killed?"

"They won't."

"But what if they do?"

"Then your parents will need you more than ever."

Meghan sniffled once, twice, and started to cry again, and because he'd made it happen, even though he hadn't meant to, Neville moved a little closer and held her.

An owl fluttered in through the window. Ginny jumped up and ran to it, snatching the note from its beak. She read it eagerly, then scowled and shook her head. "Still nothing," she said. "All they know is that two people, with 'several' Side-Along passengers, Disappeared in Honeydukes' cellar."

"Fat lot of help that is," said Meghan roughly.

Neville checked his watch. Harry, Draco, and Hermione had been missing for half an hour.

xXxXx

At Dumbledore's invitation, the Pack was waiting for news in his office.

Aletha was twisting little scraps of parchment into tight screws, with an expression that suggested she wished each of them was Lucius Malfoy's neck. Sirius was pacing, looking at his pendants and his watch after every few circuits of the office, as if convinced his motion would make them change. Danger was playing with a string she'd picked out of one of the chairs, twirling it between her fingers, knotting and unknotting it.

And I... am playing with fire.

Literally.

Remus wondered if anyone understood why he was choosing to pass the time and expend his nervous energy in this way. True, it was satisfying to shape the flames in Dumbledore's fireplace into various forms. True, it ensured that he kept control over himself, since without that control he couldn't hope to control the fire. But it also put him in a perfect position to read any notes that came through, and the Pack's friends on the Auror force, of whom there were several (Sirius had made himself popular, not least by storming out of Scrimgeour's office two weeks ago), were keeping them informed as often as possible...

The fire flared green, and a note fell out of it. Remus snatched it up and ripped it open. *Oh God, please let this be...*

“Nothing,” he said in disappointment. “Malfoy Manor is still deserted, no sign anyone was ever there. They’re doing the rounds of suspected Death Eaters – the ones who got off – but they don’t think they’ll find anything...”

“No shit,” said Sirius angrily. “He’s not going to take them to somebody’s effing house. He won’t want witnesses. Wherever he’s gone, it’s deserted, abandoned.”

Abandoned. Something flickered in Remus’ mind, but it was gone again just as quickly. He let it go. Chasing after it would do no good – he had to think about something else to make it come back.

He picked up quill and parchment. *Better tell the Pride this, as unhelpful as it is.*

After the near-fiasco with the curse, Remus was determined not to keep the Pride in the dark again. Informed people tended to make fewer stupid decisions. As long as the Pride was aware of how much was not known, they were less likely to go running off and try to rescue their friends themselves.

Well, except Ron. But we knew that. He was livid when Poppy made him take that potion, but Letha said if he overexerts at this point he could hurt himself, and he wouldn’t promise to stay in bed...

He finished the note and whistled for one of the owls roosting on the windowsill. A barn owl hopped inside, and Remus handed it the note, which he’d addressed to Ginny. The owl took wing and swooped out the window, and Remus returned to his place by the fire.

Fifteen minutes till moonrise, Danger reminded him.

I know.

Are we going anywhere else for it?

There’s no reason to. As long as you’re here with me.

True enough. Danger stood up and came to sit behind him, beginning to rub his shoulders. **It just strikes me as a little odd.**

What does?

You’ve always been shy about your change. The only time I can think of when you were all right with letting anyone but me see it was the night before Sirius’ trial, when we were in jail together.

Remus twisted to look at her. **Somehow, with everything else that’s happening right now, it doesn’t seem quite as important as it used to.**

xXxXx

Scared. Scared. Scared. Cold. Face hurts. Hands hurt. I want to go home!

Draco snapped into full awareness. He was sitting cross-legged on a moldy-smelling bed, his hands tied behind him, back to back and hand in hand with someone else. It wasn't hard to guess who, not with her voice dinning into him.

I want to go home, I want to go home, I want to go home now...

“Guess what, Neenie, me too. Would you mind shutting up about it?” Draco tried to keep his voice from cracking, and was startled by how mean it sounded instead. A wave of hurt rolled over him. *God, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that...*

“It's all right,” said Hermione's voice from behind him, and he felt her hand squeeze his gently. “I know you didn't. But Draco?”

“Yeah?”

“I wasn't saying anything.”

“Yes, you were. I heard you.”

But did you hear me with your ears?

“Of course I heard you with my ears. How else do people hear each other?”

You're assuming. Listen. Listen carefully. What do you hear?

Draco listened. A cold draft whistled through the room, coming in the open door and blowing out the broken window he could see when he craned his neck to look over his shoulder. He could hear his own breathing, and Hermione's, and footsteps somewhere else in the house...

Now keep listening. You should still be able to hear all those sounds. Because you're not hearing me with your ears. You can't be. I'm not talking aloud.

“Then how are you talking?”

With my mind. The way Moony and Danger do, or the way we do with the chains. Try it.

“Try what?”

Think at me.

“Give me a second.” Draco closed his eyes. Could they actually be talking silently?

After I yelled at her, she answered what I was thinking, not what I said out loud. And that didn't

sound like something she'd say out loud, but it did sound like something she'd think...

Can you hear this? he thought loudly, picturing Hermione clearly in his mind and squeezing her hand as he did.

Ow ! You don't have to shout!

Sorry. Didn't mean to.

It's all right. How are you feeling?

Scared. Stiff. Both separately and together. Draco opened his eyes and leaned a little forward, rolling his shoulders as best he could with his hands in their unnatural position.

Me too. How long do you think we've been here?

I don't know. You're facing the window – can you see anything?

Just glass on the floor. And sunlight coming straight in. It can't be long till sunset.

Sunset. Draco frowned in thought. **The match was supposed to end half an hour before sunset, to give Moony and Danger time to run us through a quick analysis before they had to go... you know. And it was about half an hour from being done when Luna came to get us.**

So we've been here maybe an hour, or a little less.

Wherever here is. Draco's gut was turning cold. **Hermione, I think I know who took us. And at least part of why.**

Your father?

Yeah. He looked like Dursley, but that smile gave him away. It was nasty.

So maybe the Luna who came to get us wasn't really Luna. Maybe she was Pettigrew in disguise.

A knot in Draco's throat untied with a rush of relief. Luna hadn't betrayed them after all. **Neenie, you're brilliant.**

I just hope the real Luna is all right. Pettigrew wouldn't have wanted to risk her bursting in on us...

The knot retied itself, but looser. **She can't be dead. Our pendants would have reacted to it. Maybe he just knocked her out.**

From behind, like he did Meghan on Halloween, so she wouldn't see anything to be scared or worried about. He felt Hermione nod. **That makes sense. But you said you know why he took**

us.

Same reason as always, Neenie. He wants me. Why he'd need you too, I don't know – usually he wouldn't have any use for a Mudblood... Draco was trying to make light of it, but the truth was he could think of any number of horrible things his father could do to Hermione.

And I'd go with him if he'd just promise not to touch her...

Does your face hurt? asked Hermione abruptly. **Just under your left eye?**

Yes, actually, it does. Draco ran his tongue up and down the inside of his left cheek and felt the stretch of just-healed tissue on the outside. **It's like someone cut me there, but it's healed already. Unless it's been a lot longer than we think it has, that means magic. Blood magic...**

Blood magic. Draco – could that be why we can talk like this? Because someone did blood magic on us?

Draco frowned. **I don't know. Why would my father do a spell binding us closer together? He wants to pull me away from the Pack, not make me closer to you.**

I don't know either. But let's get one thing straight. If he offers you any kind of deal where he'll leave us alone forever if you'll just go away with him, don't take it.

Why not? I want you to be safe –

And that's just what we wouldn't be! Draco, he was a *Death Eater*. Do you really think he's going to keep a promise?

I could get him to make an Unbreakable Vow. He couldn't get out of that.

He'd find some way to get around it. Like resurrecting Voldemort and having *him* come and kill us all. Hermione sounded angry, but Draco would have bet money she was using Letha's trick of being angry so you weren't afraid. **Draco, whatever he does to me, don't, please don't throw your life away. One of us has to get back.**

Draco shook his head hard. **I'm not leaving without you.**

Damn it, don't talk like that! It sounds really great in films, but it doesn't work in real life! It's like Ron's always telling you about chess. That's why you don't play so well. You don't like to make sacrifices. But sometimes you have to. And if I'm what you have to sacrifice to get out of here alive...

Hermione, I'm not leaving you with him. I wouldn't leave my worst enemy with him –

Hermione snorted. **He is your worst enemy.**

Draco gave a short laugh. **You have a point. But that's not what I mean. How could I keep**

living, knowing the price I paid for it? No. We both get out of here, or neither.

That's what I'm worried about. The neither part. And there's somebody else involved in this too.

What? Who?

Harry. I got a look at my pendants, and your carving is glowing, but so is Harry's. He must have come to see what was going on.

And got caught himself. Draco felt ill. *It's all my fault – none of this would ever have happened if I just hadn't been there –*

Would you bloody STOP! Hermione screamed into his mental ear.

Draco wasn't sure what shocked him more, the volume or the language. Hermione never swore.

I do when I need to. And I need to now. We have to think – find some way to get out of this – and I do NOT have the time to play Clarence to your George Bailey, so knock it off right now!

All right, all right. I'll stop. Do you have any ideas about how to get out of this, then?

No, admitted Hermione. **I was hoping you did.**

Sorry. When it comes to ideas, I haven't got a twig to fly with right now. But damn it, there's got to be something! Draco kicked at one of the disintegrating pillows in frustration, sending up a cloud of dust. His eyes began to water and his nose to itch. **Uh-oh. Hang on.**

To what?

Me, I guess. Draco sneezed three times in rapid succession, just missing banging his head into Hermione's with the force of the third. **Sorry.**

"Awake, then," said a cool voice from the hallway. "Excellent."

Hermione's hands tightened around Draco's as Lucius Malfoy stepped into the room. Draco stared. His father was elegantly robed and perfectly coiffed, not a hair out of place, and looked overall more suited to a dinner party than to a dank, decaying house like this.

Malfoy tutted. "Do I not merit a greeting, Draco? Such an undutiful son. Five months since last we met, and you cannot even spare me the courtesy of a salutation."

"Do you hear something, Hermione?" said Draco, looking away from the man.

Draco, don't do this. Please. It can't hurt you to talk to him.

What happened to “don’t listen to him”?

I meant don’t agree to anything he asks you for! All we have to do is wait, the Pack’s bound to find us soon – but I’d rather not get tortured while we’re waiting!

All right.

“You seem to be in some discomfort, my son. Allow me.” Malfoy drew a handkerchief from his pocket and gently wiped Draco’s eyes with it. It took all Draco’s courage not to flinch away from the man’s touch.

“Thank you, sir,” he said with only a tiny bit of sarcasm in the tone as Malfoy pocketed the handkerchief. “It’s very kind of you.”

“Not at all, my son, not at all.” Malfoy seated himself on a chair in the corner of the room, near the edge of Draco’s field of vision. “It is the very least of what I will soon be giving to you. I apologize for these unusual arrangements – I am sure it must be torturous for you, to be in such close proximity to one such as Miss Granger-Lupin...” His voice caressed Hermione’s name. “But, as you will soon understand, it was necessary.”

He thinks it’s torture to be close to you, but not to have my freaking hands tied? I think someone needs to sort out his priorities.

Will you *please* not make me laugh in front of him?

“Necessary, sir? I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t.” Malfoy stared out the window, towards the setting sun. “Of course. Because you have been lied to, Draco. Vilely lied to, and viciously used. Tell me, my son – of the two of you, yourself and the girl behind you, who would you say is the better at using magic? Who would you say has more success in lessons and the like?”

“Hermione,” said Draco without hesitation. “She’s better than I’ll ever be at everything.”

Draco!

It’s true.

“She is better than you will ever be, at everything,” Malfoy repeated slowly. “And have you never wondered *why*?”

“I know why. She’s smart. She’s really smart, and she loves to learn, and she pays attention to everything. What does that have to do with me?”

I am not better than you’ll ever be!

You are so. Shush.

“It has this to do with you,” said Malfoy, leaning forward. “This so-called family of yours – this *Pack* – have they ever been able to explain to your satisfaction why it is that you, a child of the oldest magical bloodlines in Britain, should have less magic than the brat of a pair of Muggle tooth-pullers?”

Hermione gasped. “Don’t act so surprised, girl, of course I know who you are,” said Malfoy testily. “I make it a point to know my enemies. It makes predicting their next moves easier. So I know all about you, and your precious sister – rather curious, the way she married Lupin so soon after meeting him. One would almost think she’d had some kind of shock. Perhaps she feared for your life on some future full moon, should she fail to... *satisfy* her new acquaintance...”

“That’s not true!” shouted Hermione, whipping her head around. Draco leaned away from the flying hair that threatened to hit him in the face. “You’re lying!”

“Am I?” Malfoy chuckled. “But we’re rather off the subject, I fear. Or are we? Your sister interests me, little one. She never attended Hogwarts, nor was this because she refused her invitation – there was no invitation. She was a Muggle at the age of eleven, and twelve, and on upwards. Until, approximately, her twenty-first year, when she married Remus Lupin and vanished from sight. When she reemerged nearly ten years later, she seemed perfectly comfortable with magic. She owned and used a wand, and she possessed some unusual abilities.”

“Like what?” asked Draco. “Punching you in the face? That’s not so unusual. I can do it. Let me up and I’ll show you.”

“Oh, I’m afraid I can’t do that. Not yet, at any rate. You see, it is imperative that you and she remain in physical contact for the next...” Malfoy checked the time, and Draco marveled at the man’s need to playact, that he had strained what had to be very limited resources to get what looked like a real gold pocket watch. “Seven minutes. At that time, the bond will be complete, and we can proceed.”

“What bond?” asked Hermione, at the same time Draco said, “Proceed with what?”

Malfoy laughed. “I do believe I have caught your interest,” he said teasingly. “Draco, a question remains unanswered between us. Have those folk who pretend to be your parents never discussed with you why it is that this girl has more magic than you do yourself?”

“They’re not pretending to be my parents,” said Draco, scowling. “And I don’t think Hermione has more magic than I do. She just uses what she has better.”

“Oh, believe me, my son, I have examined you both carefully.” Malfoy smirked, and Draco felt Hermione shudder. “It is as I say. Have you any idea why?”

Draco shrugged as best he could. “It happens like that sometimes,” he said. “There’s no way to predict who’ll have more or better magic by looking at blood.”

“That,” thundered Malfoy, standing up, “is the lie you have been taught! See beyond the lie,

Draco, see the truth! You have been robbed, robbed of your birthright! *This girl has stolen your magic!* ”

“I have *not!* ” cried Hermione furiously. “I *wouldn't!* ”

“Oh, not of your own accord, perhaps, but have you never wondered from whence came your marvelous magical prowess?” Malfoy prowled around the bed, and Draco squeezed Hermione’s hands hard as he felt her leaning back against him, away from the older wizard. “Have you never pondered the improbability of such a very fine witch being born from a line that produced no other magical scions save your very – *unusual* – sister?”

“Blood isn’t everything,” said Hermione in a trembling voice. “I wouldn’t be a pureblood if you paid me.”

“As well,” said Malfoy lazily. “I doubt you would be willing to pay the necessary price...”

Draco felt a tide of rising panic. **What’s wrong?**

He’s going to touch me – he’s *petting* me. Down the side of my face and – wait a second – Hermione’s mind flashed from fear to fierce jubilation. **Got it.**

She jerked her head rapidly to one side, and Malfoy yelped.

What did you *do*?

Bit him. Hermione sounded very proud of herself. **Right on the finger.**

There was the sound of a slap. “Little bitch,” Malfoy snarled.

“That’s *queen* to you,” spat Hermione.

Another slap. “Hold your tongue.”

Nice going, Draco said, working to remove the grin from his face before his father came around and saw it. **Really nice.**

Thanks. See if you can keep him talking. Maybe act like you think he did right.

“My apologies for that, sir,” said Draco as Malfoy came around the end of the bed again, his finger wrapped in his handkerchief. “Hermione can be rather rowdy at times. But you seem to have found a good method of controlling her.”

“Is it one you favor yourself, Draco?”

Draco pouted slightly. “We’re not permitted to do such things at home, sir. She’d go crying to the adults if I did. But you were just getting to something interesting. You say Hermione’s stolen my magic to be as powerful as she has, and then you mentioned Danger. Do you think she also stole

someone's magic?"

"Without a doubt. Though 'stole' is less proper an appellation. Living with them, you must have noticed that she and Lupin are seldom far from one another? To the best of my knowledge, they have not been parted for so much as a full day since they were married. I believe that, out of 'love' or some other misguided sentiment, Lupin has extended use of his own magic to his so-beautiful *mate*, and she has accepted it."

Draco frowned. "Can he do that?"

"Marriage creates a certain bond between the man and the woman who undergo it, Draco. Even a Muggle ceremony creates such a tie, but a magical wedding creates a far stronger one. Through such bonds as these, magic may indeed be shared. Though long-term sharing necessitates close contact between both parties."

Hermione inhaled sharply. **Ask if there are any other kinds of bonds that magic can be shared on. I think we're getting somewhere.**

"Are there other bonds that can allow magic to be shared, sir? I assume so, since you mentioned a bond you are creating between myself and Her... Miss Granger-Lupin."

A ghost of a smile was beginning on Malfoy's face. "Indeed there are such bonds, my son. Blood bonds are some of the most powerful in magic. Parents may share magic with their children, or take it from them temporarily, as many do to stop a spate of childhood accidental magic. And, of course, blood siblings may share magic. I believe that thus was your magic stolen, Draco – that your family did much as I am doing."

"What are you doing, sir?"

"I have created between you," announced Malfoy, "an artificial blood bond. When it is complete, you will be able to share magic as fully as siblings – no, I dare go even farther and say that the bond between you will be more like that of twins." He shuddered artistically. "You have my most abject apologies for the indignity, Draco, but it was necessary. It was the only possible way in which I could restore to you the magic which was stolen from you so long ago." The ghostly smile returned. "Poetic justice exists, I daresay."

"Why do you dare, sir?"

"I have no doubt that your so-called guardians have kept you all these years out of some misguided sense of loyalty to my late wife. Had she not charged them with your keeping in return for their safe deliverance, they would likely have killed you once they had what they wanted from you."

Oh, God, please don't let me laugh, said Hermione desperately.

You think you've got problems? I can't even crack a smile! Draco thought hard of Danger's

cries by his bedside, of the pain in her voice and Moony's as they spoke his name, and managed a suitably grieved expression for his father's benefit.

You idiot. A month ago, you might have convinced me. But I've heard it now, what they would say if they thought I was dead, and it's nowhere near the "Thank Merlin that's off our hands" you'd have me think it is – and that's your fault. You're a liar, and you always have been.

It was then that the implications of Malfoy's statement struck him.

"Sir?"

"You may address me as Father, Draco, if you wish. It is, after all, accurate, and it would give me great pleasure."

I don't want to do anything that will give you pleasure, great or small.

Do it. You don't have to mean it.

Yes, Mother. "Yes... Father. Why do you think that the Pack – my guardians, that is – why would they have killed me?"

"Because even after the blood-bond between you and the girl was broken – and skillfully broken at that, to the point where I can find no traces of it..."

Because there never was one, said Hermione scornfully, **except in your twisted imagination.**

"Some form of bond still existed between you, and you began to reclaim your magic slowly through it, becoming more intelligent and skilled in magic as the years passed, at her expense." Malfoy smiled, examining his fingernails. "I shall not make that mistake."

Draco was grateful that his father's head was down, since he knew for a fact that an expression of pure terror currently inhabited his face. **God, no, no, he can't mean –**

He does. He must. Draco, get a hold of yourself, please!

Get a hold of myself? Hermione, he's going to kill you!

I know. I know. But I have an idea. I think there might be a way for us to get out of here. Or at least out of these ropes. But you have to do something first.

Anything. Tell me what.

Get him to tie us front-to-front, instead of back-to-back, and leave us alone for a few minutes. Can you do it?

Draco grinned inwardly. **Watch me.**

“You’re going to kill her,” he said in as flat a tone as he could manage, trying to ignore the gallon of ice water that seemed to have replaced everything which ought to be inside him. “Aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“I don’t suppose I can stop you.”

Malfoy laughed. “Bound as you are, without a wand, and with your marvelous family unaware of your whereabouts? I doubt you can.”

Draco let some of his fear creep onto his face. “I guess you’re right. I just wish...” He let the words trail off and looked away.

“Wish what?” Malfoy was suddenly in front of him, all concern. “Come, Draco, speak to me. If we are to be a family again, we must learn to trust one another. I will gratify any wish you may have – within reason, of course. What is it you wish?”

Draco looked directly into the man’s eyes. “I wish I could see her,” he said. “I wish we could look at each other one more time, and have a minute or two to say goodbye.” It took very little acting to summon a tear. “She does bother me a lot, but she’s still – I mean, we’ve grown up together. I’ll miss her when she’s gone.”

“It would be fitting,” said Malfoy thoughtfully. “A ceremonial farewell, bidding adieu to the last vestiges of the old life before stepping into the new. I believe it can be managed. I assume you would wish me elsewhere during this touching scene?”

“If it’s not asking too much.”

“Never, my son.”

Draco smiled faintly. “Thank you, Father.”

And I mean that like I never have before.

“Stay still, now, children,” Malfoy cautioned, drawing a wand from his robes. “Do not try to move, or the spell will be disrupted...”

Draco felt himself spinning in place, and Hermione was spinning too, her startled cry echoing once in the room, and then suddenly they were looking into each other’s eyes, their four hands clasped in front of them, cocooned in rope. Malfoy put his wand away, looking rather pleased with himself. “Five minutes,” he said coolly. “By that time, the bond will be cemented. I must tend to my cauldron in any case. Enjoy yourselves.”

He left the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

All right, said Draco, taking a deep breath. **What do we have to do?**

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 22: Queen the Pawn (Year 3)

Chapter 22: Queen the Pawn

Minerva McGonagall had watched Albus Dumbledore face down vampires, Death Eaters, transformed werewolves, dementors, dragons, Inferi, and Lord Voldemort himself, all without ever losing his aplomb.

But here he stood in the corridor, seemingly unable to speak the words which would open the door to his office. Unable to go upstairs and tell four people that he had failed to find their children.

“Albus, they must know,” she said quietly. “And you found out something – it’s more than anyone else has done...”

“Three times, Minerva.” She could barely hear his voice. “Three times in as many years I have failed these people. They entrust their children to me, believing that I can keep them safe, and three times in three years their children have been in harm’s way, in danger of dying, here under my supposed protection. Perhaps I am too old...”

“Nonsense,” said Minerva sharply. “Pull yourself together, Albus. You’ve done things no one thought were possible – how many times do you think those children would have been endangered if you *hadn’t* been there? You’re an extraordinary man, but you’re still a man, and every man has his limits. Every man makes mistakes. Now go upstairs and tell those people what they deserve to hear.”

Albus straightened, lifting his head. “Yes. I shall.” He gave her a small smile. “Although the news I bear is hardly what they *deserve* to hear, I think you would agree. Peppermint Toad,” he said to the gargoyle.

Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress ascended to the office together.

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“It’s better than nothing, I suppose,” said Aletha. “It certainly narrows things down a lot. But a fifty-mile radius around the Disapparition point still covers a lot of ground.”

“Teams of mixed Aurors and DMLE personnel are searching every house within the area as we speak,” said Dumbledore, sitting down at his desk. “Hogsmeade itself has been thoroughly searched, every building to which they could reasonably have access explored.”

“Reasonably?” repeated Sirius. “We’re talking about Death Eaters here, Albus. Reason was never high on their priority list.”

“Be that as it may,” said Minerva, “a more careful search was made of the buildings near the spot where Peter Pettigrew was seen a few months ago. Unfortunately, nothing was turned up there –

no one had Apparated in or out within the last two hours.”

“You’ve still done a lot, Albus,” said Danger. “If I recall correctly, tracing how far someone Apparated just from studying the place they Disapparated from is supposed to be difficult verging on impossible. I’m fairly sure who came up with a way to do it, and on short notice too.”

Dumbledore smiled faintly. “I thank you, Danger. Remus, are you well?”

“As well as can be expected.” Remus reached around and took Danger’s hand. “I don’t foresee any problems, if that’s what you’re asking. Not as long as we stay close.”

“Not a problem,” said Danger, joining her other hand to the clasp.

“I’ll get the note to the Pride,” said Aletha, crossing the room to pick up a piece of parchment from the stack sitting next to Remus. “Your hands probably hurt about now.”

“Not that much. But thank you.”

Aletha nodded, already writing. “Who should I address it to?”

“I’ve been sending mine to Ginny...”

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Ginny tore the note open eagerly. “They have something!” she nearly shouted. “They didn’t go more than fifty miles from Hogsmeade – and there are Aurors and everyone else out looking in all that area now!”

“Yes!” shouted Neville, pumping his fist in the air.

Meghan squealed happily. “Luna, did you hear?” she said, sliding off the bed and running to Luna’s. “Did you hear? They know where Draco and Harry and Hermione are – or where they’re not – and they’re going to find them! They are!”

Luna didn’t answer.

“Luna?” Meghan shook the older girl by the shoulder. “Luna, are you all right?”

Still no answer.

Meghan made to touch Luna’s wrist, then stopped, looking worried. “Should I?” she asked Neville and Ginny.

“It should be safe,” said Neville. “You’re not related to her by blood. That was how the curse on Draco hurt you, through your blood. So you should be able to help her.”

Meghan took Luna’s hand. “Luna, wake up,” she said. “There’s good news, sort of, and you should

hear it.”

“I heard it,” said Luna, opening her eyes. “The searchers know where they aren’t. But they don’t know where they are. And they’re looking in the wrong places.”

Ginny leaned forward. “Do you know what the right places are?” she asked carefully. Luna’s eyes looked a bit more unfocused than usual...

“I don’t think I do. Let me think about it a minute.” Luna closed her eyes again.

“Is she listening to something?” Meghan whispered to Neville.

“No, I’m trying to remember something I listened to a long time ago,” said Luna without opening her eyes. “On the train, after the dementor left. I heard a lot of different things. Things different people had to do. I think they were meant for tonight.”

Ginny held very still, not wanting to disturb Luna’s thinking. It was hard work. Mingled fear and hope kept making her want to jump up and run around the room, yelling, or else hex something, or someone. Preferably whoever had taken her friends.

“I don’t know where they are,” said Luna finally. “But someone else does. They just need to remember that they know, or have it told them a different way. And Draco and Hermione will need help.”

She opened her eyes and looked directly at Ginny. “You have to send them help. Neville can help you with it. He can make you invisible while you go up to the Tower and out to Hagrid’s and come back again. But you’d better hurry. You can only walk. You have to send them faster help.”

“What about Harry?” asked Neville. “How can we help him?”

“We can’t.” Luna looked at the next bed over. “But Ron can. Ron knows how to find him.”

“But he’s asleep!” Meghan looked as if she might cry. “He can’t tell us anything while he’s asleep!”

“So we have to wake him up,” said Ginny. “It shouldn’t be too hard.”

“He’s under a potion! He won’t wake up until it wears off, or someone gives him the antidote!”

“And there isn’t anyone here who can do that,” said Ginny ironically. “No, there’s no one here who knows about Healing potions, or the spells that Healers use to give them to people who’re asleep...”

Meghan’s expression reversed course with magical speed. “I’ll be right back,” she said, and sped down the ward.

“But what are you supposed to do?” said Neville to Ginny. “Go up to the Tower, down to Hagrid’s,

and back. Why?"

"To send them help," said Ginny, thinking hard. "Help that moves faster than I can, because I can only walk..."

And then she knew. "Got it," she said, jumping up. "Neville, can you make me invisible to human beings but not to animals?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Because I know who's supposed to help Draco and Hermione. And he's not human."

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The Headmaster's office had fallen into an uncomfortable silence. The portraits on the wall had ceased to pretend to sleep and were waiting for news as avidly as anyone. Minerva had her wand out and was transfiguring a piece of parchment into a Galleon and back again, over and over. Dumbledore stroked Fawkes, who crooned softly.

As Sirius passed the portrait of his great-great-grandfather for the umpteenth time, he suddenly swore loudly. Everyone, including the portraits, jumped.

"I can't take this," Sirius said, stalking into the center of the office. "I can't take it anymore." He pointed at the clock on the wall. "If there isn't news in five minutes, I'm going out there and look for them myself."

"Sirius, be reasonable," said Minerva, standing up. "What could you hope to do that isn't being done already?"

"I don't know. But I can't handle just sitting here and waiting. I have to do something. I have to. I can't just sit here and wait and find out later that I could have done something, if I only tried, and now it's too late and it's happened already..."

Aletha got up from her chair. "This is not like James and Lily," she said. "There's nothing any of us could have done differently to keep this from happening."

"Oh, really?" Sirius turned to the fireplace, looking at Remus. "Nothing *any* of us could have done?"

Remus looked away. "I'm sorry, Sirius," he said very quietly. "You may never know how sorry."

"Oh, I may never know," Sirius mocked. "I may never know, when my godson's out there about to die, and you're the one who let Malfoy take him out of the castle without even having to work at it."

"Sirius, don't do this," Danger warned, half-rising.

“I’ll do whatever I damn well please—”

“You will *not*. ”

The voice stopped everyone cold. Dumbledore was on his feet, his eyes transfixing Sirius. “This is my office, Sirius Black, and you will be courteous to the other people here or you will leave.”

“Fair enough. I’ll leave.” Sirius headed for the door and yanked it open. “And good luck finding them sitting here on your backsides!” he called over his shoulder.

The door slammed shut.

“Excuse me for a moment, everyone,” said Aletha, marching across the office. “I believe a lesson on manners is indicated.”

“Letha, it’s not important,” Remus began, but was cut off by the second closing of the door.

“I guess she thinks it is,” said Danger.

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Half the Pride stood in front of the gargoyle which guarded the Headmaster’s office. They knew that a password would make it spring aside and allow them access. They did not know what that password currently was.

Meghan stepped forward and put her hand on the carved stone. “Please, won’t you let us in?” she said beseechingly. “We need to get inside and talk to my parents. It’s important.”

Something rumbled behind the wall. Meghan jumped back in surprise as the gargoyle sprang aside. “It worked!” she said happily. “Come on!”

“—self-centered idiot and *listen* to me!”

“Or not,” said Ron, looking around wildly from where he leaned on Neville. “Hide.”

The three of them and Luna scrambled into a cross-corridor just in time as the wall split open.

“I’m a self-centered idiot? Who’s sitting up there feeling sorry for himself, and who’s planning on going and actually doing something about this?” Meghan stared as her Dadfoot leapt off the spiral staircase backwards, so he wouldn’t have to stop glaring at Mama Letha.

“You know perfectly well Remus would be out there himself if he had any reasonable idea where to go!”

“Reasonable. There again with reasonable. I’m done being reasonable. It’s time to get unreasonable here, and I’m going to do it, and anyone who stands in my way can just go and—”

“Dadfoot?” said Meghan tentatively.

Her Dadfoot jumped and spun. “Pearl? What are you doing here?”

Mama Letha came to look into the corridor. “Ronald Weasley,” she said, hands on her hips. “You are supposed to be in bed.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Letha,” said Ron. “But I had to come.”

“And why exactly did you *have* to come?”

Ron took a deep breath. “Because I think I know how you can find them. Or at least find out where they are.”

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Remus looked around, startled, as the door crashed open again. “Ron’s got something,” announced Sirius, levitating an embarrassed-looking Ron into one of the chairs in front of Dumbledore’s desk. “Go on, tell them.”

Ron ducked his head for a second. “I did it last year,” he said. “Without meaning to. I turned my pendants into locators. They showed us where Ginny was. One of the jewels got brighter when we got closer. So I thought someone could do that again, only with a map – because you know the general area where Harry and Hermione and Draco are, so you could hold the pendants over the map and move them and watch the light to see when it gets brighter.”

“Dowsing,” said Aletha. “Magical dowsing. It ought to work. But the jewels are one use only, and it’s a red one that’s required...”

“I’d better do it,” said Remus, standing up. “Albus, do you have a map of this area?”

One flick of Dumbledore’s wand cleared his desk, and a second conjured a large map on it. “Thanks,” said Remus, taking off his pendants. “What do I have to do, Ron?”

“Just hold them, and think about the people you want to find, and wish you had a way to find them. That’s all I did.”

Remus nodded and closed his hand around the pendants. It took no effort at all to think of his missing cubs – it was all he’d been doing for the last fifty minutes – and wishing he had a way to find them was even less work than that. *Show me where they are*, he willed. *Lead me to them.*

Red light flashed between his fingers. Quickly, Remus took his hand away and held the pendants by their chain over the map. One of the red jewels glowed with an internal light, brightening and dimming as he moved it back and forth.

“Brighter means closer, I take it, Mr. Weasley?” said Minerva, staring at the pendants in fascination.

Ron nodded. “Just like playing Hot and Cold.”

Within a few moments, Remus had the brightest area pinpointed. “Can you zoom in?” he asked Dumbledore, who tapped his wand twice on the parchment. The map vanished, to be replaced by one in a larger scale.

“Hogsmeade,” said Danger as Remus found the brightest spot again. “They’re still in Hogsmeade?”

“Not in the village itself,” said Dumbledore absently, enlarging the map. “It seems to be indicating an area a short way outside the town...”

One more enlargement brought them to a scale where they could see buildings. “This ought to do it,” said Remus, moving slowly lest he overshoot. “Closer... closer... got it!”

He dropped the pendants on top of a building sitting by itself on a hill. The red gem flared brightly, as in triumph, and went out.

Remus snatched up the chain to see where his cubs were.

xXxXx

Outside, Ginny shivered a little, wishing she’d thought to bring a jumper of her own as well as the one she clutched in her arms. But that would have taken more time, and she had to hurry.

She rounded Hagrid’s darkened hut and ran up to the paddock. “Buckbeak!” she called to the creature standing off to one side, head under his wing. “Buckbeak, wake up!”

The hippogriff’s wings flared, and his head came around, his great orange eyes fixing on Ginny. She swallowed and bowed deeply, praying he didn’t pick this moment to get into a snit. After a moment, she heard a whoosh of expelled breath and saw Buckbeak’s scaly knees bend in front of her.

Ginny straightened and ran to the hippogriff’s side. “Beautiful Buckbeak,” she said coaxingly, stroking him. “You like us, I think. But you like Draco the most. You like him because he comes down here and talks to you. You know who I mean – this boy.” She held up Draco’s jumper, the one she’d taken from his dorm. “Here, sniff. You know him.”

Buckbeak lowered his head to the jumper, inhaled several times, and crooned deep in his throat.

“That’s right, you know him. He’s in trouble, Buckbeak. He needs your help. Can you go to him? Can you fly and find him, and help him?” Ginny didn’t know how much of what she was saying would get through, but she had to try. “Go on, Buckbeak! Fly! Find Draco!”

Buckbeak opened his wings again and beat them twice, screeching. His great beak plucked at the jumper in Ginny’s hand, then turned and tugged at his neck feathers.

“What, you want this there?” Ginny could have sworn he winked at her. “You want this around your neck?” Wondering if she was losing her mind, she tied the jumper around the hippogriff’s neck. “There you go, Buckbeak. Go on, now.”

With a second, louder, screech, Buckbeak turned and galloped down the paddock, launching himself into the air at the end of it, flapping hard to gain altitude. Ginny watched him for a moment, then turned to run for the castle.

Her part was done. She only hoped it would work.

xXxXx

Lucius Malfoy shut the door of the bedroom where his son and the Mudblood girl sat and tapped all four corners of the doorframe with his wand, smirking to himself. Nothing would leave that room by the door without his permission now, and the window was much too small to allow a human access. As well, he had examined both children closely, and removed from them anything that could be used as a weapon, although he was admittedly confused as to why they both wore illusionary necklaces. Still, illusion – by its nature a thing of vision only – could not harm him.

Little fool. He thinks he has deceived me. He chuckled as he made his way down the hall. He thinks I believe that he will willingly return to me, when he has told me twice that he never will. But thanks to the wands Patroclus procured for us, some careful purchases with what gold I had, and some pilfering from Severus Snape’s stores to make up for it...

It still made him angry to think of it. The day he had tried to withdraw more gold from his Gringotts vault, only to be told that it was empty, that its entire contents had been withdrawn, withdrawn and redeposited in a vault belonging to one Remus Lupin. And then to see Lupin escorting his son around the village, laughing and talking familiarly with him, even placing a fatherly hand on the boy’s shoulder...

After the Dark Lord’s return, I believe I shall ask if I may have Lupin, Lucius mused. Him and his wife. I can teach her what a real man is like, with him to watch. And cloth-of-silver garments are always amusing. Then, at the next full moon, let the games begin – the arena filled with weapons, but only one made of silver – can she find it and kill her love in time to save herself? Or will the Beast devour Beauty in this version of the tale?

Patroclus Nott would have to be allowed a share in the spoils, though. He had been livid when he had realized that he, and his son, had both been Obliviated to remove their knowledge of Lupin’s lycanthropy. The son had been very helpful, Lucius had to acknowledge, for the first half of the year – stealing the rarer supplies Lucius needed from Severus Snape’s office, and spreading stories about Draco through the school, to put him in the right frame of mind for the Christmas present Lucius had prepared for him.

But after Christmas, he seems to have abandoned his pursuits. And Draco never mentioned my little gift. Perhaps it was misdelivered, or the first spell, to catch his interest, failed to engage. He shrugged. It matters nothing now. Unless...

Could Draco's odd vacillations be explained by the effects of the curse Lucius had laid on the globe? Perhaps the personality he had so carefully implanted had taken partial hold of the boy's mind, and needed only a bit of help to finish its work.

Filio Fidelius. Such a lovely phrase.

The Dutiful Son Curse would make use of the blood they shared to bind Draco to him permanently, making him the center of the boy's world. It came directly from the ancient Romans, who had firmly believed that a child's first and only loyalty should be to the *paterfamilias*, the father of his family. The *paterfamilias*, in turn, had the right to do anything with his children, for they belonged to him. He could marry them off, send them to war, install them in a trade...

Or kill them.

That was the use of one of the potions he was brewing now. A time-delayed poison with no antidote, rare and difficult to recognize, it would destroy the Mudblood girl's mind immediately but allow her body to live on for several days, giving her family false hope for her, until it finally destroyed the last vestiges of her brain and killed her.

In his other cauldron, of course, was the potion that would open the newly-created link between their two minds and souls, allowing Draco to drain away the magic that was his by right. Lucius frowned at this potion as he dipped a testing flask into it. One of the books had claimed it was not actually necessary, that the link would open on its own once the binding had begun, allowing magical sharing and even mind-to-mind speech between the two so bonded.

Certainly the joining of the two bloods had been spectacular. He had made the cuts as the spell's instructions directed, in the same place on each child – he could always remove the mark from Draco later, and he rather enjoyed seeing them branded his creations. Then he had collected a drop of each blood on a knife blade and thrust it into the fire of pine, dogwood and yew. The flames had roared up and turned blood red, and both children's cuts had instantly become scars. This, according to the book, was the sign of a fully successful joining, one which would be as useful as a true-born blood bond, and only possible if the hearts and minds of those being joined were unopposed...

Lucius set the flask of potion aside and went to find the book. He flipped through the pages rapidly until he found the passage he wanted, then read it over carefully, and sighed in relief.

I see. I see now. The link will open on its own only if there is some currently extant magical bond between the two. And nothing of that sort exists between them – I checked it myself...

Which meant, Lucius realized, that his Christmas gift to Draco had either never arrived or never been opened. He would have been able to tell if his curse were currently active on the boy.

But it no longer matters. Direct action is the course of the day. And direct action is what I will take. In precisely...

He checked his watch again. *Four minutes.*

And then, with his son at his side, he would seek the Dark Lord and find him, and bring him Harry Potter. His master would rise again, greater and more terrible than ever before, and with the prophesied vanquisher instead the vanquished, no other would dare stand before them. The world would be theirs for the taking, and theirs to keep, for the Dark Lord had promised that all those who had helped to bring him to power should have their reward...

Immortality. Lucius licked his lips, tasting the sweetness of the word. *I will watch my great-great-grandsons play the ancient game, and teach them how it is done, and spar with them but keep them always in awe of me, for I shall be the true paterfamilias, the Father of the Family who can never die...*

The fires under the cauldrons flickered as the potions boiled and bubbled.

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Harry's eyes came open again. He still couldn't move any other part of his body, but his head hurt less, and it was easier to think now. Straining his eyes downward, he managed to see it had been about forty minutes since he was last awake.

All right. Time for some serious thinking.

Goal: get out of here alive, preferably unhurt, and definitely with Draco and Hermione in the same condition.

Requirements: get out of this damned spell, find Draco and Hermione, get them loose from whatever's been done to them, find out where we are, find a way home, and use it. All without attracting the attention of Malfoy and Pettigrew, or, if we do attract their attention, dealing with it.

I wish I had my wand. Or my dagger.

Pursuant to Combat Club rules, to avoid cheating, Harry had left his wand in his dorm. Some of the older students had grumbled about this, claiming their basic rights were being violated, but Moony had been firm – no wands, or no playing. To the cubs, he had issued a separate order – the daggers, too, must be left behind. “Just in case you forget this isn't a real fight,” he'd said. “I've known it to happen.”

So Harry and Draco, and Hermione and Meghan, had dutifully removed their belts and tucked their wands under their pillows before reporting to the Slythindor mustering point. Harry could feel the shape of a wand tucked into his robes, but it was a Combat Club wand, and would only squirt dye at someone.

But I got it in Pettigrew's eyes when he was masquerading as Luna, and that worked pretty well. Or if I can get it into someone's mouth...

Not important right now, Harry. Think about important things. Like getting loose from this spell.

On first blush, his prospects weren't good. Spells like the Body-Bind were supposed to be impossible to break from the inside.

But so are Memory Charms. And I did one of those once. I just wanted it to break hard enough, and it broke.

Still, I think I need something more here. Something strong, powerful, but simple. Something to let me go, to unlock this spell...

The word triggered a memory. "Basic unlocking is three, three, five," said Professor Vector's precise voice. "All together, now – three, three, five..."

Arithmancy . The unlocking sequence. Could that work on this? You're supposed to do it with a wand, but maybe it would work without one.

Harry closed his eyes, the better to remember. *I'd need to do three of one motion, three of another, and five of a third. Unfortunately, my motion skills are kind of limited right now...*

Wait. I can open and close my eyes. That's two, right there! Left eye, right eye! Perfect! What for the last one, though?

He took a deep breath, and just like that, had his answer. *Breathing. Big, deliberate breaths. So, left eye three times, right eye three times, and then five breaths, and that should break the spell.*

I hope.

Harry blinked several times to clear his eyes, then began. Ceremoniously, he lowered and raised his left eyelid, once, twice, three times. Then the right, once, twice, three times.

Now the breaths.

Breathing in and out five times, slowly, left him with plenty of time to worry.

Is this really going to work? Should I have tried something else?

One.

Can I even do wandless magic? I'm only thirteen...

Two.

I don't even know if Draco and Hermione are here with me. Or where here is.

Three.

But this has to work. I have to get free of this. I have to.

Four.

So I will. I always do what I have to.

Five.

It's a family trait.

Harry exhaled the fifth breath extra slowly, almost afraid to try to move, in case it hadn't worked.

Well, I have to move sometime...

He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth.

I think...

He tried a smile. His face responded perfectly to his mind.

Yes...

He rolled over and sat up, stiffly but with no other trouble.

YES!

He stretched carefully, a bit at a time, working the stiffness out of his muscles. *I have to be ready for anything. Running, fighting, hiding...*

Footsteps sounded in the hall.

Hiding sounds best right now.

Quickly, Harry lay back down in the same position he'd held for the last hour. He'd hide in plain sight until the person passed by, being just what he was expected to be – a helpless prisoner...

But instead of passing by, the person turned in at the door of the room.

Wormtail. Harry tensed up as he saw the small, hunched silhouette, and again as the man came into the candlelight, staring down at him.

Two and a half years in Azkaban had robbed Peter Pettigrew of much of his fat. The face Harry remembered as being so nervous was alight with a strange, fiendish glee. From within his robes, Pettigrew withdrew a wand.

I thought they weren't supposed to have wands...

"I always wanted to do this," he said, staring at the wand. "I always wanted to, but I never got the

chance. I wanted to do it to James, but he died before I got the chance. I didn't think that was fair. The Dark Lord promised I'd have my revenge." He looked down at Harry, a thin smile beginning on his face. "You'll have to do instead. But we can't have Lucius horning in on the party, no, we can't have that. *Silencio!*"

Wormtail waved the wand around the room, and all the little noises Harry had been hearing from elsewhere in the house ceased. He tensed even further, unable to stop himself, preparing for what was almost certainly coming. *Death Eaters love the Unforgivables...*

"Poke!" said Wormtail, jabbing the wand into Harry's shoulder.

"Poke!" Another jab, this one in the back.

I don't believe this. Harry allowed a disbelieving smile to spread over his face, since Wormtail was behind him. *Just have to wait until he gets around to my front again...*

"Poke, poke, poke, poke, poke!" chanted Wormtail, giggling like a girl as he prodded Harry with the wand. "Oh, and we can't forget the most important place of all, can we? Can we?" He skipped around Harry's feet and aimed the wand at a very private place.

I don't think so.

Harry swept his feet around, knocking Wormtail to the floor, and scrambled up in the same motion, diving on the older wizard. Within seconds, he had Wormtail pinned, one hand over his mouth, and the wand was in his hand, its point resting against Wormtail's throat.

"Poke," he hissed, digging it in slightly.

Wormtail made a whimpering noise.

"*Quietus,*" said Harry, wand still aimed at Wormtail's throat. He stood up and backed away. "*Finite Incantatem,*" he said, flicking the wand around the room to remove the Silencing Charm.

"Why – why did you do that?" whispered Wormtail, his eyes widening as he realized he couldn't speak any louder.

"So no one sneaks up on us," said Harry, advancing on Wormtail again, stopping just out of easy grabbing range, wand aimed directly at Wormtail's chest. He knelt down, then sat on one hip, never allowing the wand to leave its target. "Now. Give me one good reason I should let you live."

"The little girl," Wormtail gabbled sotto voce. "Meghan. Sirius' daughter. I never wanted to take her – I wouldn't have hurt her – I wouldn't have let Lucius have her..."

"Right," said Harry skeptically. "How did you get onto the grounds?"

"An illusion spell. It stands up to more than a glamour charm, but it's easier than Polyjuice Potion. And it lasts longer. Up to three hours if you do it right. You need a piece of the person

you're disguising yourself as – hair or nails or skin – we had someone helping us, a boy, a student, I don't know his name, but he would leave us notes with hair inside them. I was him the first time, on Halloween. Lucius was him yesterday.”

“How did you get in yesterday?”

“In his pocket – the boy's pocket – I changed and climbed inside...” Wormtail's eyes darted around the room.

“Don't even think about changing now,” said Harry, the wand never wavering. “I'm the fastest in my class, and I could get you before you were finished. How did you escape from Azkaban?”

“As a rat. I got out when the door was opened, then waited until there were no dementors in the hallway to free Lucius...”

“How did you transform? There were wards on your cell.”

“They were only on the inside of the walls,” said Wormtail, and to Harry's disconcertment, he giggled again. “Only on the inside, and I made a hole... I chipped the rock, day after day, week after week, until I had a hole. It was big enough to get little pieces of me into it – I could transform bit by bit, squeezing a little more of my human self in every day and changing, until one day there was enough room for all of me...” His giggles escalated madly.

“Stop that,” said Harry. “Where are Draco and Hermione?”

“They're here – in this house – upstairs. They're not hurt, at least I don't think so – it hasn't been long enough yet – Lucius had to let the spell finish before he could kill the girl...”

Harry's heart did a sort of quick-step double beat, but his hand stayed steady – he'd been the best of the Pride at keeping a wand on target no matter what, and Padfoot and Moony had come up with some amazing distractions. “What spell?”

Wormtail explained. Harry wasn't sure whether to laugh or sick up. *Malfoy's bloody insane. But we knew that.*

“All right,” he said when Wormtail had finished. “Close your eyes.”

Wormtail looked terrified. “Harry – you wouldn't – you wouldn't really – Sirius let me live...”

“Shut up.” Harry stared Wormtail down, imagining that he could see into the other wizard's mind through his watery blue eyes. “Yeah, he let you live. Maybe he shouldn't have. But he did. You know why?”

“N-n-no...”

“I think you do. He told you at your trial. Think really hard. Maybe you'll remember.”

Wormtail shook his head hard. "I can't... I can't remember..."

"He didn't want to have your death on his conscience," said Harry, recalling it as he spoke. The way Padfoot had held Meghan in one arm and put his other around Harry, holding both his children close to him, and the things he had said. "He didn't want to be any more like you than you had to. You killed twelve people, and handed over three others to Voldemort—" He got a malicious pleasure out of seeing Wormtail shudder at the name. "You did all that for yourself. So your worthless little life could go on. Because you don't have anyone else, do you? You had friends once, but you threw them all away for your Dark Lord."

Wormtail's mouth opened and closed, but he couldn't seem to muster up anything to say.

"Padfoot didn't want to live his life knowing that something he did, or something he didn't do, killed even one person. Even you."

"B-but you, Harry..." Wormtail managed to choke out. "What will *you* do..."

"You'll know in a minute," said Harry coldly. "Now close your eyes, or I'll close them for you."

Trembling, whimpering, Wormtail closed his eyes. Harry stood up, holding the wand on target, and backed away across the room.

"Petrificus Totalus," he whispered.

Wormtail jerked once as the spell hit, then was entirely still. Harry tucked the wand into his waistband and hurried back across the room. Getting a hold of Wormtail's collar, he hauled the man into the center of the room, where he himself had been a little while before, and peered cautiously into the hall. No one was in sight.

Damn it. I forgot to ask where we are. Well, I'm not taking the spell off to find out. I'll just find Draco and Hermione, we'll take out Malfoy, and then we'll get out of here.

He adjusted the candle so its light wouldn't immediately reveal that Wormtail and not Harry now lay helpless in this room. Then he bent over Wormtail.

"Padfoot let you live," he said quietly. "So will I. Call it a second chance. But you're running low. If we ever meet again, I might not be so nice."

Turning away, he slipped out of the room, testing every board before he stepped on it in case it squeaked, looking for a window, a door, or the stairs, and praying he didn't unexpectedly run into Lucius Malfoy.

He'd done the impossible once already. Now he just had to do it again.

xXxXx

Animagus.

What do you mean? Wait – Draco stared at Hermione. You want to do your first change here?

It ought to work. Hermione sounded like she was trying to convince herself. **I've taken the potion, and I know the incantation, I've known it for weeks, I just haven't had the courage to try it. But I'll try it now. And it will work. You'll see.**

But what will it do? Draco looked down at their hands and could have kicked himself. **Of course – the ropes are tied around your human wrists. They'd fall off cat paws. As long as they're not magical.**

I don't think they are. It's just that there's so much of them, and they're holding our hands so tightly, that we'd never have a chance to get away without magic.

I hope you're right.

I'm sure I'm right. Feel. Hermione wiggled her hands. **There's loose space in here. Not much, but it's here. A magical rope would have closed down around us by now.**

All right. Draco took a deep breath, focusing on calm. He needed to be calm, so that Hermione would be calm, so that she could accomplish this impossibly advanced magical feat and free herself, so that she could free him, so that they could both escape, assuming his father hadn't somehow charmed the door to keep them in here even if they could remove the ropes...

This isn't helping.

Hermione looked closely at him. **You know, that is a scar on your face. On your left cheek. It's about an inch long, straight up and down.**

You have one too. It looks just like that.

I wonder if he had to do it the same for both of us to make us twins?

Probably. Neenie?

Yeah?

I like being twins.

I like it too.

If we get out of this –

When.

Fine. When we get out of this, can we still be twins?

Hermione nodded briskly. **And you can be the only person who's allowed to call me Neenie,**

and drive Harry and Ron up the wall.

Draco laughed aloud. **I like that.**

But first we have to get out of this. And that means I should be standing up. Cat legs don't bend this way. Help me out?

With a little squirming, a little leaning, and a little grunting, Hermione worked her legs around, wincing as circulation returned to her feet. When she could feel again, she stood up on the other side of the bed, leaning forward so that her hands still rested on the bed inside their rope cocoon. **I think I'm ready,** she said uncertainly.

I know you're ready. Draco knew how this worked – if he showed any signs of nerves or worry, Hermione's courage would fail, and they wouldn't get out of this. He had to be steady as a rock for her. But he could do that.

She was his twin. He wouldn't let her down.

Go ahead, he continued. **I'm listening.**

Hermione closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. **All right. Here goes.**

She began to recite, each word carefully and deliberately articulated. **Reno mea adsimile curalium, argilla, et merula est.**

Draco felt an odd prickling against his hands, and stared as Hermione's face sprouted fur, fur which grew in blotches of orange, white, and black...

Well, that is what she just said.

Celeritas et decor mea non pare est.

There was no visible change for this sentence, but with his mind in contact with hers, Draco could feel the changes there. Neenie's brain was beginning to alter, her reflexes to change. This mind belonged to a body that could run all day and never tire, walk a tightrope and never fall.

Mea denses et unguis catus sunt, atque ego sum.

Now she was developing the hunter's mind, and a body to go with. Draco watched as she pulled her lips back from her teeth, which were becoming sharper by the second, and winced as claws began to dig into his hands. *Finish up, Neenie... come on, last sentence...*

Hermione took a deep breath, although she wasn't speaking aloud. **Felis sum qui solus ambulat, sed omne loci idem mihi non sunt.**

I am the cat who walks by herself, Draco translated, *but not all places are alike to me.*

Hermione's body shrank, her clothes began to disappear, her face changed shape and her ears migrated. Draco watched it all in fascination.

She's a paradox. A cat with a home, a Pride to take care of, but one to take care of her as well...

Hermione scabbled with her back paws against the bedclothes and got her rear end up onto the bed just in time for Draco to watch her tail sprout, long and graceful. She sat down on the edge of the bed, looking nervous.

"It's done," Draco whispered aloud. "It's done. You did it – Neenie, you can look! You did it!"

I did it? Neenie opened her eyes. **I did it! I did it! Draco, I did it! I'm an Animagus!**

"I see. I see you. Now try taking your paws out."

Carefully, Neenie withdrew her dainty paws from the confining rope, then looked at him triumphantly. After a moment, puzzlement seemed to creep onto the feline face.

Draco frowned. "Are you trying to talk to me?"

Neenie nodded hard.

"I don't hear anything."

Neenie rolled her eyes.

"I don't get it. Moony and Danger can talk from anywhere."

Neenie frowned cat-style, pulling her lips back, then brightened. She padded quickly around to Draco's side and laid a velvety paw on his exposed wrist. **How's this?**

Draco sighed in relief. **Loud and clear. You?**

The same. I guess we have to touch.

Well, that's better than nothing. Can you change back?

Probably, but why?

Draco lifted his hands, which were still bound. **I'd like to get loose at some point tonight...**

Oh, right. Sorry. Hold on. Neenie leapt lightly off the bed and disappeared. A bit of scabbled and two thumps later, the human Hermione appeared above the bed and began untying knots.

"The return spell is a lot easier," she said. "Just '*Reditio ipse* .'"

"That's good." Draco squirmed free of the last loop and started rubbing his wrists. "Well, there's that done. What now?"

Hermione shook her head. "I was hoping you'd have an idea."

"I'm not saying I don't. Let's see if we can tell where we are." Draco stood up and went over to the window.

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"The Shrieking Shack," breathed Minerva. "They're in the Shrieking Shack – the one building in Hogsmeade we never checked – it's been abandoned for years..."

The association appeared in Remus' mind again, but this time it didn't flee the instant he noticed it. *Abandoned. Long-abandoned prison of youth –*

It means the Shrieking Shack! Danger almost shouted. **You have to go back there – willingly – or you will at some point tonight – wait here. I'll get it.** She ran for the fireplace.

"Where's she going?" asked Sirius, staring after her.

"Sibyll Trelawney made another prophecy," said Remus quickly. "Ron witnessed it, we were able to get a copy from his memories. Danger's gone to get it now."

"What is it about?" asked Aletha.

"We think it's about tonight." Remus slid his pendants back over his head and stared down at the little ink drawing of the Shrieking Shack. He'd never wanted to go back there, for any reason... and there had been lines in the prophecy about spilling blood and wreaking havoc...

Danger's here. It won't happen.

But he kept thinking about how nice some blood would taste, particularly some blood with the name Malfoy attached to it...

It must be getting close to moonrise.

A check of the clock revealed he had four minutes left. *No surprise, then. But I can't bite him, there's too much risk, if I infect him I'll be exposed...*

Coming back, said Danger dizzily inside his head. **In the Floo now...**

"Here she comes," said Remus, just as the fire turned green. Danger stumbled out, shook her head violently, dislodging a cloud of ashes, and walked quickly across the office, handing the scroll to Dumbledore.

"On the night of the willing return to the long-abandoned prison of youth, the impossible will happen, three times over," Dumbledore read aloud. *"Souls shall join against the darkness, the faithful three will ride again, and five shall spill their blood upon the ground... revenge and mercy wreak havoc alike, as an ancient lie becomes truth... on that night, the impossible shall come to*

pass... ”

“Willing return to prison of youth being you, Remus, going back to the Shrieking Shack?” Aletha questioned.

“That’s what I think,” said Remus. “But I’d never make it now. I’d have to stop and transform partway there, and that’s no good...”

“But we don’t have to stop,” said Sirius, grinning. “Letha and I. We can go right now.”

“I will send word to the Aurors,” said Dumbledore, standing up. “They should arrive within a few minutes.”

“Tell them to hurry,” said Aletha, following Sirius to the door. “Or there won’t be anything left.”

“Bash ‘em, Dadfoot,” said Meghan, with a smaller version of Sirius’ grin decorating her face. “Bash ‘em good for me.”

“I will, Pearl. You all be good now,” Sirius told the Pride. “And maybe we’ll let you kick them a few times.”

Ron looked interested.

“Stop giving them ideas,” said Aletha firmly. The door closed behind her. Dumbledore had already left by the fireplace.

“I’ll take them back to the hospital wing,” said Minerva. “You two stay here.”

“Just for a few minutes,” said Danger. “Then we’re heading out.”

“Good luck,” said Neville, standing up.

“Good luck,” echoed the rest of the Pride as they followed Minerva out the door.

And we end up being alone anyway. Danger smiled. **Funny how things work out.**

Just don’t assume anything, Remus warned her, sitting down in the chair Ron had vacated. **They’re not dead yet, but a lot can happen in a few minutes...**

Well, you’re a regular little ray of sunshine.

I’m just trying to be realistic. Just because we know where they are is no guarantee we’ll get them back safely...

Have you ever known Sirius to fail?

Do you really want me to answer that?

No. Answer this. Have you ever known Sirius *and* Letha to fail, when they went after something together?

Remus considered the question. **No**, he said finally. **Anything they work together on seems to come off well.**

And they're working together on this. What does that tell you?

Sirius is a very changeable man?

We knew that.

So we did. Remus reached over and pulled Danger into the chair with him. **And we also knew that the best way to ease before-moonrise pains is skin-to-skin contact, did we not?**

We did.

And the best way to facilitate skin-to-skin contact is the removal of clothing...

Mmmm .

"Hmph," said Phineas Nigellus. "Disgusting."

A snap of Remus' fingers produced a curtain of fire in front of the old wizard's portrait.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 23: The Faithful Three (Year 3)

Chapter 23: The Faithful Three

“Letha?”

“Yeah?” They were outside now, running across the lawns towards the Whomping Willow.

“I’m sorry. About earlier.”

“We’ll let it go for now. Call it... temporary insanity due to stress.” Aletha drew her wand without breaking stride and aimed a spell at the knot on the Willow’s trunk. It went wide, and she swore. *I used to be able to hit what I aimed at...*

But I don’t usually shoot running. Or scared.

Sirius nailed the knot with his first spell. The Willow froze.

“I see you’re back on track,” said Aletha, ducking under the motionless branches.

“In the flesh and ready to kick some arse.” Sirius followed her down the hole and into the passage. Once inside, he whisked a hand across his throat, indicating silence was the order of the day. Aletha nodded and pulled out her chain, which Sirius quickly threw over his head. **We don’t know what we’re going to find, he said through it. Better be ready for anything.**

They’re not dead. We would have felt that. Aletha rubbed her pendants, wishing she could will warmth into them, force them to say that her cubs were all right, no longer close to death –

And then she noticed something. **Sirius, look!**

What? Sirius took the pendants from her without stopping, continuing down the low, earthen passage. **Letha, I don’t see a change – no, hang on – it’s Harry’s, isn’t it?** Relief rolled off him, tempered still with worry but lighter than his emotions had been for the last hour. **It’s not nearly so bright any more. It’s still lit, but it’s gone down to almost as dim as Draco’s.**

And Hermione’s isn’t nearly as bright anymore either. It’s as if the danger’s passing somehow.

They must be doing something, said Sirius, grinning. They’re not just sitting around and waiting for us to come find them – they’re fighting back.

As long as they’re not doing anything stupid that would put them in more danger, said Aletha darkly. Sometimes sitting and waiting is the smartest thing to do...

Well, they won’t have to do anything much longer. Because we’re going to find them, and get

them home, and catch the maniacs responsible for this.

Amen. And then maybe we can have normal lives.

Sirius snorted. **Define “normal.”**

Good point. Aletha looked around at the walls of the passage and felt a twinge of fear – she wasn't quite claustrophobic, but she didn't care for small spaces much. **We aren't quite what most people would call normal. But I mean without having anyone after us.**

I don't think I remember a life without having anyone after us. First we were in hiding, then we were famous, then Harry's had Voldemort chasing him in two separate incarnations, and now Draco and his father... Sirius sounded thoughtful. **I think I'd be bored by a normal life at this point.**

Well, you'll have to learn to deal with a normal life, if you want to keep a normal wife.

What did I do to deserve this? Sirius moaned mentally. **Trapped in an underground passage with a woman who makes terrible puns...**

Aletha kicked him gently in the back of the leg. **Trapped indeed. Shut up and keep moving.**

Yes, ma'am.

xXxXx

“It looks familiar,” said Hermione, staring out the broken window, brushing her hair out of her face as the draught blew it forward. “I've seen it before, but not like this – not from this angle, I don't think...”

Draco, rubbing a cramp out of his leg, noticed something on the floor amid the shards of window glass. It was a small rock, a pebble really. “Look at this,” he said, picking it up. “I guess someone threw it to break the window.”

Hermione took the rock from him and tossed it in her hand. “Window, first floor,” she murmured. Then a delighted expression broke over her face, and she snatched Draco's hand. **I know where we are!** she shouted into his mind. **I threw this, last Hogsmeade visit but one! We're in the Shrieking Shack!**

Ow . Draco rubbed his forehead, but he had a smile on his face to match Hermione's. **You're right. That's Hogsmeade out there – we're not ten minutes from Hogwarts, if we can get out of here...**

But that's the problem, isn't it? Getting out. This window's too small for us, and I don't trust the door.

Nor do I. But the window's only too small for me. Not for you. And cats always land on their

feet, don't they?

Hermione gaped at him. **You want me to – to jump out the window and leave you here?**

Neenie, it's the best plan we have. You can run back to Hogwarts, tell them where we are, bring them back here –

And by that time, you'll be gone! He'll have taken you somewhere else, and I'll never see you again! Her fear for him colored every word, and suddenly she hugged him hard. **I don't want to lose you. I don't ever want to lose you.**

I know. And I don't want to lose you either. Draco disengaged gently from the hug. **But a few minutes ago, you were the one telling me that "I'm not leaving without you" sounds great in films, but it doesn't always work in real life. You have to go, Neenie. It's the only chance for either of us. And you have to go now, before he comes back.**

Oh, Draco – Hermione pressed his hand hard. **Be careful!**

I'll do my best. You'd better change.

Hermione shut her eyes and began to recite. It didn't take as long this time – within about thirty seconds, Draco could lean down and pick up ten pounds of cat, cradling her in his arms. **At least you cleared the window pretty well with that rock,** he said. **There aren't any really big pieces left in the frame.**

Are you going to throw me? Neenie peered at the windowsill, littered with shards. **I don't want to walk on that.**

I can do that. Ready?

No. Do it anyway.

Draco rolled his eyes and rearranged his grip, preparing to toss her gently out through the opening. **You have to let go of me,** he said, realizing what the little prickles on his arm were. **No claws.**

Spoilsport, grumbled Neenie as the prickles disappeared.

One, two – Draco broke off, staring out the window. **What in the name of –**

Something very large was flying directly towards the house. The setting sun was directly behind it, so Draco could only see it in silhouette, and it was front-on to him, meaning there wasn't much to go on. **Neenie? Can you smell anything?**

No, the wind is the other way – but it's not Letha, it's built wrong, it's stockier and its neck isn't as long –

Draco backed away warily as the thing got closer. For a moment, the twins watched gray wings

beating outside the window. Then a large beak poked in.

“Rawwk?”

xXxXx

Lucius looked up from his reading. *What was that?*

Quickly, he slipped two sealed flasks of a knock-out-vapor potion into his pocket and gulped down a measure of the antidote. *If they are trying to escape, I can stop them without being incapacitated myself.*

He started down the hall towards the room where the children were imprisoned. *It has been more than long enough in any case...*

xXxXx

No, said Neenie in disbelief. **It can't be...**

“Buckbeak?” breathed Draco, moving closer. “Buckbeak – it is you!” He reached out the window and scratched around the hippogriff's beak as Buckbeak beat his wings to stay more or less level.

“Awwrrr,” said Buckbeak happily, leaning into the scratch.

“Looks like your ride's here,” Draco said to Neenie, curled in his other arm. “He's even got something tied around his neck you can hold onto. Here you go...”

It's yours, said Neenie as Draco held her out the window so that she could attach herself to the woolen thing tied around the hippogriff's neck. **It's one of your jumpers, one Danger made for you. It smells like you all over. Someone must have given it to Buckbeak and told him to come find you.**

She arranged herself on the hippogriff's back and concentrated, and Buckbeak squawked again as the weight on his back suddenly increased twelve-fold. “I'll come back as soon as I can,” she said aloud, fastening one hand in the jumper and squeezing Draco's with the other. “I love you.”

“You too.” Draco pressed her hand once more, then let it go.

“How touching.”

Draco whirled. His father stood in the doorway, looking at him in genteel surprise. “More resourceful than I thought, it seems,” he said, stepping into the room. “But no matter. Move aside, Draco.”

“No.” Draco planted his back against the window frame. “I won't.” *Go*, he willed Hermione. *Go, get out of here – I'm buying you all the time I can –*

“As I suspected. Your seeming conversion was an act.” Lucius smiled. “When you had so often told me that your first loyalty was now to the band of animals who raised you, was I to believe that you had so readily seen the light and returned to humanity?” He drew his wand. “So I must treat you as an animal for a time, I fear. Teach you who is your master. You will thank me for it one day, believe me...”

I won't go down without a fight. Draco pulled the Combat Club wand from within his robes, painfully aware it would do nothing but spray dye where he pointed it –

Unless I can surprise him by exploding it in his face...

Lucius laughed. “You think I would have left you with a weapon, even had you possessed one? Do you plan to fight me with a false wand? Or perhaps strangle me with your illusionary necklace?”

“Illusionary necklace? What are you talking about?”

“The chain you seem to wear around your neck,” said Lucius, gesturing with his left hand.

“I don't seem to wear it, I do wear it. It's real.”

“Spare me,” said Lucius impatiently. “The chain can be seen, but not touched, therefore it is an illusion. Now will you move away from that window or must I force you?”

Seen but not touched... the Slytherin gift...

In that instant, a plan unfolded in Draco's mind. He risked a quick glance over his shoulder. Hermione and Buckbeak were still there, hovering, anguished indecision on Hermione's face. Draco slipped his left hand behind his back as he turned his head back into the room.

“I'll move,” he said, feeling Hermione's hand against his. **Go down and out a little from the window and stay there,** he sent in one frantic burst before he stepped forward. “See how nicely I'm moving?”

“I do.” Lucius looked pleased, then surprised, then a little worried as Draco kept advancing on him. “Stop,” he said, brandishing the wand. “Stop!”

“What are you afraid of? You're the one with the wand.” Draco took one more step, feeling the tip of his father's wand against his chest. “There. I've stopped.”

This had better work, or I am so dead...

Draco lifted his Combat Club wand to his mouth. “Dye output max, go in five,” he muttered to it, then kissed it ceremoniously, swapped it end for end, and offered it to Lucius. “My wand, sir.”

Lucius accepted it from him suspiciously and quickly flung it aside. But his attention was still distracted for a split-second, and that was all Draco needed. He closed his hand around his father's wand where it met his chest and thought hard at his pendants. *Slytherin jewel, activate!*

Lucius whipped his head back to face Draco, saw what he was doing, and tried to pull his wand away –

His fingers passed through it as if it was made of air, and it remained in Draco's hand –

Heart pounding, Draco whirled on his heel and dashed towards the window, catching glimpses through it of waving wings –

I'm out of my mind –

He jumped his hardest, passing through the wall like a ghost, and saw Hermione and Buckbeak three feet too high and much too far out, and the ground below him, coming up fast – Hermione's scream echoed in his ears, along with the sound of a wand exploding behind him –

He slammed into gray feathers, the impact knocking all the breath out of him, and felt Hermione's hands close around his arms with desperate strength. "Got you!" she gasped out, clutching at him. "Buckbeak side-slipped to catch you – are you all right?"

"Fine," Draco panted, clinging to the jumper knotted around Buckbeak's neck with all his might. "Just fine. I even got his wand."

"Don't drop it," said Hermione. "Here, I'll move back..." She scooted backwards a little more and helped Draco pull himself up into a proper riding position on Buckbeak's back in front of her. They looked back at the window but could only see vague shadows within. Then a voice shouted something unintelligible and an object came flying out towards them, smashing on the ground, which was now only a few feet below them.

"Gee up, Buckbeak," said Draco quickly, slapping the hippogriff's shoulder. Buckbeak took a deep breath, his wings swept down and up again, and they were soaring upwards, towards the stars which were beginning to become visible.

We did it, whispered Hermione's voice inside his mind as she laid her head on the back of his neck, her hair flying this way and that in the confusion of the draft Buckbeak's wings made and the prevailing winds, which were from behind them. **We did it – we really did it – we got away! Both of us! And – wait –** Draco felt her fumbling with something behind him. **Draco, do you feel it? Do you feel it?**

Do I feel what?

Our pendants! They're not cold anymore, and nothing's glowing at all – nobody's in danger! Harry must have got away too! We're all going to be all right!

Draco felt Hermione's joy surging through him, and returned it with interest. **Better than all right**, he said. **Do you realize what my dear father has just done?**

No. What?

He's made himself father to a Muggleborn! He's my father, and you're my twin sister – so he must be your father too!

Dear old Dad, said Hermione, giggling. **And that would make him *Danger's* father too, and Moony's father-in-law! Do you think he'll give the bride away if they ever get magically married?**

Draco burst out laughing at the image she sent – Lucius Malfoy, in sleek black dress robes, soberly shaking hands with Moony, putting Danger's hand in his, and saying, “Do right by her, son.” **Somehow I don't think so,** he said. **It would be more like this.**

He sent her an image out of an old Western movie – Lucius dressed like a farmer, running cowboy-Moony off his farm with a shotgun, while Danger, in a gingham dress, wrung her hands on the front porch, looking sweet and helpless.

Don't DO that! I'm going to fall off! Hermione was laughing so hard she had to hold onto him with both arms. **You're awful!**

I try. Draco patted Buckbeak on the side of the neck as the hippogriff yawned. **I do try.**

xXxXx

The first thing Sirius heard as he climbed out of the passage into the Shrieking Shack was Harry's voice, shouting, but not in pain or fear.

“Expelliarmus !”

“Harry?” Sirius bellowed as Aletha scrambled out behind him.

“Upstairs!” came the answer. “Turn right!”

Sirius ran for the stairs – he knew perfectly well where they were, even after all this time – and took them three at a time, emerging onto the top floor to see something that banished the previous hour of fear from his mind.

Harry was standing in the hallway, holding his wand perfectly steady and trained on Lucius Malfoy, who had his hands in the air and was covered in what looked like Gryffindor Combat Club dye.

“Draco or Hermione must have blown up their wand on him,” said Harry without turning around. “I don't know where they are – Wormtail said they were up here, but I haven't seen them...”

“They're safe,” said Aletha, coming to the top of the stairs. “Their carvings have stopped glowing.”

“Then they must have got away. Were you trying to hit them with something?” Harry asked Malfoy, who only glowered at him. “He was about to throw something out the window,” Harry

continued as Sirius came up beside him, pointing his own wand at Malfoy. "It went out the window anyway when I disarmed him, but I probably ruined his aim."

"Good work," said Sirius warmly, putting an arm around Harry's shoulders. "Very good work."

"Where's Wormtail?" asked Aletha.

"Downstairs, under the Body-Bind. I did that too."

"I'll get him," said Aletha, and Sirius heard her feet going back down the stairs. He couldn't take his eyes off Harry, nor could he keep from grinning. His godson, not yet fourteen, had captured two Death Eaters, all by himself...

Merlin's beard, he's amazing. What an Auror he'll make.

"Here, let's get him taken care of," he said. "You can put your hands down now, but do it slow," he said to Malfoy. "And hold them out in front of you."

Glaring at him, Malfoy complied, and Sirius quickly conjured ropes around his wrists. *No need to do his feet. He can walk back. And no need to gag him – who's he going to shout for?*

"So what were you throwing out the window?" he asked Malfoy conversationally.

Malfoy looked away, disdainingly to reply.

"All right, it's no polish off my wand. You do realize what's going to happen to you now. Escaping from Azkaban is pretty much automatic Dementor's Kiss."

"And I can't think of a nicer bloke to get it," remarked Harry. "Except maybe Wormtail. Do you know what he was doing to me?"

"Is it something that's going to make me want to hurt him?"

"Depends on how good a sense of humor you have."

"Where you're concerned, I have no sense of humor at all."

"You will with this. He was poking me."

Sirius frowned. He didn't like the sound of this. "With what?"

"His wand."

Sirius stared at Harry. "Poking you with his wand?"

"Yeah – I was expecting him to curse me, but no, he wanted to poke me. And he did. And he kept on going 'Poke, poke, poke!' Bit annoying, really."

Sirius shook his head. *Sounds like Wormtail's really lost it...*

"Sirius, you ready up there?" called Aletha from the bottom of the stairs. "I've got Wormtail, and he's ready to go walkies."

Sirius snickered. "Are you ready to go walkies, Lucy darling?" he asked in an old-lady falsetto, making Harry laugh. "Come on now, walkies right out here... you go on ahead," he added to Harry. "Stay out of reach."

xXxXx

They were still laughing when Draco began to feel it. A quaver in Buckbeak's wingbeat, a hesitation, as if the great animal had forgotten how to fly. "Come on, Buckbeak," he said, patting the hippogriff's back. "You can do it."

Buckbeak yawned again, hugely. "I don't like this," said Hermione from behind Draco. "I think something's wrong with him. Maybe we should land. It can't be far to Hogwarts now."

Draco squinted at the ground. "It's so dark I can't see anything. But all right. Down, Buckbeak."

The hippogriff yawned once more, then set his wings and began to glide downwards in spirals. Hermione stroked his flank. "Clever Buckbeak," she said. "You were so good to come and find us."

With a set of thuds as his feet hit packed dirt, Buckbeak landed, wobbling slightly as he stood. Draco and Hermione scrambled off his back, and the hippogriff immediately tottered a few steps and fell over.

"Oh no!" Hermione ran to him. "Oh no, oh no, what will Hagrid say?" She laid her hand on him, then exhaled in relief. "He's alive," she said. "Just... sleeping, I think."

"Maybe whatever fell out the window was a sleeping potion," said Draco. "And Buckbeak got a breath of it."

"Maybe." Hermione stood up. "I think I know where we are," she said. "It's not far from the gates. We can walk the rest of the way."

Draco drew his wand. "*Lumos* ," he said.

The wind picked up again as they set out, tugging at their robes, seeming to urge them forward.

xXxXx

If looks could kill, Aletha knew, she and Sirius and Harry would all have been dead long ago. Lucius Malfoy was absolutely and completely consumed with rage at each of them, and would gladly have killed them with his bare hands. As said hands were currently tied, and Sirius had made it clear after the first few insults that he would gag Malfoy if it kept up, Malfoy was reduced

to *looking* at them.

Wormtail, on the other hand, was shuffling along the passage with his head down, looking thoroughly cowed. Aletha kept her wand on him, though. She didn't intend to be fooled by him again.

"Hold it," said Sirius, stopping.

"What is it?" asked Aletha, holding out her hand to halt Harry, behind her.

"Moony's wards. They're not letting us in. We might have to go back."

"Don't give up before you even start," said Aletha. "Have a try at taking them down. I'll watch Malfoy." She brought her wand over to guard both men.

A few flashes of light heralded unsuccessful attempts. "I'm not sure I can," said Sirius. "When Moony protects a thing, it stays protected... wait, I have one more idea." There was a faint jingling sound, then a triumphant shout. "Got it!"

"What?" asked Aletha.

"How'd you do it?" said Harry, peering forward.

"Hold on, let me come back." Sirius lit his wand and stepped towards them. "Watch." He turned and pressed against the air in front of him, which seemed to harden under his hand, not letting him through. "Now..."

He grabbed Malfoy's arm and pulled him forward, pushing him up against the hardened air, then fished inside his robes, brought out his pendants, and pressed them to the air. Malfoy fell forward through the former barrier, just managing to stay on his feet.

"Nice," said Harry. "Let me." He pulled out his wand, aimed it at Malfoy, and let himself through the wards. Sirius followed, and Aletha escorted Wormtail through. Within a few minutes, they were climbing out of the hole between the roots of the Whomping Willow, Harry having reached up first to hit the knot.

Aletha looked up, keeping half an eye and her wand on Wormtail. The stars were coming out more thickly every second, and she knew soon the full moon would be above the trees where she could see it. *Remus and Danger are going to be pissed... there's nothing left for them to do.*

Malfoy tripped and fell heavily to the ground. Sirius bent to pull him up, and a mist curled up from under his body. Aletha frowned. *What is that?*

Sirius sniffed curiously, and his eyes went wide. "Letha, *run!*" He seized Harry's arm and flung the boy away from Malfoy as hard as he could. Harry went flying, losing his balance and rolling down the slight slope that housed the Whomping Willow, as Sirius staggered back and fell.

Aletha was about to curse Malfoy when she remembered who she was *supposed* to be watching. She spun around and swore. Wormtail was gone.

She pointed her wand at herself. “*Video caloris!*” It was the equivalent of Muggle infrared goggles – she would be able to see heat sources –

Wormtail’s trail glowed faintly red to her eyes. She took off, head down, looking up only long enough to see that she wasn’t going to run into anything – she could Summon him if she could just get to where she could see him...

xXxXx

Lucius could not have been more delighted. The potion had worked – if not perfectly, then well enough. All his captors were out of the way. Now he had only to free himself.

He picked up Black’s wand, which the Auror had let fall, and put its back end in his mouth. Aiming it at his wrists, he thought hard of the incantation for a cutting spell, and sighed with relief as the ropes fell away. He took the wand from his mouth and looked around carefully, but nothing moved nearby.

I could go after Potter, but why push my luck? Better just to return to the Shack, pack up a few necessities, and make good my escape while I still can.

But two pieces of business first.

He kicked Black hard in the face, and chuckled as the Auror’s nose crumpled and began to bleed like a tap. Then he aimed his “borrowed” wand towards the gates of Hogwarts and shot off a Summoning Spell.

To give Black what he should have had the day after he stole my son...

He slipped back into the hole out of which they had so recently come and started down the passage.

It is not quite the perfect evening I had hoped for, but neither is it as bad as it looked to be a few moments ago. I will still have my freedom, in any case. And I am rid of that disgusting little worm Pettigrew, and Black will get what he deserves.

Yes, all in all, not a bad evening’s work.

xXxXx

Harry picked himself up painfully and pulled out the wand he’d taken from Pettigrew. “*Lumos !*”

The wandlight showed him Padfoot lying on the ground by the Whomping Willow, which had reactivated now and was waving its branches around threateningly. Padfoot’s chest rose and fell, so he was alive, but his face was a bloody mess. Harry wanted to get to him, wanted to make sure

he was all right, but something made him hesitate.

He threw me away from there, and yelled at Letha to run. Something must be wrong. Maybe that mist was a knock-out potion – and maybe it's still there...

A howl from behind him made him whip around. His wandlight picked out the forms of two enormous wolves, coming toward him at speed –

“Moony! Danger!” Harry waved wildly. “Over here!”

The wolves skidded to a halt in front of him, Danger turning human as she did and pulling him into a tight embrace. “Harry, thank God you’re alive, are you all right?”

“Fine – but Padfoot’s hurt, and Malfoy got away, and Letha went after Wormtail – I haven’t seen Draco and Hermione, but they have to be all right, the pendants are normal again.”

“What happened?” said Danger quickly, as Moony rubbed against Harry’s legs in greeting and Harry squeezed his Pack-father’s shoulder. “Just to Sirius, Letha can take care of herself, and we’ll hear the rest later.”

Harry explained about the knock-out mist, and how Malfoy had disappeared in the time it took him, Harry, to pick himself up and light his wand.

“Only one place he can have gone,” said Danger. “Back into the passage, back to the Shrieking Shack. That was his base, wasn’t it?”

Harry nodded. “What are you going to do?”

“Track him down. What else?” Danger pulled out her wand and froze the Whomping Willow, allowing Moony to get in close to Padfoot. “You were right not to go to Sirius,” she said as Moony sniffed around. “Some of those knock-out vapors can linger for hours.”

“Then why...”

“Werewolves are immune to most spells and potions in transformed state,” said Danger. “It’s part of what makes them so dangerous.” Her eyes blurred blue. “He definitely went back into the passage,” she said absently. “And Sirius isn’t badly hurt – it looks like Malfoy just kicked him in the face. There’s a bit of vapor hanging around, but with this wind blowing, it should be gone within a minute or two. If you can wake him, get him into the castle. If not, just wait there – there should be someone along soon.”

“All right.” Harry hugged her quickly once more, then stood back as Danger changed forms and joined Moony near the entrance to the tunnel. “One more thing!” he called after them. “*He tastes awful!*”

xXxXx

The wolves looked at each other in disbelief.

I don't even want to know.

Nor do I. Let's go. Remus started along the passage, moving silently and swiftly as the wind.

xXxXx

“Ah-ha!” Aletha thrust her wand out. “*Accio Wormtail!*”

Squeaking in dismay, the rat flew out of the hole he'd buried into and towards Aletha's hand. Halfway there, he became human again, knocking her to the ground on impact. Her wand flew out of her hand. He scabbled after it, but Aletha rolled over and got a hold of his arm, yanking him back towards her. He swung his other arm up and hit her on the ear. “NO!” he shouted. “I won't go back there! I won't!”

Aletha ignored the pain, throwing herself on top of the small man, only to feel him shrink away to almost nothing beneath her. A lucky grab netted her his tail, and she hoisted him up, then yelped and dropped him as he bit her.

“Oh, yes, you will,” she growled, feeling around on the ground for her wand and tracking his progress with her eyes as he scurried away. “You'll go back as soon as I get you...” Her hand felt smooth wood, and she snatched up her wand and shot a spell after the running rat. She missed, but hit the ground near him, and the shock wave knocked him to his side, where he lay motionless.

Good enough.

She started to run toward him, then slowed down, blinking. The heat-sight spell must be failing – it was supposed to make things look brighter, not darker... but Pettigrew's red shape was fading before her eyes, all the shapes were...

And why were her pendants suddenly so very cold again? She was shivering with their effect.

“*Lumos* ,” she said, holding her wand above her head, and everything came horribly clear.

It wasn't just her pendants that were cold, and it wasn't the heat-sight spell that was failing...

xXxXx

Harry counted as slow a sixty as he dared before sprinting up the rise to Padfoot's side. He tore a piece off his own robes and wiped some of the blood off his godfather's face, then pointed the wand at him. “*Ennervate!*”

Padfoot opened his eyes. “Harry?” he rasped out. “What... what's going on?”

“Malfoy got away,” said Harry, “but Moony and Danger went after him, and Letha's gone after Wormtail. Do you think you can walk? We have to get up to the castle and tell them.”

“I can... try.”

Harry helped his godfather sit up, but it was obvious he wasn't going to be able to stand any time soon. “All right,” he said. “So we wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“Help to come.” Harry shivered a little. “Are you cold?”

“A bit. Harry... I'm sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“Letting Malfoy get away.” Padfoot felt his nose gingerly. “You caught him... and I let him get away again.”

“Oh, bollocks,” said Harry impatiently. “It could have happened to anybody. And I only got him because he had his back turned.” He shivered again, and blinked a few times as his vision clouded slightly.

“Is getting cold around here,” mumbled Padfoot, wrapping his arms around himself. His eyes were drifting shut. “C'mere... keep each other warm.”

“Shouldn't you be saying that to Letha?” asked Harry. He tried to smile, but the cold seemed to be sapping his strength, making him want to lie down and never get up again...

Understanding shocked through him. He snatched up the wand and pointed it outward. “*Lumos !*”

Beside him, Padfoot collapsed bonelessly to the ground.

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Draco stopped as a chill went through him. *That's odd. Are we in danger again?*

“Did you feel that?” said Hermione beside him.

“Yeah.” Draco pulled out his pendants. Hermione's carving was flickering, as was Harry's, and –

“Padfoot and Letha,” said Hermione anxiously, looking at her own pendants. “And Harry again, and us...”

The night had gone completely silent. Draco felt for Hermione's hand, and found it searching for his. **I don't like this,** he said. **What do you think...**

I don't know. But whoever it is, they're not going to come where we can see them. Shine the light around.

Draco aimed the wand off to one side of the road and felt his whole body plunge into ice water again.

But I suppose I could always be wrong, said Hermione in a shaky voice.

Three dementors floated several feet from the road, their hoods turned to regard the twins.

Back away slowly, said Draco, following his own advice. **They're not looking for us.**

He turned to run, and a second wave of ice water drenched him. Four more dementors waited on the other side of the road.

Are you sure? asked Hermione, trembling all over. **Because they're all looking at us...**

Draco looked around wildly, shining the light to every side. Black robes and black hoods surrounded them, blocking every escape. They were trapped.

What can we do, what can we do? moaned Hermione. **I don't even have a wand...**

Just stop, Draco snapped. **Stop, you're not helping.**

The dementors were closing in, his vision was starting to cloud over – any minute he would start to hear that voice again, the voice he'd only just escaped – so smooth and elegant sounding, so careful and precise, talking about such horrible things – and he wouldn't be able to fight it, and the dementors would close in on them and take their hoods down and bend over them and Kiss them, suck their souls from their bodies, first him, and then Hermione...

No.

He squeezed her hand, and felt a feeble response. *No. They can't have her. I can't let them have her.*

I'm going to try a Patronus, he told her. **It's the only thing that drives dementors away. But I should warn you, I wasn't very good when I tried it before, and that was only with one of them, and it was a boggart anyway...**

Anything's better than waiting here for them to eat our souls! Please, try!

Draco raised his wand and tried to think of a good memory, but nothing came.

Guess I have to try it anyway...

"Expecto patronum!"

Not even a wisp of silver mist came from the wand's tip, and the dementors were getting closer by the second – the wand's light had died out, the scene was almost completely dark...

“Expecto patronum! Expecto patronum!”

Don’t you have to think of something happy?

I’m *trying!* Do you have any ideas?

Not really. Maybe... maybe you just don’t have enough magic to do this spell.

Maybe not. But I have to keep trying.

“Expecto patronum!”

A tiny streamer of mist drifted out of the wand and evaporated instantly in the chill darkness. Draco felt Hermione’s consciousness begin to waver. **NO!** he screamed through their link. **Damn it, Neenie, stay with me! I can’t do this alone!**

Painfully, Hermione dragged herself back to full awareness. **You’re right**, she said faintly. **You can’t do it alone –**

Draco heard her gasp. **But you’re *not* alone. Draco, why did he bond us? Why did he want to put us together? What is this bond *meant* for?**

He meant for me to steal your magic. Because he thought you had stolen it from me.

Yes, but that doesn’t matter now – the point is that our magic is *connected!* If you don’t have enough of your own, *use mine!*

But – that would be –

No. It wouldn’t. The realization came easily, as if thought out by someone else far away and communicated to him by means unknown. *He meant the bond for evil. Take it and use it to do good. There’s all the difference in the world between stealing and accepting a gift.*

Great, he finished. That would be great – but how?

Like this. Hermione threw her mind open to him, and Draco felt her magic flood over him like sunlight and warm wind. A memory came easily to him now, one that brought both of them joy...

Immersed together in the moment when their minds had touched in the hospital wing, when her voice had given him hope again and stopped the curse from taking hold, the twins spoke out as one, Draco’s hand holding the wand high.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

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Harry looked around, his breath coming short. What looked like every dementor at Hogwarts was

gathered around the Whomping Willow, and every black hood was pointed at him... any minute, he knew, he would start to hear the screaming...

I have to fight. I have to send them away.

“Expecto patronum!” he shouted, and silver mist bled from the end of his wand, wavering into a four-legged shape – but it was so weak, so feeble, and it was taking his strength with it – and now there was a voice shouting in his mind, one he almost never heard – it belonged to a man –

“Lily, take Harry and go! It’s him! Go! Run! I’ll hold him off–”

Harry fell to his knees, his head throbbing with the voice. He knew who it belonged to.

Dad.

Padfoot moaned a little beside him.

My dad couldn’t save my mum. And I can’t save Padfoot. We both failed... and now I’m going to die, like him...

But they saved me.

Harry lifted his head painfully. His Patronus was gone. The first dementor was almost on top of him, its slimy hands going to its hood.

They saved me. I lived. They didn’t fail. You’re telling me the beginning of the story, but I know the end of it...

The dementor’s hood came down. Harry stared, aghast. It didn’t have any eyes – the sockets where they should have been were scabbed over with thin, gray skin – but it had a mouth, a black hole of a mouth, sucking air in with a noise like a death rattle...

Padfoot moaned again as the dementor leaned over him.

They saved me. And I can save Padfoot. My dad can save both of us. His son, and his best friend –

Harry scrambled to his feet, wand held out in front of him. He was through lying down in front of evil.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

xXxXx

Aletha swore under her breath, looking around. *There’s so many of them...*

Doesn’t matter. I’ve done it before, I can do it again.

“Expecto patronum,” she said quietly, recalling a lamplit evening in a London music room, and the joy that had restored Sirius to his old self as they held each other in their arms, together once again after the painful months of separation...

But whose fault was the separation? Who made it happen? You know who did that, and he’s right there, within your reach at last...

Her Patronus flickered and died, and the dementors advanced again.

Come on, Letha, keep it together! Think!

She tried again, this time with the memory of their wedding day. This Patronus didn’t even have a shape, as she recalled instead how they’d been cheated.

We had to be married under false names, in hiding, and live that way for so long, all because of him...

She could just see the red outline of the rat through all the dementors’ chill, though it was getting harder as her eyes kept drifting shut...

NO! Grimly, she fought back to consciousness. *I can’t – I can’t let this happen –*

Seeking a happy memory, her mind touched the night after Sirius’ trial, the night she’d awakened to find her love burning folders filled with paper in the fireplace of the music room.

He was letting Wormtail go. Letting go of all his anger and hate, because he didn’t want it to run his life.

Now I have to do that. I have to let everything go, if I want to have a life past this moment.

Quickly, she immersed herself in the memory of that night, until she could almost smell the smoke of the fire that had destroyed the ancient hatred, hear the carol they’d sung together speaking of comfort and joy. Then she gathered her strength and shouted.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

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It’s a wolf, said Draco uncertainly. **I think...**

No, it’s a werewolf. Hermione sounded positive. **Look at the tail, and the snout. It has to be.**

A werewolf Patronus. I wonder how many people have one of those?

Hermione laughed aloud. **I think it’s probably just us.**

The silver werewolf circled them, snapping at any dementor that dared come too close, then

turned and looked at them.

I think it wants us to follow.

Let's go, then.

Hand in hand, they followed their Patronus down the road towards Hogwarts.

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Sirius opened his eyes uncertainly. The muscles in his chest were tight in a way they only were when he'd been very cold and shivering hard. His entire face hurt as if he'd been kicked, and the only light on the scene was shimmering and silver –

Moon must be up.

He lifted his head and stared. It might have been the moon, but only if the moon had four slender legs and branching antlers, and only if the moon lowered its head to allow Harry Potter to caress it.

Harry lifted his hand away. The stag, released, galloped off towards the gates of Hogwarts. Harry turned to Sirius, took three steps towards him, and passed out cold, hitting the ground like a Stunned giant.

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The silver dog was brighter than it had ever been before, and it could have been Aletha's imagination, but she thought it seemed to be smiling at her.

I have to learn to let go of the past when the present is more important. I'm starting, with taking up my Healer training again, but I still need to work on it. I think I've taken a big step tonight.

She rubbed her bleeding hand, very carefully not looking at the place where Wormtail had been. *We can always find him again, and losing my soul wouldn't have done anyone one bit of good...*

She hoped if she told herself that enough times, she'd believe it.

The dementors were gone. Aletha's Patronus loped away towards the gates. With a poisonous glance at the place where Wormtail no longer was, she followed it.

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We got by them on the road, but we still have to pass them at the gates, said Hermione worriedly.

Don't remind me. Draco peered ahead. **Do you see something?**

Something like what? Hermione looked, and then stared, wide-eyed. **Oh my.**

The wrought-iron gates of Hogwarts stood wide open. The werewolf Patronus sat in the center of the road, tail wagging. One side of the gate was guarded by a great silver dog, and the other by a proud silver stag. Dementors moved uneasily in the darkness behind each of them.

Looks like a welcome mat to me, said Draco, grinning. **Come on.**

They dashed through the gates, which closed directly behind them. The Patronuses faded from view.

“Draco! Hermione!” Their names were almost sung, so much thankfulness and joy was tied up in them.

“Letha!” The twins charged her, hugging her tightly.

“Oh, I’ve been so worried...” Letha held them both, then let them go to look at them. “What’s happened to your faces? Are you hurt anywhere?”

Both of them shook their heads. “We’re twins now,” said Draco.

“Lucius Malfoy did it,” Hermione picked up her cue beautifully.

“He blood-bonded us—”

“He thought I’d stolen Draco’s magic—”

“Or that you’d stolen it for her—”

“We had to work so hard on not laughing—”

“But we can talk mind-to-mind when we touch—”

“And we can share magic—”

“We shared it to do that Patronus—”

“And we’re going to be twins from now on!” they finished together.

Letha had spent this speech looking from one to the other of them. Now, she burst out laughing. “We are in so much trouble with you two in the house, aren’t we?” she said when she’d caught her breath a little.

Draco and Hermione nodded in unison, with identical smug smiles. Then Hermione blinked several times and looked around. “I think I’m going to sleep now,” she said, and crumpled to the ground.

That looked like a good idea, Draco decided. “Me too,” he said, and let his knees buckle. “Oh, Letha?”

“Yes?” Her face looked very patient from down on the ground.

“Would you tell Hagrid thanks for letting us use Buckbeak?”

Letha’s eyebrows climbed towards her hair. “I’ll do that.”

“Thanks.” Draco found Hermione’s outstretched hand, curled his fingers around it, and shut his eyes.

It was all over now. He was safe.

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They would have to do this right now. I don’t think I could transfigure a teacup at this point. How am I going to get them up to the castle?

Aletha sat down beside her cubs, shaking her head. I suppose it’s my turn to sit and wait for help to come...

Then she heard crashing in the Forest. In an instant, she was on her feet, wand ready.

I don’t think there are any really big predators in there, other than the acromantulas, and they never come out this far, but something could always have moved in... but Hagrid would have known about it, he knows everything that happens in that Forest...

Then she lowered her wand, laughing at herself. *I don’t think predators carry lamps. Or sing.*

A moment’s thought produced another Patronus and sent it streaking off to Hagrid, and it wasn’t long before the groundskeeper himself hurried out of the Forest. “Letha? Thought that dog was yers – what’s goin’ on?”

“Hello, Hagrid. Have you been in the Forest long?”

“Most o’ the evenin’ – why, what’d I miss?”

“Oh, nothing important,” said Aletha, stifling a giggle. “Help me get Draco and Hermione back to the castle? They wore themselves out.”

“Ar, they work too hard,” said Hagrid, handing Aletha his lantern and lifting Draco and Hermione like a pair of oversized babies. “Y’oughter tell them ter relax once in a while. Take life easy. Maybe come on down and visit Buckbeak – they haven’ been fer a month...”

Aletha carefully did not laugh. She was afraid that if she started again, she wouldn’t be able to stop.

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Sirius rubbed his nose, which had returned to its usual shape and was no longer bleeding. “I thought you said you didn’t prance around in the middle of the night rescuing people,” he said to Minerva McGonagall as she finished conjuring a stretcher under Harry.

She looked at him severely. “If you’d rather I leave...”

“No, no, you’re fine,” said Sirius quickly. “Really, you’re just fine. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

They started off for the castle together.

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Albus Dumbledore Apparated silently into the living room of the Shrieking Shack.

“Oh, hello, Albus,” said Danger’s voice from the corner. “Nice of you to drop in.”

Several small fires flickered to life around the room, revealing Danger sitting in a nest of dusty cushions with as much of a werewolf in her lap as would fit. She was stroking him behind the ears.

“I’m beginning to understand what Phineas was talking about,” said Dumbledore, allowing his amusement to show. “You truly are shameless.” He looked closer. “Danger, are you hurt?”

“Hurt? No, not at all – why?”

“You have blood on your collar.”

Danger looked confused for a moment. Then her face cleared. “Oh, that. Don’t worry. It’s not mine.”

“I see.” Dumbledore exchanged a long look with the werewolf. “Where may I find our mutual foe?”

“Next room,” said Danger, nodding toward it. “Unconscious, tied up, and unlikely to do any running in the near future in any case.” She grinned wolfishly. “At least on one leg.”

“I shall want to hear all about this,” said Dumbledore lightly. “After everything is seen to, of course. My office, tomorrow morning, perhaps?”

“Perhaps. And if anybody asks, I caught him running.”

Dumbledore nodded, resisting the urge to shake his head instead, and went to see to Lucius Malfoy’s proper disposal.

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Are you sure? This is your last chance, you know...

Positive. Remus squirmed a little, settling his back half more comfortably. **I don't want to take the risk. Yours will serve for both of us.**

But Andy told you you're not contagious...

But that was two years ago. Something could have changed. Or maybe her samples were bollixed up – I don't know. And I won't risk our Pack's safety and happiness on something I don't know.

Remus closed his eyes and felt Danger's mind drifting with his, back to the moment he'd decided not to do what he'd been looking forward to all evening...

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This was what the wolf lived for, Remus knew. The moment when the prey was helpless, nowhere else to run, nothing to fight with. Malfoy's eyes were wide with fear, he was scrabbling against the wall behind him, whimpering. Remus could smell that he'd soiled himself, and snickered nastily. *You can dish it out just fine, but you can't take it, it seems...*

Danger growled behind him, her mind a match for his own. **What are you waiting for? Kill him!**

I want to, Remus said longingly, taking a step forward, his mental hand on the latch of the wolf's cage. **I want to.** He could taste the blood in his mouth, feel the bones crunching beneath his teeth, hear the screaming as he destroyed this man who had tormented his cubs...

But I can't. He backed up and laid his flank against Danger's, trembling. **I can't kill him.**

Why not? she demanded, her eyes narrowed in anger. **All you have to do is claim he was trying to kill you first. I'll back you up, trust me. Just do it!**

No. Remus shook his head. **I won't do anything that dishonors you.**

Danger stared at him blankly. **I'm sorry?**

You give me the power to choose, Remus elaborated. **The power to choose what I do with myself, no matter what form I'm in. A power so many people take for granted. And if I choose to do what I would otherwise have no choice but to do – to shed human blood, to take a human life – that's the same as saying that I care nothing for your gift, that I would spit on it and throw it away. I've done that once, and I nearly killed a man I call my brother because of it. I won't do it again, no matter who I'm facing. Not even him.**

The wolf-rage was gone from Danger's mind. In its place was an emotion Remus was far more used to in his love – exasperation. **Has anyone ever told you that you're far too highly**

principled?

Yes. You do. Often. Remus pranced in place, grinning.

Well, you are. But I'll respect your decision. So I won't kill him. But I am going to bite him. Once. Hard.

And I will gladly watch.

Watch, hell, you can do it with me if you like.

I like. I very much like. Remus felt his breath coming faster. He would get to taste blood after all tonight...

Danger stalked forward, and Malfoy's eyes fixed on her, his breathing coming faster. She snapped her jaws, and he whimpered. **Well, well, it seems no one's ever taught dear Lucius how to tell a werewolf from a true wolf. Or how to tell a boy wolf from a girl wolf, come to that.**

Or maybe, at the moment, he just doesn't care. Remus sat down and closed his eyes, letting his consciousness cohabit with Danger's as she eyed Malfoy carefully, looking him up and down, then without warning sank her teeth into the fleshy part of his right calf.

His scream was very satisfying. His taste was not.

Ugh. Danger let go and backed away, tongue lolling out in disgust. **Harry was right. That's horrible. I don't think he's bathed in a week.**

Of course, that brings up the question of how Harry knew...

Let's not get into that, please. One more formality to observe. Danger raised her nose to the ceiling and howled triumphantly. Remus joined her.

Malfoy slumped to the floor, unconscious.

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They floated back to the present on a tide of laughter. **Honestly, I didn't think our singing voices were that bad,** said Remus. **We're not quite as good as Sirius and Letha, but people passing out when they hear us... that hurts a little.**

Come on, let's get back to the castle. Danger got to her feet. **We have cubs to hug, a wand to return, and a den-night to have. And a whole lot of recovering to do.**

Amen. And a thanksgiving for another crisis successfully weathered.

Side by side, the two wolves set off down the tunnel.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 24: Friends and Enemies (Year 3)

Chapter 24: Friends and Enemies

“...but I really must protest your intrusion into what was an orderly search for these missing young people. No one can be happier than I to see them safely returned, but would it not have been wiser to have waited for lawful authority before you ran off pell-mell to find them?”

“Lawful authority, Minister?” said a cool, female voice. “You mean, an Auror, perhaps?”

“Yes, precisely...”

Someone cleared his throat.

“Yes, well, Black, you weren’t on duty tonight, and you wouldn’t have been assigned to this project in any case, it would be a conflict of interest...”

“I think it would be a concord of interest, myself. I’d be interested in seeing the... men get what was coming to them, both as a father and as an Auror.”

“Yes, but that’s precisely my point – you place those two roles in that order of importance, and as a result, one of the criminals we’ve been hunting all year has escaped, *again*, and the other’s whereabouts are currently unknown...”

“As a result?” said the woman’s voice crisply.

Harry opened his eyes. He was lying on his side in a bed in the hospital wing. Everything was rather fuzzy without his glasses, but he could see if he squinted, and what he saw filled him with relief. On the next bed over lay Hermione, her eyes shut but her chest rising and falling regularly. Draco lay in the bed beyond her, curled up on his side, shifting restlessly. A sliver of light entered the room from the open door into the hall, through which the voices were coming.

“You think that *our* actions allowed Peter Pettigrew to escape?” continued the woman’s voice, which Harry could now identify as Letha’s. “Or why don’t you be more specific – *my* actions, since I was the person chasing him?”

“Well...” This voice belonged to a man, not someone Harry knew, but he sounded rather uneasy. As anyone would be, faced with Letha in a mood, Harry thought.

“Don’t sugarcoat it, Minister, just say it out. Do you or do you not think that I am responsible for Pettigrew’s escape?”

Harry sat up straight, the words suddenly registering along with the speaker and the tone.

Wormtail got away?

“Er... well... Merlin’s beard, woman, what do you expect me to say? By your own admission, you were guarding him, you became distracted, he escaped. You chased him down, fought with him, and he escaped again. Those are the facts, are they not?”

“Those are *some* of the facts, Minister.” Harry had heard Letha angry before, but never like this. Every word was sculpted from ice. “Shall I remind you of the portion of the story you seem to be leaving out?”

“Yes, by all means, do.”

Harry fished for his glasses, not taking his eyes off the door. *She keeps calling him Minister. Is it Fudge? I suppose it’d have to be...*

“Pettigrew had taken rat form, the better to flee from me. I nonetheless was able to find him and knock him unconscious, and I was almost as close to him as I am to you now, Minister, when I was forced to turn my attention to a more immediate danger. I was being menaced by dementors.”

“Dementors? My dear lady, why in heaven’s name would dementors menace you?”

“I didn’t bother to ask them. I was too busy keeping my soul in its proper place. By the time I had driven them off, Pettigrew was gone. I assume that he regained consciousness and ran off in rat form while they were trying to get to me.”

Movement across the aisle caught Harry’s eye. The rest of the Pride was gathered on two beds, listening as avidly as he was himself.

“But – I – do you mean to tell me that they came onto school grounds? That they attempted to Kiss you?”

“I didn’t let any of them get that close, but I’m fairly sure that’s what they were after.”

“Fairly sure, I see.” There was suddenly a smug note in Fudge’s tone Harry didn’t like at all. “And you mentioned that you think two of your children may also have had a run-in with dementors?”

“They told me they had conjured a Patronus. Dementors are the only reason I can think of for them to do that.”

“They told you that. Of course. And how convenient that they are currently asleep, and that you refuse to let them be awakened...”

“Are you calling my wife a liar, Minister?” asked Padfoot’s voice heatedly.

“Liar – why, no, no, that was never my intent...”

“Going to call me one too?”

“No, not at all. Let me see... you said that Lucius Malfoy used some sort of potion to render you

unconscious. Harry Potter awakened you a short time later, at which point you found that your nose had been broken, and that you were still groggy from the effects of the potion. You passed out again while in Mr. Potter's company, and awakened to see him with a corporeal Patronus – rather unusual feat for a thirteen-year-old wizard, is it not? – after which he, in his turn, passed out. You were both consequently rescued by Minerva McGonagall. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Essentially."

"So you admit that you never actually saw a dementor on Hogwarts grounds?"

Harry was on his feet, moving towards the door. He heard two or three intakes of breath from the rest of the Pride, but beyond a hurried nod, didn't acknowledge them.

"Why would Harry have conjured a Patronus if there were no dementors?" asked Padfoot through clenched teeth.

"I honestly don't know," said Fudge, sounding positively cheerful. "And since Mr. Potter is also asleep, there is unfortunately no way we can ask him..."

Harry pulled the door of the hospital wing open, leaning on it for support. Padfoot and Letha both noticed him immediately, but he set his hand in the signal for *I'm all right* and spoke up. "Have you ever seen what's under a dementor's hood, Minister?"

The short, plump wizard in a pinstriped cloak, carrying a lime-green bowler hat, turned towards him in surprise. "Well, no... I can't say that I have..."

"They don't have any eyes," said Harry, fixing his own on the Minister's. "Their eye sockets are grown over with skin that looks like the stuff on their hands. All gray and scabby and dead. But they have mouths. It's where a human's mouth would be, but it's not like that. It's just a round hole. It sucks air in, and life, and warmth, and it breathes out death. That's what I saw tonight. There were dementors on Hogwarts grounds." He felt a chair against the backs of his legs, and sat down without taking his eyes from Fudge's.

"And dementors only take their hoods down when they plan on using the Kiss," said Padfoot, moving over to stand beside Harry. "I can't think of any other way Harry would have known what's under there."

"So now it's your turn to explain, Minister," said Letha, drawing Fudge's attention and holding his eyes as Harry had. She was taller than he, so that he had to look up to her. "Explain to me why the dementors you set here to keep criminals away from Hogwarts grounds, when those criminals arrived here tonight, ignored them both and instead attacked me, and my husband, and my children. Explain to me why dementors stopped me from capturing Peter Pettigrew. And then explain to me why you insist on doubting my word on this matter."

Fudge opened and closed his mouth several times. Harry fought not to laugh.

“Or, on second thought, just go away.” Letha turned away from the Minister of Magic. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore.”

She pushed open the other side of the double doors and entered the hospital wing. Fudge stared after her for a moment, then turned to Padfoot. “I – I hope I haven’t offended – it was never my intent...”

“Glad to hear it,” said Padfoot shortly. “Come on, Harry, you should be in bed. Poppy’ll be back any minute with that chocolate she ordered, and I don’t want to get blamed if she finds you on your feet.” He offered Harry his hand. Harry took it out of politeness, and discovered as he stood up that he needed it.

No, really? I just had a concussion, escaped from Death Eaters, and fought off dementors – why should I be tired?

“Thanks for the chair,” he said to the shoulder and leg he could see behind the door.

“You’re welcome.”

It was Ginny’s voice.

“Dumbledore!” said Fudge from the hall as Padfoot helped Harry back to his bed. Letha was sitting on the opposite bed from his with Meghan curled beside her. “Just the man I was looking for. After careful consideration, listening to all the stories and so forth, I’ve decided the dementors can’t stay here. I’ll be ordering them sent back to Azkaban immediately, tonight.”

“How very kind of you, Cornelius. May I offer you some good news in return?”

“Heaven knows I need it, with Pettigrew gone and Malfoy God-only-knows-where...”

“I beg to differ on that point. I am no god, but I am perfectly cognizant of Lucius Malfoy’s current whereabouts.”

“You are? Good God, Dumbledore, you don’t mean you’ve captured him?”

“I? No, the credit for this goes to two of my professors, Professors Lupin and Granger-Lupin. They pursued Mr. Malfoy back to his hideout in the Shrieking Shack – which, incidentally, had been carefully charmed tonight to be inconspicuous and forgettable – and captured him there. I arrived rather after the fact, contributing only the safe transportation and incarceration of Mr. Malfoy. He is currently housed in a broom cupboard on the fourth floor.”

“Well, that’s excellent! Quite excellent! I’ll just go out and fetch a dementor in, then, it shouldn’t take long at all...”

“I beg your pardon?” said Danger’s voice.

“Ah, Cornelius, let me introduce you to Professor Granger-Lupin. This is Minister of Magic

Fudge.”

“How do you do,” said Fudge. “My God – Dumbledore, *what is that?*”

“It’s a dog,” said Danger flatly, causing several members of the Pride to stifle giggles as Moony slipped around the door into the hospital wing. “What were you saying about bringing in a dementor?”

“Yes, I wished to ask you about that myself, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore.

Harry tuned this out in favor of watching Moony. His tail was describing ecstatic arcs in the air as he sniffed at Draco and Hermione, first one, then the other.

“Let me give you a hand with that,” said Padfoot, getting up. “Better get out of the way.”

Moony jumped onto Hermione’s bed and from there to Harry’s, bumping Harry gently in the shoulder with a paw. Harry pushed him back. “Gerroff.”

Moony showed his teeth in a wolf-grin. *Make me*, he seemed to be saying.

Padfoot shoved Draco’s bed closer to Hermione’s. Everyone winced at the screeching noise made by the iron bedstead moving over the stone floor. “For heaven’s sake,” said Letha. “Don’t you have your wand?”

“No. Malfoy took it.”

Moony barked quietly and pointed his nose at the door.

“Danger’s got it?” asked Padfoot.

Moony nodded.

“Well, I can get it later. Can I use yours, Letha?”

“Please.” Letha drew her wand and tossed it to Padfoot, who waved it around experimentally a few times, then carefully levitated Draco’s bed and set it down next to Hermione’s.

Moony jumped back across the gap, landing neatly beside Hermione’s feet. He stepped over them and lay down between the two cubs with a sigh of contentment. Harry felt like echoing it. He was safe, and so was everyone he cared about, and all he wanted was to lie down again and get some sleep...

“Very well, if you insist. I admit the law isn’t very clear on the point, so I suppose it makes sense to abide by his wishes.”

The door opened, and Fudge, Dumbledore, and Danger entered the hospital wing. Dumbledore lit the candles with a casual flick of his wand, while Danger went to Draco’s side. “I know you’re

awake, fox,” she murmured to him. “I’m sorry about this, but we need you to decide something.”

Draco sat up slowly, looking around the room. Fudge stared at him. “It’s positively uncanny,” he said to Dumbledore. “Have you noticed? Such a close likeness...”

Moony rumbled low in his chest before turning to face Fudge.

“Draco, I am afraid we must ask you to make an important decision,” said Dumbledore as Hermione blinked and stretched, rubbing her eyes, then sat up. “Lucius Malfoy has been captured, and is currently in custody. By law, he may either be returned to Azkaban, or undergo the Dementor’s Kiss. As the party most closely affected, the choice is yours.”

Draco stared at Dumbledore. “You mean I get to decide what happens to him?”

“Precisely.”

Draco looked down at his bedspread, obviously thinking hard. After a moment, he raised his left hand to his cheek, where, Harry now saw, he had a cut – no, it was a scar, a vertical scar about an inch long.

Where did that come from?

Hermione was watching Draco closely, and as Harry moved down his bed to see his brother more clearly, he noticed that Hermione’s cheek sported an identical scar.

Something weird is going on here.

“Just send him back to Azkaban,” said Draco finally, looking up. “Please. Nobody deserves to have... *that* ... happen to them. No matter who they are, or what they were planning on.” His left hand went over Moony’s back and found Hermione’s right. “I just don’t want to have to think about him anymore.”

Dumbledore and the Pack-parents looked quietly approving. Fudge seemed a bit nonplussed. “Well... all right, then. I’ll arrange it with the Aurors, if you don’t need me for anything else, Dumbledore, I suppose I’ll be getting along... at least we got one of them, and Pettigrew has no reason to hang about the school... my sincerest apologies, all of you, for the dementors, I’ll find out which of them were responsible and, er, speak to them...” He plopped his hat on his head and hurried out of the room, still chattering.

“Speak to them,” said Ron in disbelief. “He’s going to *speak* to them...”

Ginny emerged from behind the door and shut it. “Bad dementors,” she scolded, sticking out her stomach and mimicking Fudge’s voice and gait admirably. “Bad dementors. No prisoners for you.”

Harry snorted and Hermione giggled, and within a few seconds everyone was laughing.

From there on, Harry's impressions of the night were incomplete and rather disconnected, but weaving through them was the solid, strong, supporting feeling of Pack and Pride, safely together once more. Madam Pomfrey arrived, distributed large amounts of chocolate to everyone, and left again. Dumbledore left as well, after talking quietly with the Pack-parents for a short while.

Hermione and Draco made everyone laugh with their newly rediscovered talent of twin-talking and the newly acquired one of silent speech, and Hermione showed off her latest achievement by changing forms and curling up next to Moony, purring loudly enough to be heard in Hogsmeade. A lot of people said, "Oh, so *that's* why..." as the various stories were told. The odds-on favorite entertainment of the evening was Danger's imitation of Malfoy's exact actions when cornered by two extremely angry wolves.

Finally, after Madam Pomfrey had stuck her head out of her office twice and cleared her throat significantly, the Pack-parents started quieting everyone down. "You're stuck with us for the night, Poppy," Padfoot told her. "We'll be good and clean up after ourselves."

"You had better. Otherwise I'm sending you the bill."

"What bill? House-elves clean for free."

Madam Pomfrey humphed and went back into her office, then reemerged when Padfoot had his back turned and hit him in the back of the head with a spell. A perfectly circular patch of hair fell out at the crown of his head.

Harry lay down quickly and shoved his face into his pillow, Draco and Hermione clasped hands, and Meghan buried her face in Letha's robes. Letha's face was perfectly straight, Harry saw in a sidewise peek, as long as you didn't look too closely at her lips. Ron also had his face in a pillow, while Ginny was having a coughing fit and Neville was just staring. Danger had a hand around Moony's muzzle and another over her own mouth. Luna seemed not to have noticed.

Padfoot turned around and looked at them all. "What?"

Danger cracked first, setting Moony off, then Ginny lost control of her coughs and they turned into giggles. Luna looked confused at first, but then Padfoot turned around again to see if something funny were behind him, and she began to laugh as well. Slowly, everybody else fell prey to it, until Pack and Pride were all in fits. Letha patted the top of her head, prompting Padfoot to investigate his own head. The look on his face, unfortunately, was enough to start everyone up again, just as they were coming down from their first spike.

Life was back to normal, Harry reflected as he drifted off to sleep later, and he rather hoped it stayed that way for a while. He liked excitement, but exams were about to start...

xXxXx

"Headmaster."

“Severus, what can I do for you?”

“I have located Dudley Dursley. He was locked in a supplies cupboard in a boys’ bathroom on the ground floor of the school, and claims he has been there since yesterday afternoon, when another version of himself ambushed him and Stunned him.”

“Is he lying?”

“No.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Very well. Is he hurt?”

“Hungry, groggy, and mildly dehydrated.”

“Would you mind dealing with that yourself, Severus? The hospital wing is... otherwise occupied at the moment.”

Snape’s lip curled for a second. “Very well, Headmaster.”

“And I will want to speak with him tomorrow. In the afternoon, if he has no examinations then.”

“I will inform him.”

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“I never left any notes,” said the pudgy boy, looking straight into Dumbledore’s eyes. “Why would I want to help criminals get inside Hogwarts?”

“You are being accused of nothing,” Dumbledore said calmly. The boy was telling the truth, or at least he thought he was. There was a suspicious blankness and smoothness in two or three places in his mind... “It is merely odd that one of the criminals in question claimed a boy within the school had been helping them, supplying them with the materials needed to create disguising spells, and that one of them was disguised as you when he struck.”

“What kind of materials do they need?” Dursley wanted to know. “Is it like that potion Professor Snape told us about, where you need a piece of the person?”

Very clever. “Yes, very much like Polyjuice Potion.” The boy had almost certainly been Obliviated. That slippery texture in the mind was like nothing else. *But was it without or with his consent?*

“Somebody could have got one of my hairs anywhere, sir. Especially if they’re a Slytherin. Off my brush, or my pillow, or my robes... it wasn’t me, sir, it really wasn’t.” Dursley’s eyes were wide and scared. “Please, sir, don’t expel me. I haven’t got anywhere else to go – my dad never wanted me to do this in the first place, he won’t pay for me to go to Muggle school, and my mum won’t do anything he doesn’t like...”

Dumbledore knew he was being manipulated, but unfortunately, what the boy said was also true. He had kept track of Harry's family over the years, just in case there might someday be the necessity of reviving the blood magic, and he knew that Dudley Dursley's life was not an easy one.

I only wish I could be more confident that he is not turning to Dark magic as the answer...

"You will not be expelled, Mr. Dursley. These matters seem to have been beyond your control. You may return to your common room now."

"Thank you, sir." The boy hurried out of Dumbledore's office.

Dumbledore sat back in his chair wearily. Fawkes rustled his feathers and made a clucking sound.

"What would you suggest, then? Punish him for something that there is no proof he did?"

Fawkes flipped his feathers into place and turned his head away.

Dumbledore sighed. "Perhaps we are both growing too old," he said quietly. "A phoenix can be reborn many times, but even your kind are not immortal, my friend. How many burning days can a phoenix have before nothing arises from the ashes?"

And how many times can I help Harry Potter and his family avoid disaster before it strikes us all head-on?

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Dudley pulled out his Charms text to do a little last-minute studying. A note fluttered to the floor.

I don't remember putting that in there. But it was addressed to him, in his own handwriting, and a notation under it – Open this only if you don't remember it.

Suddenly very curious, he ripped it open.

You helped Pettigrew get on the grounds in October, and both him and Malfoy in May. Malfoy Obliviated you so you wouldn't get in trouble for it. The Death Eaters owe you, whether it paid off or not. Don't forget it. Burn this.

Dudley read it through three times, then grinned.

I knew I couldn't be as much of a goody-two-shoes as I was acting like in Dumbledore's office.

He trotted out to the common room and dropped the note into the fireplace, then spun around on one stocking foot and headed back to his dorm.

He didn't see the note catch fire only around its edges, then fall below the grate. Nor did he see the person who slipped up to the fireplace and watched the note burn, memorizing its contents as it

disappeared.

xXxXx

Father kept telling me if I didn't come up to scratch, he'd give the big jobs to someone else. I guess he meant it.

Theodore Nott stared into the flames where the piece of parchment had vanished.

Sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't be better off somewhere else.

But where else is there?

Across the room, Blaise Zabini dipped his quill.

xXxXx

Dear Colleen,

I'm glad to hear that Hermione Granger-Lupin is all right after what happened to her. Her "twin-talk" with Draco Black sounds funny. I wish I could have heard it for myself. Thank you for passing on what Harry Potter said about the pin I sent you, but I'm happier that you like it.

Dudley Dursley's just come back from the Headmaster's office. He's in no trouble for what happened. Apparently Lucius Malfoy was disguised as him all Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning, and through the Combat Club match. He may even have played around with the sentry assignments, to get the people he wanted in the place he wanted them...

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The rest of the term was as close to perfect as Harry had ever felt. Even the weather was gorgeous, sunny almost all the time and warmer every day. Buckbeak had returned to his paddock the morning after everything had happened, showing no ill effects from the knock-out potion he'd inhaled, and the dementors were gone from around the grounds.

There was an optional lecture announced in Defense Against the Dark Arts, scheduled for the night of the first day of exams. Professor Lupin's classes being as popular as they were, it was very well attended.

When the classroom was full, Moony enlarged a photograph with his wand and hung it on the board. "Who can tell me," he said, giving the Pride a look that said very clearly that they weren't to answer, "what these animals are?"

Several hands went up. Moony picked Seamus Finnegan. "Wolves, sir," said Seamus. "Male and female wolves."

"Five points to Gryffindor," said Moony. "Yes, one of these wolves is a male, and one is a female.

But there's another difference between them. Anyone?"

A Ravenclaw seventh year raised his hand. "I think the male is a werewolf," he said.

"Why do you think so?"

"The snout's a funny shape."

"Snout, very good. Someone else."

Other people began to raise their hands, naming off the characteristics of the werewolf, and Hermione finally volunteered when no one could get the pupils of the eyes as the last characteristic.

"Now that you can tell a werewolf from a true wolf," said Moony, waving to the picture, "does anyone have any questions before we move on?"

Fred and George Weasley's hands went up. "Uh-oh," muttered Draco.

Looking as if he were doing it against his better judgment, Moony called on them. "We were just wondering," said Fred.

"Where'd you get the picture?" finished George.

"A Ministry of Magic employee," said Moony smoothly. "Anyone else?"

Hermione was staring at Moony. "He lied," she whispered to the boys.

"No, he didn't," said Harry. "Padfoot works for the Ministry."

"Oh. Right." Hermione's face cleared.

After about a half-hour of question and answer, Moony allowed the older students to play with the photograph, making the two pictured wolves do things like dance, chase their tails, and roll over.

"Of course, real werewolves never do such tricks," he said. "And most true wolves don't either, except in the wild with their packs. Never play with an animal unless you know it."

"Does that mean I can play with you?" Harry asked him later.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether you're willing to be mercilessly tickled."

Harry ran for the door, dodging a Tickling Charm on the way out.

xXxXx

Harry found his exams to be a relief, something he was fairly sure he could handle. Even if he couldn't, the only penalty was a little more time in class, not someone's life. He passed them all, even Potions, though his favorite was Moony's obstacle course, which he defeated without even breathing hard.

Draco had to punt a few Red Caps to make them understand he meant business, but once he was past them he did very well. Moony let Neville start again after the grindy low almost drowned him, though he warned Neville that he'd be marked down for it. Marked down was better than a zero in Neville's opinion, and he finished the course in respectable time on his second go.

Hermione breezed through the obstacles until she reached the trunk containing the boggart. She slid inside with a cocky smile on her face, then burst back out a moment later with a horrific scream and attached herself to Moony, shuddering.

"Hermione, what on earth is the matter?" asked Moony, looking considerably worried.

Hermione gulped several times before she was able to speak. "It – it – it was *you*," she got out finally.

Moony's look of worry increased.

"You – you said I'd failed everything!" Hermione wailed, and burst into noisy tears.

Neville, unfortunately for him, was the first to lose his composure and laugh. Hermione yanked out her wand and hexed him hard, dropping him to the grass with Jelly Legs. Draco and Harry took off at high speed, but Hermione got them both within a minute, knocking them flat on their faces, and was about to start in with a second round of hexes for all when Moony caught up with her.

"Why don't we call this extra credit," he suggested, his face carefully impassive, "and you can give the boggart a try again in a few minutes, when you're recovered?"

"When *she*'s recovered?" Harry said under his breath to Draco from where they lay on the grass, Harry's legs locked together and Draco's shoelaces in knots so complex they covered his shoes. "What about us?"

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Ron was back to his old self a week before school let out, which meant he had enough time to take his exams after all. Thanks to Hermione's studying with him every night, usually over his protestations, he was more or less ready, and Harry and Draco volunteered to partner him in the exams that needed them. He got only half credit for the hinkypunk portion of the Defense exam, since he fell face-first into the mud and lost his wand after remembering at the last minute not to listen to the little creature, but redeemed himself somewhat by defeating the boggart in thirteen seconds flat after Moony got his wand back for him.

The Leaving Feast was as noisy and joyful for the Gryffindors as in previous years, since

Gryffindor's Quidditch Cup victory had rocketed them to the House Cup as well. The Great Hall was hung with gold and scarlet, and Harry felt that there wasn't any way he could possibly be happier.

Well, one way.

There had still been no news of Peter Pettigrew. Scrying spells over all of England had failed to find him. There were rumors at the Auror Office that he'd fled the country.

Good riddance, then, Padfoot's letter that morning had said. He was never more than a passable wizard in any case – he can't possibly do us any harm from overseas. With Malfoy safely back in Azkaban, I think we can all relax for a while and have a nice summer. By the way, the potion's in the cauldron as we speak. It ought to be ready the afternoon of the day after you get back. Your dad would have been proud of you, Harry. I certainly am.

Harry grabbed another chicken leg and tore into it, remembering the feeling of his transfigured head – the eyes that found movement and black-and-white patterns so easy to see, the ears that picked up even the slightest rustle, and the nose that could tell things and people apart just by their smell. He'd spent a few moments registering the personal odor of each member of the Pride, making sure he'd know them in a crowd.

“Wolfing your food again?” Ginny inquired from across the table.

Harry swallowed and gave her a toothy smile. “Appropriate, don't you think?”

“Mm-hmm.” Ginny swallowed a mouthful of potatoes. “So you're second. Wonder who'll be third?”

“Probably Neville,” said Harry. “He's farthest along. But it could be Ron or you, or even Luna. Draco and Meghan are going to take a little longer.”

“We're probably some of the youngest people ever to do it.” Ginny mashed her potatoes further with her fork. “Though it's not really very hard, when you get right down to it. Just long, and with a lot of steps.”

“And each step by itself isn't very hard,” Harry agreed. “But put together, they're pretty tricky. And they cover just about all the basic areas of magic, so you have to either be able to do everything yourself or have friends – or parents – who'll do some of the things for you, because if even one thing goes wrong...”

“Then you're sunk.” Ginny nodded. “But I can't wait until I can do it all. I've already started writing my final incantation. I borrowed a little from Hermione's, but not much. How about you?”

“Danger showed me hers, but it just felt too different from me. So I started pretty much from scratch. I have a couple of lines already. Basic descriptions, like dark fur and green eyes, the scar and the glasses markings – and that was hard, because there's no Latin word for glasses, so I had

to improvise.”

Ginny giggled.

“But I still feel like it needs something else,” Harry finished. “Something to talk about me, not just the way I look.”

“Maybe it should say, ‘My body is a wolf’s, but my heart is the heart of a lion,’” suggested Ginny. “And ‘I fight fiercely for the ones I call my own, for I will not abandon those who are mine.’”

Harry put down his fork, staring at her. “Hang on,” he said. “I need to write that down.”

“No, you don’t,” protested Ginny as Harry dug in his pockets for a quill. “I was just saying – it wasn’t important – Harry, don’t...”

Harry found a quill and a small piece of parchment. “Come on, say it again,” he said, tapping the quill twice with his wand to load it. “Please? I’ve been trying to figure out how to say it right for weeks, and what you just said sounded great.”

Ginny repeated the two lines quietly, staring at the table, her face growing steadily redder. Harry scribbled down the words as she said them, blew on the ink to dry it, and stuffed quill and parchment back into his pocket. “Thanks a million, Ginny. Now I just need to put it into Latin.”

Ginny jerked her head up. “You’re not really going to use it, are you?”

“Of course I am. It’s perfect.” Harry grinned. “Unless you were just being nice, and that’s not really how you think about me.”

“No! I mean – Harry, listen. You came and rescued me and Percy from the Chamber last year. And the year before that, you went after the Sorcerer’s Stone because you thought people would die if You-Know-Who got it. And this year, you could have run away when you got free of the Body-Bind, but you didn’t. You went looking for Draco and Hermione.”

Harry sighed. “Ginny, anyone would do that.”

“No, anyone wouldn’t do that. This is what I mean, Harry. You’re so used to the way you are that you can’t see how amazing it is. Most people would have run away as fast as they could from any of those situations. But you didn’t. And you’re still alive to tell about it. That’s what those lines mean. That’s why they’re about you, and nobody else.” Ginny dropped her fork off the edge of the table and dived down to get it.

Harry was still staring at the place where she had been when the main courses faded and desserts arrived.

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“Congratulations, Remus,” said Dumbledore the next day while they watched the students

flooding down the stairs into the entrance hall, calling to friends and shouting impolite remarks at rivals. “You have just become the first Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher to finish out the year with us in nearly twenty-five years.”

“Don’t jinx it now, Albus. I’d like to come back if I possibly can. What is it about this post that makes it so hard to keep a teacher in it, anyway?”

Dumbledore was silent for a long moment. Remus turned to him, surprised. “You do know I was joking?”

“Will you come aside with me?” Dumbledore led the way into the small antechamber where the first years traditionally waited until they came into the Great Hall to be Sorted.

Puzzled, Remus sat down on one of the chairs lining the wall and waited.

“I have not been fully honest with you, Remus,” Dumbledore said, looking up from the floor to meet Remus’ eyes. “Your remark has struck closer to the truth than you know. Do you recall your own Hogwarts days, and the Defense Against the Dark Arts post?”

“Yes, I do. We never had the same teacher two years in a row either...” Remus frowned. “That does sound like some kind of curse. But who would curse a teaching position?”

“Someone to whom I denied it,” said Dumbledore quietly. “A short time before you began your schooling here, soon after I became Headmaster, another of my old students returned to Hogwarts to ask again what he had asked before. He wished to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. But he wished to teach it as it had never been taught at Hogwarts, as it never will be taught while I am Headmaster.”

“From a perspective friendly to the Dark Arts, you mean.”

“Precisely. And when I refused his request, he became angry and left. Since that time, no teacher of Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts has lasted more than one year. Some leave voluntarily, as Sirius and Aletha did. Some are... unable to continue.”

Remus cracked a smile. “Like Quirrell and Lockhart.”

Dumbledore did not seem amused. “Yes.”

Remus looked more closely at the Headmaster. “You’re worried, aren’t you? You’re thinking something may happen over the summer, something that keeps me from coming back?”

“I worry for more than that,” said Dumbledore, with a trace of anger in his voice. “In Merlin’s name, Remus, do you think I care more about filling a teaching post than I do about you? Nearly anything that would necessitate your leaving your position would also harm you and your family, and I can think of one possibility in particular which I greatly dislike.”

“My unmasking?”

“Yes.”

Remus shook his head. “Forgive me, Albus, but I can’t see how it could possibly happen. The only people who know are trustworthy – more or less, since I haven’t done anything to annoy Severus recently – or out of touch. Unless one of the cubs slips, and I don’t think they would, after that scare Harry gave us in first year. Who was it that cursed the position, anyway? You seem to be taking it very seriously.”

“Few people took him lightly,” said Dumbledore. “Those who did, often did not live to regret the mistake.”

“Wait a minute.” The back of Remus’ mind had been doing sums, and was now presenting him with a troubling total. “You said twenty-five years earlier. And then you mentioned that the curse had been laid down shortly before I started school, around the time you became Headmaster.”

“Yes.”

A slight chill ran down Remus’ spine. “The war started around the time I entered school. And it’s been about twenty-five years since then.”

Dumbledore gave a small nod.

The sunlight streaming through the windows was not as bright as it had been a moment before. “Voldemort.”

“I can think of many reasons why he wished a teaching post here at Hogwarts,” said Dumbledore, looking into the distance. “He hoped to learn more about the school and the Founders, certainly. To reopen the Chamber of Secrets, quite probably. But becoming a teacher would also have given him a legitimate tie to the school. A tie very like that which Meghan Black and Neville Longbottom enjoy.”

“And use, for magic that would otherwise be beyond their capabilities.” The chill returned and brought friends. “I think that I’m very glad you refused him.”

“Even though it may have adverse effects on your own life?” Dumbledore smiled wryly. “The curse has acted before in unexpected ways, but it seems to take the path of least resistance. We both know what the public outcry would be if it were discovered that I had employed a man with your condition.”

“And since we’re not willing to suffer the storm of publicity that would inevitably result from the explanation of Danger’s magic, not to mention the distinct possibility that some other werewolves might try to kidnap her and force her to help them...” Remus shivered.

“Would that be possible?” asked Dumbledore curiously. “I understand that you may not know, but what is your impression?”

“I tend to think... no. It’s the taming power that...” Remus stopped just in time, recalling that

Dumbledore still didn't know about their silent connection. "It brings us very close," he said instead. "Closer than I think most people want to get, except to that one special person."

"Some werewolves are desperate," Dumbledore reminded him quietly. "Because they cannot work, they cannot afford expensive potions like the Wolfsbane. Many of them cannot even find a proper place to live."

"I know." Remus stood up and started pacing around. "I haven't forgotten. Living in shacks, in caves, like animals – thinking of themselves as more animal than human, acting that way – some of them even deny they're human at all. They say werewolves ought to be considered a separate species, like centaurs and merpeople, and that they ought to hate normal wizards, see them only..." His voice sank with disgust. "Only as a *food source*."

"And as the reproductive pool," Dumbledore said calmly. "Since werewolves cannot reproduce as most species do."

Remus stopped dead. "Greyback," he said, and sudden hatred flooded him, hatred of a caliber he'd never felt before, not even towards Wormtail or Malfoy. He looked down at a pain in his palms and found his fingernails piercing the skin, he'd clenched his fists so tightly.

This is ridiculous. I haven't thought of Fenrir Greyback in years, why am I reacting so strongly now?

But he knew why, with a cold and leaden certainty. When he had last had to think about Fenrir Greyback, he had been a younger man, alone in the world except for friends, and almost all his friends were adults. There were only a few children, and they were babies, carefully protected by fully capable parents. But now, he was a parent himself, a father of four, and although his children were strong and intelligent and fine witches and wizards, they were still children, and Greyback specialized in children...

And Danger.

"She would threaten him," said Dumbledore from behind Remus. "What she does for you would threaten the very foundation of Greyback's world, which is that a transformed werewolf stops for nothing and no one. He would never believe that her power is for you and you alone, as I am sure it is. No, Fenrir Greyback would be positive that a werewolf tamer was a terrible threat to him, and to his power, which is based on having large numbers of his people ranging Britain with no controls over them save those he sets."

"He'd kill her," Remus said, still staring at his hands. "He'd hunt for her and kill her. And I don't know if I could stop him. He's huge, incredibly powerful, and I think because he's so wolfish when he's not transformed, he has more of his human cunning when he is... he certainly knows how to hide, and how to wait for the prey he prefers..."

The memory closed down around him. He was four years old, going out of the house to find his favorite book, since he knew Mummy would be angry if he left it out on the grass all night –

Daddy said never go outside at night, but he wasn't going far, just out to the little tree where he liked to sit and read...

Then there was a terrible growl beside him, and something with huge teeth and claws charged at him out of the darkness – he screamed and tried to run away, but it caught him on its third leap, and knocked him to the ground, and sank its teeth into his leg, making him scream again...

“Remus.”

Jolted back to the present, Remus looked up. Danger stood before him, in her traveling robes, looking worried. “Are you all right?”

He pulled her to him and wrapped her in his arms, as though he could protect her from the world if he could just hold her tightly enough. “I won't let it happen to you,” he whispered. “Not to you or to any of the cubs, or to anyone else I love. Never again.”

I know you won't. Her fingers traced the line of his collarbone. **I know.**

“So what have you been talking about in here that has you so worked up?” she asked when he let her go. “You must tell me, Albus. I can almost never get him this excited at home.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Dumbledore laughed. “For such a good cause, I must contribute.” His tone became serious. “We were discussing the possibility of Remus' condition becoming public. Time presses, so you will forgive me if I do not explain fully. Remus can finish the explanations later.”

“Not a problem,” said Danger, sitting down.

Don't forget, he doesn't know about this, Remus told her urgently.

“I'll just fill in the blanks when I have the chance,” Danger finished smoothly. “So. From the way you look, you've thought of something we haven't. Not an unusual occurrence.”

“First, I would like to know what you think would happen in this instance.”

“I suppose I'd have to resign,” said Remus sadly. “And I don't want to. I love it here. I love the castle, and the kids, and watching them light up when they finally understand – I've spent some of the happiest times of my life at Hogwarts, as a student and as a teacher. I was terribly jealous when you asked Sirius and Letha to take the teaching post last year, and it was only later that it dawned on me that the only reason for me to be jealous would be if I wanted it myself.”

“You make a terrific teacher,” said Danger. “And it's certainly some of the happiest I've seen you. We had some good times back in London, and in Devon, but you were always just working to bring home a little money, and for something to do. Here, you love your work just as much as you love being home with us and the cubs. I'd be so happy if you could stay at Hogwarts.”

“But as Albus was just pointing out to me, the position seems to be cursed,” said Remus. “Since

before I was a student here, there's never been a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who's stayed more than a year."

"We have very occasionally had professors return," said Dumbledore, "but never one who could remain for two consecutive years. But this is all beside the point I wish to make. Yes, your condition becoming public would practically force your resignation. What would it do to your life at home?"

"Our life at home?" Remus laughed. "Nothing – at least, I don't think it would..."

The same thought occurred to him and Danger simultaneously. "Draco," she said quietly. "His adoption contract – you signed it. In blood. Making it magically binding – but if it's not legal for you to adopt in the first place..."

"Then such a contract would be legally null and void," said Dumbledore. "For the purposes of future converse, however, I do not remember the details of this contract from Sirius' trial, nor have I ever heard from you how many of you signed it."

He's got a point. We'll have to fix that as soon as we can.

If we can. And there's another problem. "You may not remember it," said Remus aloud. "But I think Draco mentioned at the trial that all – I mean, how many of us had signed it. And there was a Court Scribe present, I remember her, so there's bound to be records of the trial somewhere."

"You may well be able to rectify that situation yourself," said Dumbledore. "I believe you keep in contact with a Muggle friend of yours who testified at the trial, a Mrs. Robertson?"

"Sue? Yes, I still hear from her – why?"

"The Scribe at that trial was her daughter. And all official Scribes have access to the files where records are kept."

I believe Albus Dumbledore is advising us to break the law.

I believe you're right. "If I may ask, Albus," said Danger. "Why the sudden recurrence of things you either don't remember or aren't telling us?"

Dumbledore rose and came across the room to them, placing a hand on each of their shoulders. "Because I have come to care for you very much, and I would rather not see you hurt." He smiled at them, and Remus suddenly got a glimpse of what it must be like to be so old and so experienced, to have seen so much, and to watch the young rush heedlessly into danger and trouble, never listening to advice, and come to grief through their own folly...

"Excuse me?" said Hermione from behind them. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Professors, but it's almost eleven. Most of the carriages have gone."

"You should not miss the train," said Dumbledore, taking his hands away and shaking first

Remus', then Danger's hand instead. "I wish you a good summer, and it is my fervent hope to see you both return with the children in the fall."

"Our hope as well, Albus," said Remus. "Will we see you at all this summer?"

"Quite likely. I may even invite Harry to take tea with myself and an old friend, with your permission, of course."

"Of course," said Danger. "Just let us know when."

They turned and left the antechamber. Hermione and Draco were waiting for them in the entrance hall. Remus hugged Hermione briefly around the shoulders and ruffled Draco's hair.

"Let's go home," he said. "All of us."

xXxXx

He had thought it was impossible to become more miserable than he was. But he had been wrong.

"I will take you back," he'd said on his first night in captivity, but it had become such a worn refrain that he was beginning to doubt it himself.

"In your dreams," his son had sneered at him. "There's only one reason I'd come back to you. If I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that someone I loved would get something they needed out of it. Got that? Good. Get out of my head." And abruptly he had been awake again, and no amount of trying had enabled him to reclaim that dream.

His fine robes had lost all the magic he had used to patch and restore them, and were once again tattered, filthy rags. He was filthy again himself, covered in dirt and vermin. And the place where the bitch-wolf had bitten him never stopped hurting, throbbing with every beat of his heart, sending shooting pains through his leg when he tried to pace, aching when he sat still.

Then he began to be ill.

He slept more than he usually did, and when he was awake, he had no energy. The food revolted him, even more so than usual. His joints began to ache and his temper to be so foul that he struck at himself, since he had no one and nothing else to attack.

He was convinced that nothing could ever be worse than this.

He was soon to be proven wrong.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 25: Ready or Not (Year 4)

Chapter 25: Ready or Not

Harry lay on the hillside in the sun, letting the warmth seep through him. He wished it could bake away the horrible taste left behind by the potion he'd taken the day before.

Worth a try. He opened his mouth wide and let the sunlight fall on his tongue. It was already beating down on the rest of him, turning the insides of his eyelids orange, warming his chest and stomach and arms and legs, though, strangely, it didn't seem to affect his pendants...

Probably because they're magical. Magical things don't work quite the same as other things do.

The knowledge didn't worry him. He'd always known the necklace he wore was magical. It had helped him do some impressive and very fun things over the years he'd had it. Apart from the taste in his mouth, which he knew would go away over the next few days, it didn't seem that life could get any better.

He half-heard, half-felt footsteps approaching. A shadow fell over his face. "Hello, Ron," he said without opening his eyes.

"How'd you know it was me?"

Harry shrugged. "Just did."

"Your tongue's purple."

"I know. Aftereffect from the potion, I think. Like the taste. I thought Hermione was making it up, but she wasn't. It's nasty." Harry opened his eyes now and looked a long way up, into Ron's freckled, red-topped face. "Not too late for you to back out, you know."

"Back out? No way." Ron moved, and Harry hurriedly shut his eyes again as the sun hit him in the face. "I've been having dreams about flying – on my own, no broomstick – ever since Christmas of first year, when we did that spell." Harry heard his friend sitting down beside him, then lying down. "Besides, it's something Fred and George never did. Never even thought about doing."

"And nobody else did either." Harry could appreciate Ron's feelings. It had to be hard, having five older brothers, who among them had excelled in just about every way a person could excel. There wasn't much left for Ron to be good at. "You're moving through really fast, too. I think you might even be done sometime this fall."

"Not as fast as you. You were way behind – you hadn't done your chest or either of your arms or your head – and then after exams, you just caught fire and raced through all of them in two weeks. How'd you do that?"

Harry shrugged, even knowing Ron wouldn't see it. "Dunno. I think it had something to do with what happened with Malfoy and Wormtail. I figured if I ever got caught like that again, I wanted to be ready. I wanted to have something else I could do. This was something I knew I could handle, and if I couldn't, well, it was only me that suffered from it. Nobody else was going to get hurt."

"Mm-hmm."

The boys lay in silence for a time.

"Dad had a letter today, from a bloke he knows in Magical Games and Sports," said Ron finally. "Said he could probably get eleven tickets to the Top Box for the Quidditch World Cup."

"The Top Box?" Harry forgot the bitter, oily coating on his tongue. "You lucky git! That's the best seats there are!"

"I know."

"Wish my parents had contacts in Magical Games and Sports. I know we're going to the Cup, but they're not going to spend what it would cost to get seats like those." Harry squirmed a little on the grass, getting more comfortable. "Padfoot might want to, maybe Letha too, but Moony and Danger won't let them. Danger might not even want to go."

"Mum doesn't want to go either. Says she's looking forward to having the house to herself for a while." Ron shifted positions, and Harry cracked one eye open to see his friend leaning up on one elbow, looking over at him. "Harry, you're taking Arithmancy, right?"

"Yeah."

"So you can do maths."

"Last time I checked."

"How many people in my family?"

"Nine."

"And how many going to the Cup?"

"Eight, if your mum's not going. I don't think any of your brothers are going to want to stay home."

Ron made a rude suggestion about what said brothers would do rather than miss the Quidditch World Cup. "So you're right," he finished. "Eight of us going to the Cup. And Dad's got eleven tickets."

Eight from eleven is three... wait a second.

Harry rolled onto his side and opened his eyes, staring at Ron. “Are you inviting me to come to the World Cup with you?”

“Well, you and Hermione and Draco.” Ron was grinning now. “Neville’s going with his parents, and Luna’s not interested. I don’t know about Meghan – we might be able to squeeze her in, she’s not very big...”

“She’ll want to sit with Padfoot and Letha. Even if it means being lower down.” Harry could hardly imagine it. All his life he’d heard of the great golden stadium built and rebuilt in different locations around the world, able to seat a hundred thousand witches and wizards. And now he had the opportunity, not only to go there, but to sit in the highest and best seats available.

“So, d’you want to go?” asked Ron.

“No,” Harry said with a straight face. “I’d rather stay here and do my Potions homework. Yes, of *course* I want to go!”

He attacked Ron as best he could from a half-prone position. Ron retaliated in kind.

So I was wrong earlier. Now life can’t get any better.

xXxXx

Draco lay on the couch in the Longbottoms’ music room, flute on his chest, looking around at the room with the attention to detail which was necessary when learning a place to make it into a dream setting. He could already render almost any room in the Den, several in the Burrow and the Landing Zone, and quite a few at Hogwarts. Danger wanted him and Hermione to learn as many different settings as possible, so that someday they could craft their own.

She likes to tell about making a beach and a forest and a grassland for her and Moony to play in. It’s a little weird to hear, but she’s usually good about leaving the mushy parts out.

Hermione was less enthusiastic about dream-sculpting than he was. Draco got the feeling she didn’t like the feeling of being manipulative. *But it’s not as if we’re doing it to someone else’s dreams. They’re ours. I might see if I could find a way we could all share a dream I made, maybe sleeping with our pendant chains on, but I wouldn’t make anyone do it if they didn’t want to. Going into full-bond obviously works, but that’s not something you do just for fun.*

He might even try a few settings from books or movies. Hobbiton, say, or the jungle where Mowgli lived with his brothers. Or a large house in Austria...

Gee, I wonder why I thought of that?

“You look like Captain Von Trapp,” he said to Neville.

“Thank you.” Neville didn’t even look up from the chords he was fingering.

Draco shrugged. Neville was like that sometimes – he missed the point of teasing entirely, taking it either as a genuine attack or, like now, a genuine compliment.

Not my problem.

Neville lifted his head and shot Draco a quick grin before looking at Luna and Meghan, who were chatting at the other end of the room. “Oh, my darling Maria,” he caroled. “Would you come here?”

“Certainly, my darling Captain,” Meghan cooed, gliding across the room.

Or he could always be teasing me back.

Luna took a seat on the piano bench and Meghan sat on the floor as Neville began to strum in a familiar pattern. Draco raised the flute to his lips, blew experimentally into it once, then began to play the melody to *Edelweiss*. On the repeat, they all sang instead, the boys doing two-part harmony on the main theme and the girls adding the responses and descant parts.

xXxXx

Elsewhere in the house, Alice Longbottom sighed happily.

Just like old times with the Order. Frank would bring out his guitar, and so would Fabian Prewett, and we'd all sing – we could forget about the war and all our troubles a little when we had music.

I only hope these children never need to use it that way.

She returned to what she was doing.

Previous experience. Eleven years' standing on the Auror force...

xXxXx

Hermione sat perched in a tree, book in one hand, apple in the other.

“How're you doing?” asked Ginny, maneuvering her broom to a stop directly alongside Hermione.

“Not too bad. I've only bitten the book and tried to turn the page on the apple twice.”

Ginny laughed.

“How about you?”

“All right. It's a lot of fun. Do you want to try?”

“Flying around on a broom, shooting sparks at things. Thanks, but no thanks.”

“You're boring.”

“I know you. Shooting sparks at things would turn into shooting sparks at me.”

“I think you’re mistaking me for Ron.”

“Who was it set my robes on fire at Animagus work sessions in March?”

“That was an accident!”

“No, it was an accident when you did it to Harry ten minutes earlier. You did it to me on purpose.”

“I did not!”

“Well, that’s the only reason I can think of why you’d make the same mistake twice in the same night, is if one of them was on purpose.”

“I never said one of them wasn’t on purpose.”

Hermione looked up. There was a very small smirk on Ginny’s face. “You did it to Harry on purpose,” she said. “I should have known.”

Ginny sighed, losing her smile. “Hermione, what am I supposed to do?”

“With what?”

“Him! I keep trying to be his friend, and I think he likes me as a friend, but it’s not turning into anything more than that! And now he’s acting funny when he sees Cho Chang – you know, the Seeker for Ravenclaw? She’s *older* than he is, and not his House, and he doesn’t even *know* her!”

Hermione closed her book and tucked it into her pocket. “It’s a crush,” she said, starting to climb down the tree. “Like you had on Harry, before you knew him.”

“It’s not the same at all! I never had a crush on Harry before I knew him!” Ginny paced Hermione’s descent, her dive controlled although her words were anything but. “I’ve known him for *years*, and he’s never even said hello to her, and it’s not *fair* that he’s in love with her!”

“No, it’s not,” Hermione said, finding secure footing on a wobbly branch. “But think about this, Ginny. He’s not in love with her, not really. He thinks he is, but he’s not. He has a pretty picture in his mind, probably made of the way she smiles and the way she flies and a few other things about her, and he’s in love with that pretty picture. When he really gets to know her, do you think she’s going to be just like that?”

“No...”

“So, when he gets to know her, he’s going to be disappointed. Right?”

“Right.”

“And when he gets disappointed, he could do two things.” Hermione dropped to the ground. “He could either be mature and responsible and get over it and learn to love the real person anyway, or he could run away and claim his heart got broken and be unhappy for a while. A very little while, because it won’t really be broken at all. It’ll barely be bruised.”

Ginny looked hard at Hermione. “You’re sure about this.”

“Positive. Crushes rarely last long.”

“You said mature and responsible on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s funny, though. Harry is mature and responsible. At least as much as boys ever are. He might actually do what you were saying – get over disappointment, learn to love the real Cho...”

Oh no. Hermione realized too late what she’d let herself in for.

“But I can think of somebody else we both know who is not mature at all, or responsible.” Ginny stepped directly in front of Hermione. “Somebody who would probably do exactly what you’re talking about. Build up a picture of the girl he thought he loved, and then be shattered when it turned out not to be true, all without ever noticing the girl standing right beside him who’d be perfect for him, because she’s just his friend.”

Hermione sagged, leaning against the tree trunk. “You know.”

“I think just about everyone knows. Except Ron. He never notices anything unless you shove it under his nose.”

“I’m sometimes tempted.” Hermione hit her head gently against the tree. “How long am I supposed to wait, Ginny? How long am I supposed to sit here and do nothing and hope he figures out that I like him?”

“I don’t think that will work,” said Ginny thoughtfully. “In fact, I think we both need a new strategy. And I have an idea. What’s the best way to make a boy want anything?”

“I don’t know... tell him he can’t have it?”

“Exactly.” Ginny sounded almost smug. “I think the only reason they take us for granted is because we’re always there. If all of a sudden we’re not...”

“Maybe they’ll figure out that they have to do something about that.” Hermione lifted her head and answered her friend’s smile with one of her own. “I think I like this plan.”

xXxXx

Dear Remus,

Dorothy and I came to a compromise – we'd go and have a look at the records and see if there was anything there that would give the game away. As it happens, the only statement that the contract was signed by all four of you was made by Draco himself. Dorothy's uneasy about changing the records, and I have to say I agree with her. We'll still do it if you think it's wise, but wouldn't it be easier for you and Draco to claim that he hadn't seen the contract himself, and had just assumed that all four of you had signed it?

Write when you have a chance. I hope this all comes out well for you.

Sue

P.S. Has Danger read Valentina Jett's latest? I really love the character of Athena. Dorothy says it's obvious Jett went to Hogwarts while Minerva McGonagall was teaching there. I wouldn't know.

Remus chuckled, handing the letter to Sirius, who held it between himself and Aletha. "I think that's a good suggestion," he said when they had both finished, Sirius grinning a little sheepishly at the PS. "It cuts down on the illegalities here."

"Yeah, now we're only doing one illegal thing," said Sirius. "Altering a magically binding contract. Are you sure about this?"

"It has to be done," said Danger. "If the contract is invalidated, we lose all parental rights to Draco."

"But if we did, they'd just send him to the nearest unincarcerated blood relative able to care for a child. Who happens to be me."

"Normally, they'd do that," corrected Aletha. "But these are special circumstances. They'd probably say that since you cosigned the contract with Remus while aware of his condition, you'd invalidated yourself as a guardian, and send him to a foster family instead."

"And we're not the most popular people at the Ministry right now," said Remus. "Between what they can prove and what they suspect about us, they might not be as careful as they should about picking a family with whom Draco would enjoy staying."

"You have a point," Sirius conceded. "I just think we might be jumping the wand here a little. Nobody even knows you're a werewolf, Moony. The Registry records are sealed except in case of emergency."

Remus raised an eyebrow. "And how long do you think it would take the Ministry to generate an emergency if they were properly motivated?"

"Okay, okay, just playing Muggle's advocate."

Aletha slapped him lightly. "Watch your mouth."

“If I may?” said Danger deliberately.

“Go ahead.” Sirius spread his hands. “I’ll be good.”

“Ha.” Danger placed her hands flat on the table and closed her eyes. Remus moved his chair closer to hers and put his arms around her, laying his face against her hair. *She smells so good.*

On the table in front of them lay Draco’s contract, yellowing a little now after ten years. As Aletha unrolled it, Remus could catch the odor of old blood from the signatures at the bottom, which had faded to an ugly brown. Narcissa’s scent was far more delicate than Danger’s or Aletha’s – the women of the Pack shared an earthy strength that Narcissa lacked.

Maybe it’s to do with being Muggleborn. Or maybe it’s just because they are who they are.

His wife and Pack-sister were easy enough to tell apart, though. Even before they had become Animagi, Danger’s scent had always been more akin to that of a predator, and Aletha’s to a plant-eater. Danger would attack on any provocation or none at all, while Aletha would wait out provocations and react only to actual threats.

Sirius’ scent held even more strength than the women’s did, as well as just enough elements similar to Narcissa’s that Remus would have known they were related on their smells alone. The other implications were complicated, hard to pick apart, and Remus realized he was getting an overlay, as the blood-scent of Sirius ten years ago warred in his nostrils with the living-scent of Sirius now. His friend had changed a lot over those years, though Remus thought the biggest changes in him had been wrought, or at least the groundwork laid for them, before the blood on the contract was shed.

Sirius had once been a lone wolf, or dog, willing to fight anything or anyone. Now he fought only for his Pack, and only when necessary. Idly Remus wondered what James would think of the way they had all changed.

His own scent came to him last, familiar yet strange and ever new, like hearing one’s own recorded voice. It never sounded, or smelled, the same from the outside as it did from the inside. He wondered what he smelled like to Sirius or Danger or Aletha in Animagus form. Did they receive the same all-encompassing knowledge he did from scents?

Danger’s consciousness, which had thinned and flickered in his mind, now returned in full strength. She opened her eyes and leaned forward, laying her finger on the capital R in Remus’ name. As the other Pack-adults watched, tiny flames raced along the lines of the signature, burning away the blood on the parchment, leaving clean white lines behind, which yellowed to match the rest of the background in instants.

Remus looked away. He shouldn’t feel bad about this, he told himself. It changed nothing. He had never been Draco’s guardian in the eyes of the law, and he would never stop being Draco’s father in his own heart. This was a precaution, done for safety’s sake, with no real meaning.

But he still seemed to feel fire on his skin, burning him as real fire hadn't in so long that he couldn't remember the last time it had happened, burning him out of Draco's life forever...

Danger passed her hand over the parchment, and the remaining three names moved closer to one another, concealing the fact that a fourth name had ever been there. She sighed deeply. **All done. Going to sleep now.**

How long?

Probably eight to ten hours. Doing it undetectably costs. Good night. Her head dropped onto his shoulder, she sagged against him, and her mind's presence closed down into that odd mode between sleep and unconsciousness.

"All done, then?" said Sirius, inspecting the contract.

"All done. And she paid a little extra to have it be undetectable. No one will be able to tell, magically, that this contract was altered."

"And since the only other way they'd know is if someone told them, and the only people who would tell have been well briefed on the exact reasons why they're not to tell anyone..." Aletha smiled. "I do believe we've averted a possible crisis."

"I certainly hope so," said Remus, rearranging Danger so that he could carry her upstairs to bed. "I think we've all had enough crises to last us a good long while."

xXxXx

Two days later, Sirius got off the lift whistling cheerfully. He'd played a wonderful trick on Aletha the previous afternoon – he'd been hanging over her as she worked on a knotty problem in her Healer homework, and finally she had told him to "shoo." He had immediately transformed into Padfoot and begun bringing her what she had asked for, and had emptied three of the four bedrooms of footwear before she had noticed the pile of leather and canvas growing at her feet.

But she got back at me. Chased me out into the rain, rolled me in the mud – and then I got back at her again. Shake, shake, shake, shake, shake... He chuckled as he sat down at his desk.

"Morning, Kingsley," he called.

"Morning, Sirius. What's funny?"

"Oh, just thinking about my wife."

"Oh, she's funny, is she?"

"Sometimes."

And then we had to take showers, so we'd be clean for den-night. And we're environmentally

friendly, so we conserved water... He chuckled again, digging out his latest stack of case files. *Ah well, back to the old grind. Parchment, how I love thee.*

“Black,” said a woman’s voice from the entrance to his cubicle. “You busy?”

“Not really,” said Sirius, looking up. He squinted – his cubicle was right across from a window, and the sun was streaming in, making identifying her difficult. It certainly wasn’t anyone he knew by voice...

“You may not remember me,” the woman went on, stepping into the cubicle and to one side, where she was out of the glare. Sirius blinked, letting his eyes adjust. Mostly silver hair, stern face that nonetheless held laugh lines, an Auror’s robes...

His imagination suddenly conjured bars in front of her face, bars seen from the inside, and he grinned. “Auror Halcyon. Nice to see you again.”

“Likewise, especially under different circumstances.” Leticia Halcyon returned his grin. “You look well.”

“Thank you. May I offer you a seat? You look tired.”

“I am tired.” Halcyon sat down on his one guest chair. “Pulled night shift at Azkaban last night. They’re putting a couple of human guards there now, to prevent further breakouts.”

“Good God,” said Sirius, shaking his head. “That place is bad enough in broad daylight. Not that it ever sees broad daylight – I think there’s a perpetual storm center over it.”

“I think there may be. But there’s something I had to ask you.” Halcyon leaned forward. “Your friend. Lupin. I know he helped to capture Malfoy. But I was just looking at the calendar. That night when Malfoy was caught, that was a full moon.”

Sirius nodded. “Yeah, it was.”

“And last night was, too.”

“That’s right.”

“I take it Lupin’s wife still stays with him.”

“Every time.” Sirius kept his voice low. “Why?”

Halcyon shook her head. “So he was thinking when he did it,” she said. “If anyone deserves it, it’s that pureblood bastard, but it was still a goddamned stupid thing to do...”

“What?” Sirius was starting to get worried now.

“Biting Malfoy, of course. Or didn’t he tell you?”

“What – you think *Remus* bit Malfoy?” Sirius laughed. “No, no, he didn’t do that. He’s not that dumb. It was Danger who bit him. She’s just a wolf Animagus. It was just to scare him, make him bleed a little. That’s all.”

“You sure about that?”

“Sure, I’m sure. Why?”

“Because I looked in that cell last night, and it wasn’t any wolf Animagus running around in there. There’s an investigation going right now, and they’ve unsealed the Registry to find out if Malfoy had contact with any werewolves while he was out. If they haven’t tumbled to Lupin yet, they will pretty damn soon.”

Sirius distinctly felt his stomach fall out of its place and land hard on the floor under his chair. “That’s not possible,” he said stupidly. “They told me... they told me...” He stood up, shoving his chair back. “Excuse me. I have to go.”

They lied to me. The thought pounded in his head. They lied to me. They lied to all of us. They claimed Danger bit him, but Remus did – Remus must have –

He was on the lift, heading for the Atrium. He’d get in trouble for skiving off work again, but that was nothing compared to the trouble he had in mind for Remus.

Is this why he insisted so hard that we had to get his name off Draco’s contract? Because he knew it was only a matter of time before he was exposed?

He was getting off the lift, heading for a fireplace. Hardly any of them were being used at this hour.

I’ll kick his arse for this – he’s put us all in harm’s way with this one, they’re not going to spare us when they shoot him down in flames –

He was standing in front of a Floo fireplace, powder in his hand, when the furious voice in his head was supplanted by another.

Now just hold on a second, Sirius Valentine Black.

It was uncanny how much that voice sounded like Aletha, Sirius thought, dropping the Floo powder back into the small can it was kept in.

Go somewhere you can think, and think clearly. Don’t just react. You’re a big boy now.

Sirius stepped away from the fireplace and spun around, visualizing the park near their old Den where he had often played with the cubs. It had a small, thick grove of trees at one end, perfect for subtle Apparition.

Once at the park, he found a bench and sat down, idly people-watching as he thought.

Make a proposition. List evidence for and against. Weigh the evidence. Decide if the proposition is true or false. Repeat until everything is settled. Sirius pulled out his pendants and began rubbing them between his fingers, as if the carvings could help him remember things.

Proposition: Remus and Danger lied to us. Remus actually bit Malfoy and said it was Danger.

Evidence for: Malfoy's a bloody werewolf now! How could he be a werewolf if Remus didn't bite him?

Sirius looked down at the pendants as if they held the answer. His first one was flipped to the side with the serpentine B. *B for Black. The decent Blacks, like me, and Andy...*

Wait a second. Andy. Andy told us that Remus didn't test as a werewolf any more, that she didn't think he was contagious. List that as evidence against.

He looked at the second pendant; the lion and the wolf looked back at him. *And more evidence against. The cubs got back all right. There was no permanent harm done. And Remus knew that. He wouldn't inflict permanent harm on Malfoy if all Malfoy did was scare the cubs. He believes in justice. So, for scaring them, Remus would have scared him. And what better way to scare him than to make him think he's a werewolf?*

Third point against: Remus swore a long time ago he'd never bite anyone, no matter what. He'd never ruin anyone else's life that way. I don't think he'd have broken that promise even for Malfoy.

And fourth: Remus knows if he bit Malfoy the truth would have to come out. He'd have to leave Hogwarts. He might have to leave the Den. He wouldn't do anything that would hurt the Pack that way.

He leaned back on the bench. *All right, new proposition: Remus and Danger are telling the truth. Danger bit Malfoy.*

Evidence for: everything listed above as evidence against. And that's a nice big list.

But it's all supposition and character witnesses. Almost the only fact around here is the evidence against this one...

His fingers tightened around the pendants. *Either Andy was wrong and so is everything I know about Remus, or somehow, a woman who's not a werewolf managed to infect a man with lycanthropy.*

I don't like either of those options. Unfortunately, they're all we've got.

An owl flapped down beside him, offering him a note. It was addressed to him in Kingsley's handwriting. He ripped it open.

Sirius –

I was just downstairs. They've found Lupin's file. There's talk of arresting him for endangering minors. Warn him to get out – they can't do anything if he's not in the house when they come. I hope this finds you in time.

“It did,” Sirius muttered. “Thanks.” Standing up, he prepared to Apparate.

We are in so much trouble.

xXxXx

Remus was just pouring himself a second cup of tea when Sirius exploded into the kitchen. “Remus!” he shouted, then noticed Remus standing by the counter. “There you are. Good. Listen, you have to get out of here.”

“I do? Why?”

Sirius held up his hand. “Don't ask right now. Get moving. Pack a bag or something, just what you need for a couple of nights, and get out of the house. I'll come with you, explain when we're gone. We have to move.”

Remus frowned. “Right now.”

“Yes. Right now. Five minutes ago would be better.”

“Should have got me a Time-Turner, then,” Remus teased, putting down his tea.

“Dammit, Moony, this isn't funny. You *want* to get arrested?”

“Now there's a magic word.” **Something's going on**, Remus told Danger. **Sirius is insisting I have to get out of here.**

Do you think he might be pranking you?

It's possible, but... no. Sirius' scent was rife with worry and distress. **Not unless he's learned to control the way he smells along with the way he looks.** Remus was halfway up the stairs now, Sirius one step behind him.

I wouldn't put it past him. But you're right. It's lucky Letha and I finished the laundry last night. You've got plenty of clean clothes.

Where's my old duffel bag?

Under the bed. What do you think...?

No idea. Sirius says he'll tell me when I'm out of the house.

Sirius had the dresser drawers open now and was lifting out underwear and socks. “Here,” he said,

tossing them into the duffel bag Remus had opened on the bed. "I'll get some robes and your toothbrush and whatever..."

Remus added a few shirts, some trousers, the book he'd been reading. Sirius tipped an armload of toiletries into the bag. "Think you're about ready?"

"About. Padfoot, would you mind explaining..."

Someone pounded on the Den's front door. "Open up! Magical Law Enforcement Squad!"

Sirius swore. "Let's go. Diagon Alley, I think. Tell Danger you're not here and she doesn't know when you'll be back."

You heard?

I heard. What in the world...

More pounding. "Open this door!"

"I'm coming!" Danger shouted from the main floor. "Hold on a second, please!"

Remus shouldered his bag and Disapparated a split second behind Sirius.

xXxXx

Remus and Sirius sat down together in the main room of the Leaky Cauldron, Sirius with a goblet of mead and Remus with a cup of tea, to make up for the one cooling on the Den's kitchen counter. "Now will you tell me what the fuss was all about?" he asked, taking a sip. "I assume the MLE's at the door were there for me, but what did I do?"

"Remus, tell me the truth. Did you or did you not bite Lucius Malfoy?"

Remus frowned. "Not. Why?"

"Swear on Danger's life."

"I swear on Danger's life, on the cubs' lives, on yours and Letha's and mine. I did not bite Lucius Malfoy."

Sirius groaned. "I was afraid of that."

"You're not making any sense."

Sirius looked up from his mead and met Remus' eyes. "Let Halcyon came to see me today. She was the Auror in charge the night we were all arrested."

"I remember. Older woman, had a sense of humor."

“Right. She was on night guard last night at Azkaban. She heard howling coming from one of the cells. Malfoy’s cell. She went to have a look.”

Remus took another sip of tea, but it did nothing to dispel the chill in his stomach. “He’s become a werewolf, hasn’t he.”

Slowly, Sirius nodded.

Remus pushed his tea aside. “Damn it, HOW?” he suddenly shouted, slamming his fist down on the table. Sirius jumped, as did the few other customers there. Remus didn’t care. He’d worked to avoid exactly this – he’d refused to do what he wanted, been satisfied with a lesser revenge, and now it was coming back to haunt him. “How could that happen?”

“I don’t know. Unless Danger’s somehow become contagious from being with you so long.”

“It doesn’t make sense.” Remus stared at the tabletop, wishing he could read the future in the patterns of the wood grain. “I don’t test as a werewolf any more, Andy told us that. I know.” He raised a hand to stop Sirius interrupting. “That was years ago, and I haven’t been retested. But going in for tests would advertise what I am, not hide it.”

There was a bitter taste in his mouth that had nothing to do with the tea. For so long, he’d been able to avoid thinking of himself as a *what*, because he had been surrounded by people who ignored the *what* and focused on the *who*.

Face it, Lupin, you got used to being treated like a normal person. Going back to being treated like a criminal is going to hurt.

Unbidden, the laws on werewolves interacting with children floated into his mind. He’d read them carefully when Harry was born, again when the Pack was founded, and once more this past year before accepting the job at Hogwarts. “Living in the same house with the cubs is endangerment,” he said dully. “But they couldn’t arrest me if I wasn’t there when they showed up. They have to catch me in the act for it to count.”

“Right. So all you have to do to stay out of jail is never get caught at home.” Sirius sounded almost chipper. “You’re one of the fastest Apparators I know, and with you and Danger able to talk the way you can, you could be out of there before they ever saw you…”

“Don’t be stupider than you have to be, Padfoot. They’ll put a watch on me, and on the Den. They might even claim I’m high-risk and slap a monitoring spell on me, so they always know where I am. And if you or Letha or Danger arranged for the cubs to meet me somewhere, they could get you for that, on accessory before the fact.”

“What, you think we care about that?”

“I care about it!” Remus jerked his head up to meet Sirius’ eyes again. “I care! Because if you three get yourselves arrested, what happens to those cubs? Where are they going to go? Or if even

one of you gets arrested – you’re Harry’s sole guardian, aren’t you? You’ve never officially made Letha co-guardian?”

“Dammit, that’s right.” Sirius scowled. “It comes automatically with a magical marriage, but not a Muggle one.”

“Not to mention, there’s already one big bloody hole punched in the Pack. You want to make it two, or three?”

“All right, all right,” said Sirius, holding up his hands. “You win. I was just trying to help.”

“I know.” Remus slumped in his chair. “I know. Thank you. It’s just...” He tried to say what it was just, and found his voice choked. *Oh, God, not this now, I do not need to cry, not right this minute...*

Here, said a quiet voice, and the teary feeling left him, siphoned off by another. **I’m already crying, a little more won’t hurt. I love you, by the way.**

You love me? After this? Remus noted in passing that Sirius was paying close attention to his drink. **I just want to make sure you understand what’s happened here. I’ve done something to you. You are no longer normal.**

I never was to begin with.

Stop it. Don’t you understand? You’re different now – they might think you’re dangerous – they might start testing you, and asking you questions, and treating you like...

Like a werewolf?

Yes! And then suddenly the answer unfolded in front of him. **That’s it. I know what to do.**

What?

I know what I can tell them. I know what I can say to keep them away from you.

I’m sorry?

I’ll claim I did it. I’ll tell them I bit Malfoy. It’s what they’re expecting. They’ll never look any farther. There’ll be a hearing, they’ll fine me, there might be jail time, but since he’s a criminal anyway they might go a bit lighter –

Remus, are you out of your mind?

No, I’m in it. It has to be this way, Danger. Either that, or all our secrets end now, we become medical specimens, and probably end up with both of us barred from contact with the cubs. For their own good.

Hold on a minute. Remus sensed motion on Danger's end. **I'm going to go ask the encyclopedia something.**

"You done?" Sirius asked quietly.

"Paused. You're going to get in trouble for warning me, aren't you?"

"Not if no one ever knows I did it. I don't think Kingsley will tell, or Halcyon, not after she came to warn me."

"You'd better get back, then. The longer you're gone, the more chance someone will notice."

"All right." Sirius stood up, as did Remus. "Take care of yourself, Moony," he said, gripping Remus' shoulders.

"I will. You take care of everybody else."

"I'll do that." Sirius pulled Remus closer and hugged him, a gesture Remus returned gladly. "We'll miss you," he said when he let go.

"Me too. But it won't be for long."

"We can only hope." Sirius strode over to the fireplace. "Let us know when you're settled somewhere," he said, and tossed Floo powder into the flames. "Ministry of Magic."

Settled somewhere. I might as well start here. Remus gathered Sirius' empty goblet and his half-full mug and took them up to the bar, waiting until Tom appeared from the kitchen. "I think I need a room," he said.

"Family troubles?" Tom asked, bringing the ledger out for Remus to sign.

"You could say that. There might be DMLE here looking for me. Just to ask questions," Remus added hastily when Tom made to take the ledger away again. "No arrests, no trouble."

Tom frowned at him, but let Remus sign his name. "Room three," he said, leading the way down the hall. "And I'll want a Galleon for security."

Remus rummaged in his pocket and handed over his only gold coin. He'd have to go to Gringotts right away.

Found it, said Danger in his mind as Tom shut the door behind himself.

Found what? Remus lay down on the bed.

Current law on a werewolf biting someone. Danger showed him a mental picture of their magical encyclopedia, which was the size of one volume of a Muggle one but could provide just as much information, if correctly asked. **You're right, there's an automatic fine, and a**

possibility of jail time. But it mentions that as with any other serious crime, mitigating circumstances are considered. I think facing the man who kidnapped and tortured three of your children could be described as mitigating circumstances.

But I just realized, they're not going to know I was under control. Frustration surged through Remus. They're going to think it was *your* fault, for letting me out...

Maybe. Danger's mental tone was light. **Maybe not.**

Oh, dear God. What do you have up your sleeve?

A Pack-sister who's quite good at brewing potions, and who would cheerfully lie through her teeth for you. The law was written before the Wolfsbane Potion was invented, but they'll have to consider it differently if we claim you were under its influence when you bit Malfoy, won't they? He felt Danger sigh. Unfortunately, all that does is shift it back from me to you again.

Danger, I'm already in trouble. I can deal with more trouble. You do not need more trouble. You will have all the trouble you can handle taking care of the cubs. They are trouble all by themselves. And the way they react to trouble is to make more trouble...

How many times can you use the word "trouble" in one paragraph?

I lost count. Remus smiled a little. **I know one thing they can't take away from me.**

Me too. He felt Danger kiss her fingertips, then press them against her own cheek. **We've survived everything else. We'll survive this. Now I'm off to Bonham School. Letha has a break at 9:30. I'll talk to her then.**

What about the cubs?

I'll leave a note that we were called out unexpectedly and tell them when I get back.

Someone banged on Remus' door. "Magical Law Enforcement," said a deep voice. "Open up."

"Just a moment." **I have to go.**

I know. Much love.

Much love.

Remus stood up and opened the door. "Remus Lupin?" said the wizard on the other side, who looked as if he probably would have knocked the door down if Remus had been a little slower.

"Yes."

"Come with me, please."

“Am I under arrest?”

“Not at the moment.”

Thank you, Mr. Tactful...

xXxXx

The Den was still deserted when Danger returned from talking to Aletha. She picked up the mug of tea sitting on the counter and poured its contents into the sink, closing her eyes against tears.

I will not cry. I will not disgrace myself and my mate. We are in no danger, no real trouble, just separated for a few days. The cubs need me to be strong. I will not cry.

“Danger?” Hermione’s voice, breathing quickly, and from the sound, the boys were just behind her. “Mr. Weasley just firecalled Mrs. Weasley – he said it’s all over the Ministry about Moony...”

Danger rubbed her eyes before she turned around. “I’m afraid so,” she said. “Last night, Lucius Malfoy transformed into a werewolf. The Ministry had very little trouble finding out who in the Werewolf Registry he’d been close to recently.”

Draco’s eyes sparked. “Yesss,” he hissed between his teeth. “Perfect...”

“Perfect?” Harry spun on him. “You call this perfect? Or didn’t you hear? They want to arrest Moony! Arrest him, just for living with us!” He turned back to Danger. “He’s gone, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“They didn’t arrest him?” asked Hermione quickly.

“No. He’s at the Ministry answering questions, but he was not arrested. However, this does mean that until the matter is settled, he won’t be coming home.”

Draco dropped into a chair at the kitchen table. “I take it back,” he said. “Very much *not* perfect.”

“Amen,” muttered Harry, joining him. Hermione did the same.

“There is another facet to this,” said Danger, getting all the cubs’ attention. “And this is not to be discussed with anyone.” She considered telling them to keep it even from their Pridemates, but so far the other children had been as trustworthy as her own cubs. “I won’t be transforming in front of you anymore unless I must, and you’re all to stay away from me if I do. It wasn’t Moony who bit Lucius Malfoy. It was me.”

“You?” asked Harry in surprise. “But you’re not...”

“No, I’m not. But it seems I can transmit it, even if I don’t show it myself.”

“A carrier,” said Hermione. “Like for inherited diseases. You don’t have it, but you can pass it on.”

Danger nodded. “That seems as good a metaphor as any.”

Draco cracked a small smile. “You can’t threaten to bite us anymore,” he said. “I think we come out ahead. Or we will, when Moony comes home.”

“But when can he come home?” Hermione was staring out the kitchen window. “He can’t just stop being a werewolf. Are we even allowed to see him?”

“No.”

“That’s stupid,” said Harry moodily. “They know when he’ll transform, and they know he’s not dangerous outside that time. Why can’t we see him?”

“I don’t know. I still have a functioning brain, so I can’t get inside the heads of people who write laws.”

The cubs gave small chuckles at this, but their smiles faded quickly. “He can’t go back to Hogwarts either, can he?” asked Draco after a moment. “Not if they want to arrest him just for living in the same house as us. There’s lots more kids than us at school.”

“You’re right. He can’t go back.” She’d have to remind Remus to send a letter of resignation immediately, possibly date it back so it looked as if he’d resigned at the end of the year rather than now. “Looks like you’ll have a new Defense teacher this year after all.”

Harry said something which made Danger slap the back of his head lightly. “Language.”

“Yes, it is,” said Harry. “And so’s this.” This one made Hermione gasp a little. “And this.” Draco was staring in appreciation. “And—”

“We get the point, Harry,” said Danger firmly.

“Do you? Do you really?” Harry stared at her. “I don’t think you do. I’m going upstairs.” He shoved his chair back and headed for the front hall.

“May I go to the Lovegoods’, please?” said Draco quietly.

“Yes, you may.” Danger caught his hand as he passed. “We’ll get through this, fox,” she said. “We’ll be together again.”

Draco smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I know.”

“Do you?” Danger winked. “Do you really?” Softly, she whistled a few bars of *I’ll Be Home for Christmas*. “How does it end?”

Draco hummed it, frowning. Then his face cleared, and more, lit up. "I'll be home for Christmas," he sang.

Hermione joined the song, beaming. "If only in my dreams!"

"That's right." Danger grinned. "We'll get the details worked out later today, but I see no reason we can't be together again tonight."

Draco gave her a quick hug, then went into the music room to use the fireplace. Hermione's smile shrank and disappeared. "I think I know why Harry's upset," she said quietly.

"Anything you can tell me about?"

Hermione nodded. "I think he's afraid he'll have to be the alpha now," she said. "Because Moony's gone."

"Why would he think that?"

"When Draco was first under the curse, I got a look at Harry, and he looked scared to death. Scared for Draco, but scared for himself too. Because he didn't know what to do, and he thought we were going to ask him."

"Neenie, how do you know this?" Danger asked gently. "Not that I don't believe you, but it seems like you're just guessing..."

"He looked relieved when Moony walked in." Hermione balled her hands on the table. "Harry has to be the leader of the Pride," she said. "He has to be the alpha. And he knows that, and he wants to be. But he's afraid to be too. And I can't help him like a real alpha female should. Especially not now that I'm twins with Draco. He'd push me away – not meaning to, not doing it to hurt me, but he would."

"Any ideas?"

"You mean about how to help him?" Hermione shook her head. "No. Not really."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, one, but it's not a real idea. It wouldn't work."

"Tell me anyway?"

Her sister was right, Danger had to admit. The idea wouldn't work. Not practically.

But it was an excellent tension-reliever. They both laughed until they cried at the thought.

And who was to say that it might not happen on its own, in a year or two?

“But that’s the problem,” said Hermione. “In a year or two. Trouble’s not going to wait a year or two. It’s here now.”

“So you and the others will just have to help your alpha make up for what he’s currently missing. Be good friends and good siblings to him, and don’t nitpick and fuss over things that can’t be helped or don’t matter too much. With any luck, we’ll have something figured out and our Pack’s alpha home before Harry has to step into his shoes just yet.” Danger dropped a kiss on Hermione’s head. “Besides, I’m still here, so I’m in charge now. And Sirius and Letha come after me. Harry wouldn’t have to be alpha for quite a bit.”

“But he always is,” said Hermione, getting up. “In his own mind. May I go back to the Burrow, please?”

“Of course.” Danger sat down in her sister’s chair as Hermione went into the music room.

Always a leader in his own mind. Always in charge, on trial, in the spotlight. Always the one people look to, or look at.

My poor Greeneyes. He never asked for this. Which is probably part of what makes him so good at it.

Almost without thinking, Danger transformed into her wolf shape. Remus’ scent exploded into her nose, and she howled softly.

I love you, Remus Lupin, my only love, my mate. Come back to us soon.

xXxXx

Harry sat on his bed, staring out the window, and felt like howling himself.

I just want to go to the Quidditch World Cup and get to know Cho Chang. I’m not ready to be an alpha. Not for real.

But ready or not, here it came.

Harry rubbed his forehead, closing his eyes.

I think I’m going to be having a lot of headaches this year.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 26: Here It Comes (Year 4)

Chapter 26: Here It Comes

All right, I take it back. Being treated like a criminal would be a step up from this.

Remus had been in the same small room at the Ministry, sitting at the same table in the same hard wooden chair, for hours. He was grateful that he hadn't had any more to drink or eat that morning, since that lessened the attendant necessities of life, and he didn't want to risk asking if he could use the facilities.

I don't know what it is they want from me, but they're obviously going all-out to get it. It's been five hours since they brought me here, and they haven't even offered me a drink of water. Just asked lots of questions.

He'd been interrogated by about seven people in all. Three or four had been from Magical Law Enforcement, and had taken his testimony that yes, he'd bitten Lucius Malfoy, yes, he'd known what he was doing thanks to the Wolfsbane Potion, and no, he wasn't sorry about it.

"The man kidnapped my children," he'd told the last questioner, a witch a few years older than himself. "He was going to use them in blood magic rituals before he killed them." The witch had looked ill and excused herself hastily.

I think maybe I got through to her. She may have children of her own.

A clerk had come around from the Werewolf Registry to update Remus' address and personal information. That hadn't been so bad – forms were forms – though he'd had to write "To Be Determined" on the address line, since he could no longer claim the Den as his home.

I don't know what he thought of me, having to stop halfway through filling everything out to keep myself from crying.

His last two visitors had been from Werewolf Support Services, and had provided him with a much-needed dose of humor in his day. One had been a little old wizard determined to tell him that being a werewolf was nothing to be ashamed of, and the other a harried-looking witch whose basic attitude seemed to be that his case would create a lot of work for her, and therefore she didn't like him.

Well, I don't like her either. Nyah. Giving in to a childish urge, Remus stuck his tongue out at the door through which the witch had exited.

All right at home? he sent.

Fine, said Danger brightly. A little too brightly.

What's wrong?

Nothing.

Remus sighed. **We've established that you can't lie mind-to-mind, Danger. What's wrong?**

Let me clarify. Nothing you need to worry about.

Let me clarify further. Nothing I need to worry about, *right now*. When I get out of here, or when I'm sure I'll be alone for a while, whichever comes first – they might well keep me here overnight on assault charges, or whatever a werewolf bite is worth these days – then we can talk about it.

Let me clarify even further. I don't always need you to talk to me about things. Believe it or not, I am an adult, and there are some decisions I can make on my own, and some consequences I can take on my own. And some consequences I *should* take on my own.

Oh, damn. Danger, if this is about my taking the blame for Malfoy –

There, you see? You always think it's all about you. Danger's voice was rising with every sentence. **Well, maybe, just maybe, right now it needs to be about me. And just me. Maybe this is a good thing – split us up for a while, so I can remember that I used to be a person and not just half of a twosome. Maybe I'll get some backbone again, and not be bent over backwards to please you constantly.** The image she shot him left him in no doubt that she meant this several ways. **So why don't you just concentrate on what you're doing and leave me alone.** A mental door slammed.

Danger–!

The image of a palm and five fingers formed in his mind.

Talk to the hand. Wonderful. Remus put his head down on the table, hearing a faint buzzing in his ears. *She's just overwrought about this,* he told himself. *She's just worked up and losing her temper with me because I'm there. She's not rejecting me for myself, she's just angry with the world.*

But it still felt like rejection, and it took a lot of Remus' remaining strength and willpower to lift his head when he heard footsteps approaching the door again.

The wizard who entered was very ordinary looking. Remus might have passed him on the street without giving him a second glance. Hair, face, body and robes were all quite average, so much so that it took Remus a few moments to recognize and be surprised by the immediate dislike swelling within him.

There's nothing wrong with him – in fact, there's quite a lot right. The man was carrying a tray with a full pitcher of water and a plate of sandwiches on it. *Why don't I like him?*

He inhaled through his nose, picking up the wonderful odors of ham and chicken in those sandwiches, and caught something else as well, something that made him exhale quickly lest he start coughing.

That explains a lot.

The wizard set the tray on the table, shut the door behind him, and sat down. “I’m sorry about the wait, Mr. Lupin,” he said. “There was a mix-up between MLE and RCMC. Both of them thought one of the other department’s people was responsible for getting you something to eat. There’s a lavatory right in here if you need to use it.”

“Not right now, thank you.” Remus kept his voice as polite as the other wizard’s. *I don’t think I trust anything you give me. Not when you walk in here stinking of dislike bordering on hatred.*

“Well, have a drink on me, at least.” The wizard chuckled at his own cleverness, picking up the water pitcher and filling the two glasses which sat on the tray beside it. “Here you are.” He handed one across the table to Remus and sipped from the other himself.

I notice you didn’t let me take a glass for myself. Something interesting in here, perhaps? Maybe I’m being paranoid, but better paranoid than caught out...

Remus lifted the glass to his lips and wet them without actually drinking, then casually let it fall below table level. “I don’t think I caught your name,” he said, while mentally heating the water in the glass to near-boiling and immediately cooling it to keep it from steaming too much. There was going to be a wet spot on the underside of the table as it was.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Casewizard Christopher Curcio, Wizarding Family Services. Pleased to meet you.”

You filthy animal, Remus finished the sentence in his own mind. *And I notice you’re not offering to shake my hand.* He brought the glass above the table and took a drink from it. It might be warm, but at least now it was clean. *I hope.* “Likewise.”

“Please, have a sandwich,” Curcio offered, taking one himself. “So, I understand you live with several children, Mr. Lupin.”

Remus took a sandwich from the platter and took a bite. It wasn’t Danger’s cooking, but it was edible. “I did,” he said once he’d swallowed. *There’s no harm in admitting it. Not only is it common knowledge, but the law is very clear – the only way they can prosecute me for it is if they actually find me in the house. Which they didn’t.*

“And you actually signed a magically binding adoption contract for one of them?” Curcio had a small smile on his face.

“What would give you that idea?” Remus took another bite.

“The records of Sirius Black’s trial.” Curcio drew two or three parchment scrolls from his pocket

and unrolled one of them, finding the passage he wanted. “Master Draco Black specifically said that his adoption contract had been signed by all four of his guardians, which would seem to include you.”

Remus matched Curcio’s smile. “Draco was misinformed. He cares about me a great deal, and I about him, so naturally he assumed that I had signed his contract along with my wife and my friends. I would have liked to sign it, but I know that such an action would invalidate the entire contract in the eyes of the law, and I would never endanger my family that way.”

“So instead you choose to endanger them by living in the same house with them.”

Remus allowed his smile to grow a little. Open war was declared. “I don’t consider living in the same house with them endangering them. I know my transformation nights beforehand – it’s not as if they’re going to sneak up on me – and I have a safe room in the basement where I stay while I’m transformed. My wife and the Blacks often join me there in their Animagus forms. They could even come as humans if they wished, since Aletha Freeman-Black makes the Wolfsbane Potion for me to take every month. It keeps me sane through the transformation, a wolf with a human mind, if you will.”

“I know what the Wolfsbane Potion does,” Curcio snapped. “Does this woman know how to make it properly?”

“It certainly seems to work well enough.” Remus took another bite of his sandwich. “Letha’s a very talented potion maker,” he said when his mouth was clear again. “She’s been in contact with Severus Snape at Hogwarts to make sure she was doing everything right.”

Curcio’s scent flared in surprise for an instant at the mention of Snape’s name. “Animagus forms, you mentioned,” he said, keeping the surprise from his face admirably. “What forms are these?”

“Aletha can become a winged horse, Sirius a large dog, and my wife a wolf. Their presence calms me. As well, any one of them is a match for me, and two could overpower me easily.” Remus set his food aside. “I love my children, Casewizard. I would never deliberately put them in harm’s way.”

“You love your children.” The skepticism in the tone was clear. “What about other people’s children? A school full of children? You had no qualms about taking a teaching position at Hogwarts?”

“Headmaster Dumbledore was quite aware of my condition when he hired me. We arranged for me to receive the Wolfsbane every month, the doors and walls of my office were strengthened, and my wife accompanied me to Hogwarts.” Remus was sure Dumbledore would cover this one for him. “It’s not illegal for me to work, is it?”

“Maybe it should be.” All trace of Curcio’s original friendly manner was gone. “Though I’m sure you brought a unique perspective to the position. A Dark creature teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“Under our present legal system, werewolves are considered human,” said Remus coolly. “There are restrictions placed on them, but they are allowed to own and use wands, obtain jobs and housing, buy what they wish if they have the money for it, even get married.”

“Then perhaps our present legal system is flawed.” Curcio’s smile was distinctly nasty. “But laws can be changed.”

Remus locked eyes with the other wizard and simply stared. *Say whatever you like. I will not play your game. I am the alpha of the Pack, the final authority among my own. Only one man can command my obedience, and you are not he.*

Curcio looked away first. “You are prohibited from having any contact with Harry Potter, Draco and Meghan Black, or Hermione Granger-Lupin.” He sounded disgusted by the name. “No letters, no firecalls, and stay at least one hundred yards away from them at all times. You may also be arrested and charged if you are seen making advances to other minor children.”

“Meaning what? Speaking to them?”

“Among other things.”

“So it’s now a crime for me to talk to anyone under the age of seventeen. Should I carry around a little placard saying ‘If you’re underage, don’t talk to me’?”

Curcio’s lip curled. “Perhaps. Do not leave this room. A law enforcement officer will come to deal with you should you attempt it.” A wave of his wand vanished the sandwiches, including the one Remus had been eating. “Have a pleasant day.” He rose and left.

“Up yours,” Remus muttered once the door was shut, leaning forward to rest his chin in his hands. “And the broom you rode in on, too.”

Someone discreetly cleared her mental throat.

What? Remus made no attempt to moderate his tone. He was angry, and he didn’t care who knew it. **If you’re going to tell me I’m a selfish bastard, don’t bother. I’ve just met someone who does it very well indeed, and I doubt you could do it better, so you’d bore me, and I’m quite bored enough already.**

I was actually going to tell you I was sorry. But if you want me to leave you alone, I will.

Fine. You do that.

Just remember, if you want me, I’m here.

I’ll remember. In case I want to put myself out of my misery by being nagged to death.

Remus slammed the intangible door between them as hard as Danger had earlier.

Way to go, Lupin, said a heavily sarcastic voice in his head. *You know, alienating your friends*

might not be the best of moves. You don't have too many of them.

Oh, shut up. Remus put his head down on the table. And he took the food, too. I'm hungry, damn it. I haven't eaten since breakfast...

Suddenly he felt like a fool. And that's why I'm so edgy. Or part of it. I'm sure Mr. Casewizard Curcio and his stupid prejudices have something to do with it, but I'm never at my best when I'm hungry. I get angry more easily, and for less reason. And right now, I'm also lonely and scared, because I have no idea what's going to happen to me, only that I'm not allowed to go home or see my cubs. All in all, I have plenty of reasons to be angry, but none of them are Danger's fault...

Except that I was the one who bit Malfoy. But neither of us knew this would happen.

Remus didn't bother hiding his relief. **You don't hate me.**

No. Not even mad. Or if I am, it's not really important right now. This is one of those things that makes picking at each other seem kind of stupid – you know, united we stand, divided we fall.

And I'm not interested in falling. I've just seen what's waiting down there. Remus shivered a little. **Have a look.** He felt Danger slide into his memories of the past few minutes with Curcio. **Does he hate all werewolves, or just me?**

Both, I think. But you're there, and not just surviving in wizarding society but succeeding, so you make a good target of opportunity. She sighed heavily. **There will probably be more like him. Just don't forget who loves you and trusts you.**

Remus smiled. **I won't. How is everyone there?**

The cubs are less than thrilled with the news. Meghan cried when she heard, and Harry holed up in the boys' bedroom for about an hour until Ron and Draco dragged him out and hauled him off to the orchard to play Quidditch. They all send their love, by the way.

And I send mine. Remus chuckled. **“No letters, no firecalls...” Pompous arsehole.**

And it gets better. They can't control what we do in our dreams, now can they?

Oh-ho... practice for a certain Fox and Kitten, I see.

For some of the night. Danger's presence warmed slightly, as if she had moved closer to him. **Then we can send them off to play and have a dreamscape all to ourselves.**

The thought sent small chills of pleasure down Remus' spine. **How would I get through this without you?**

Well, since without me you wouldn't be in this situation...

Ah, ah, ah. If you won't let me, I won't let you. As you said, neither of us had any idea this would happen. If we had, we'd never have done it. But it's happened, and we'll just have to make the best of it. Remus sat up straight at the sound of footsteps approaching. **Hold on a second.**

The door opened again. "Remus Lupin?" said the wizard it framed.

"Yes." Remus stood up and crossed to the door to take the scroll the wizard was offering him.

"This is a summons to a hearing on the tenth of July," the wizard said in a bored tone, "to answer the charge of assault on one Lucius Malfoy. More details are included in writing. I understand you received a visit from Casewizard Curcio of Wizarding Family Services, is this correct?"

"Yes, it is."

"Do you understand that should you fail to honor the strictures placed on you regarding the children sharing your former place of residence, you will be arrested for endangering minors?"

"I understand."

"Very well. You're free to go, you can pick up your wand at the front desk."

"Thank you," said Remus coldly. **Children sharing my former place of residence, he fumed silently. Could they make it any clearer they don't think I'm worthy to have custody of a crup, let alone a child?**

The opinions of the stupid and the prejudiced need not matter to the intelligent.

Oh, yes, they do. If the stupid and the prejudiced are the ones writing the laws. Remus signed a slip of parchment, and the witch behind the desk handed him his wand. **Which they are.**

But we have ways around that. Like what we'll do tonight. And you can always write us letters, and we can read them aloud. We'll get through this.

I know. Remus walked into the lift and pressed the button for the Atrium. **Have I mentioned lately I love you?**

I think you might have. But it's always nice to hear again.

Remus let his eyes drift mostly shut, seeing through Danger's instead, as she moved around the Den picking up stray items, tidying and cleaning, humming to herself, a pleasant sound, though it kept being intruded upon by the same buzzing he'd heard in the room. He shook his head. *I need a meal, and then sleep. But I need to get to Gringotts first. I'll have to pay for that meal.*

He stepped off the lift in the Atrium and headed for a Floo fireplace. A tiny popping sound made him look around, but no one seemed to have Apparated near him.

Great, now I'm hallucinating too.

He tossed a pinch of glittering powder into the flames. "The Leaky Cauldron," he said, and let them carry him away. For a crazy instant, he wondered if it would be possible for him to travel the Network without Floo powder, because of his power with fire...

No. Not wise. Maybe for a blood Heir of Gryffindor, but I was only gifted this. I shouldn't push it too far.

He stepped from the Leaky Cauldron's fireplace and wondered for a moment if he had. An expanse of bright green was still in front of his eyes...

But no, Floo flames were never topped with bouffant blonde hair. Nor did they have faces with jeweled spectacles and very toothy smiles. "Mr. Lupin?"

Remus held hard to his poise. "Yes, that's my name."

"I'm Rita Skeeter. Special Reporter for the *Daily Prophet* ." She held out a hand, which Remus shook, being careful of the talonlike nails. "I was hoping you could spare a minute or two – this shouldn't take long, and I'm sure you want your side of the story told..." She steered him to a table before he could collect his thoughts, and had a neon-green quill balancing on a scroll the instant he sat down. "So why exactly have you left your happy home?"

I really don't want to do this right now. But he had no cause to be rude to the woman, other than the inflammatory things she had written about Sirius in the past – she'd believed it at the time, everyone had, so he really had no reason to ignore her. *And she might turn out to be helpful.* "The Ministry seems to feel that my remaining there would be dangerous to my family."

"Your family. And that includes young Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, I understand?" The capitals were audible.

"Yes, he lives there." Remus wasn't quite comfortable with the way the quill was moving. It seemed to be taking down far more than Sirius' DictaQuill did under similar circumstances. "If I may ask, what is that?"

"A Quick-Quotes Quill, very useful in my line of work. You also take care of Draco Malfoy..."

"Draco Black, please."

"Black, of course. Tell me, Remus – I may call you Remus? – with Harry Potter being the godson of Sirius Black, do you feel any special connection between yourself and Draco? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"I care for both boys very much," Remus said carefully. The quill was definitely moving too fast...

"And do you ever find yourself saddened that Draco has your friend's name and not your own? Does that ever cause jealousy between you?"

“Jealousy?” Remus laughed. “No. Why should it?”

Rita shook her head. “Family strife is a terrible thing,” she opined. “And a family like yours, built on the ashes of the war, strengthened in the fires of your years of hiding – how awful that you should be losing one another now...”

“No one’s lost anything yet, Ms. Skeeter,” said Remus firmly. “Pardon me.” He reached over and caught the quill between thumb and forefinger, lifting it away from the parchment, and turned it around so that he could read it, ignoring Rita’s protests.

Her last statement had been recorded almost verbatim. But above it, under the question about jealousy – Remus felt his eyebrows going up.

Well, of course I’m jealous. Why should Sirius have both boys and I have neither of them?

“Tell me, how much does one of these cost?” he asked, swinging the Quick-Quotes Quill back and forth.

“Well... they’re specialty items, hard to come by...”

“How much?” Remus put a bit of alpha authority into his voice.

“Four Sickles, eleven Knuts.”

Remus tossed the Quill to the table, drew his wand for window dressing, and set it on fire. A second flick of the wrist ignited the section of the scroll that had been written on. He put his wand away, found five Sickles in his pocket, and dropped them in front of Rita. “Keep the change,” he said, and walked out the back door.

He thought he heard her come after him, but when he turned around, no one was there. He shrugged and opened the archway to Diagon Alley, ignoring a faint, almost indignant buzzing in his ears.

How can buzzing be indignant anyway?

xXxXx

“I have a question,” Remus told the goblin at the counter. “How much of what’s in my vault right now was there this time last year?”

The goblin pulled out a ledger. “Two hundred thirty-four Galleons, sixteen Sickles, five Knuts,” he said after a few moments. “That was before the contents of the Malfoy vault were added, of course.”

“Of course.” Two hundred thirty Galleons was hardly a fortune, but it should be enough to see him through for a while. “Thank you. Now I need to make that withdrawal, please.”

“Right away.”

It's not much, but it's mine, earned honestly. Mine and Danger's. He frowned. That was a complication he hadn't foreseen. *I can't spend her money...*

He paused, but there was no comment in the back of his mind. Danger must be busy with something else.

I'll only take fifty to start with, and work out what's her share and mine later. He sighed, climbing into the rickety cart. The money in his vault was the product of his work, and Danger's, during their years in hiding. They'd never worked long hours, nor done very hard jobs, since they hadn't been relying on their salaries to feed and clothe themselves – Sirius' inherited gold had done that marvelously.

But I won't take charity. It was all right while I lived with the Pack. I did my share then, pulled my weight. I won't spend other people's money while I'm not doing anything for them.

It hurt to put his time with the Pack in the past tense. He still hadn't quite got his mind around it. Part of him still expected to shout “The Marauders' Den!” to the Floo at the Leaky Cauldron, to step out of the fireplace in the music room, to see Aletha's face brighten as she turned away from the piano or Draco's as he put his flute aside, to hear Hermione and Meghan come running for their hugs and Danger for her kiss and Sirius and Harry to say hello and try to play a trick on him...

Damn wind, making my eyes water.

xXxXx

Danger stood at the stove, tapping a finger thoughtfully on a frying pan. The shared dream the night before had been a great success. Draco and Harry had chained up before they went to bed, as had Hermione and Meghan, and she herself had shared with Sirius and Aletha, sleeping on the floor in their room to make that possible.

I won't use our bed until Remus comes home, she'd promised herself. It's our bed together, not mine alone. Aletha had promised to help her get something fixed up for herself today...

Sirius, who was reading the *Daily Prophet*, swore loudly and comprehensively. Danger jerked around, Hermione squeaked and Meghan giggled, while Harry and Draco looked impressed and Aletha just glared.

“Here,” Sirius said bluntly, thrusting the newspaper at his wife. “You tell me.”

Aletha opened the paper, took in the headline, and cursed as well, an oath even worse than Sirius'. “I thought Gringotts records were private,” she said. “Private, as in no...” Several unrepeatable adjectives. “...reporters could get at them.”

“What is it?” Danger asked.

Aletha handed her the newspaper. Danger looked at it and was tempted to swear herself.

HOGWARTS PROFESSOR DARK IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE!

Remus Lupin, werewolf, also placed “son’s” money in own vault

Ministry acts immediately for safety of Lupin’s “children”

Danger rubbed her shoulder, which ached after a night of sleeping on the floor. “I think what I like best is the sneer quotes around ‘son’ and ‘children,’” she said. “Here, Sirius, read it to them?” She tossed the paper back to him. “Before they jump on me and tear it out of my hands?” The cubs did look very eager to hear what the newspaper had to say.

Danger had to work hard on not burning the various parts of breakfast as Sirius read. The article was filled with misinterpretations, half-truths, and downright lies, all designed to paint Remus as a calculating con man who had stolen Draco’s money and lied his way into the teaching post at Hogwarts. “Who wrote this piece of shite?” she asked halfway through.

“Rita Skeeter, who else?”

“Just checking.” *If I ever get my paws on her...*

“Dibs,” said Draco and Harry at the same time.

“Dibs on what?” said Aletha.

“Beating up Rita Skeeter,” said Harry.

“No,” said Aletha firmly.

“Why not? She’s a liar.”

“If we beat up all the liars in the world, there’d be no one left without bruises. Including the person who put salt on my toothbrush not three days ago and told me to my face that he hadn’t been *near* my bathroom.”

“That wasn’t a lie! I wasn’t near it, I was in it!”

“You had to be near it to be in it. Don’t split hairs. Go on, Sirius.”

The rest of the article was very much like the beginning, except that Rita Skeeter also claimed Remus had menaced her when she asked for an interview and caused her to flee in terror from his horrible rage, in which he had magically destroyed all the belongings she had with her. “Certainly, with all his stolen wealth, he can make me reparations,” Sirius read aloud, in tones of disbelieving revulsion. “In fact, I demand it. And then he should return what remains of his ‘son’s’ inheritance to the boy and remove himself to that obscurity which he so richly deserves.”

“Is her picture in there?” asked Hermione, putting down her glass.

“Who, Skeeter’s? Yeah, it’s here. Right at the top of the column.” Sirius scowled. “Ugly old biddy. Looks like a man in drag. Why?”

“May I see it, please?”

Sirius turned the newspaper around. Hermione took another mouthful of her drink, regarded the picture for a moment, then spat. The photographic Rita shrieked silently as orange juice drenched her. The other cubs applauded.

“So what did he really do?” Aletha asked Danger.

“She was trying to interview him, and she had an automatic quill that was misquoting him left and right. He asked her how much it cost, handed over that much and a bit more, burned up the quill and the parchment, and walked out. It was trying to claim he was jealous of you,” she told Sirius. “Because Harry’s your godson and Draco’s got your name.”

“Oh, please,” said Meghan. “Like that makes such a big difference.”

“To some people, it does,” said Draco. “Names are important.”

“Yes, they are, and your name says you belong here,” said Sirius firmly. “End of story.”

An owl rapped on the windowsill. Hermione got up to bring it in. “It’s something official,” she said, handing it to Aletha. “From the Ministry.”

Aletha slit the envelope and pulled out the parchment. Her face became very still as she read. Once she reached the end, she started again. Everyone had stopped what they were doing to watch her.

“I do not believe this,” Aletha said finally, tossing parchment and envelope to the table. “I don’t bloody believe this!” She shoved her chair back and stalked around the table and out of the room. Seconds later, there was a crash.

Sirius picked up the parchment gingerly. “Here, let me,” said Danger, bringing the frying pan to the table and setting it on the potholder in the middle. Sirius surrendered the parchment gladly.

Danger started to read and felt her knees wobble. She sat down quickly on Aletha’s abandoned chair.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Black and Mrs. Granger-Lupin:

An irregularity has been brought to our attention concerning the adoption contract you signed on 26 July, 1984, with one Narcissa Black Malfoy, regarding her son Draco Regulus, now known as Draco Regulus Black. A hearing has been scheduled for tomorrow morning at 9 AM in the WFS offices on Level Two at the Ministry of Magic. One of you is requested to attend, along with the

minor child Draco, and bearing the aforementioned contract. If you do not attend this hearing, your custody of the minor child may be temporarily revoked and the minor child placed in foster care.

Thank you for your time,

The Office of Wizarding Family Services

“I can’t go,” said Aletha from the door into the music room. “I have a test.”

“Me or him, then,” said Danger, glancing at Sirius.

“You or me what?” asked Sirius.

Danger read the note aloud. There was a brief silence.

“This is stupid,” said Hermione, slamming her glass down on the table. “This is really stupid. What are they trying to do, take us all away from each other?”

“I don’t know,” said Danger, closing her eyes. Remus was still asleep, and she didn’t want to wake him, but she wanted him near, so badly. “I don’t know. I should go, Sirius, you have work...”

“I can get some time off,” said Sirius, and Danger felt his hand on her back, then two hands, rubbing her shoulders. She hummed in pleasure and leaned into the massage. “You’re not feeling your best. You were limping on the stairs this morning.”

“I’m fine. Just sore from sleeping on the floor is all.”

“Could they actually put me in foster care?” asked Draco apprehensively.

“I’m sure they could,” said Aletha. “But they won’t. The contract is perfectly in order...” Now, everyone supplied mentally. “...so unless you have something to complain about, everything should be just fine.”

“Oh, I have lots of things to complain about,” said Draco. “I just never tell you any of them.”

“I get it,” said Harry. “You’re a stupid horklump and you *want* to go into foster care.”

“No!”

“Then cut out the jokes. People like that have no sense of humor.” Harry pointed at the parchment. “You can tell by the way they write.”

“It’s just bureau-speak,” said Danger. “But Harry’s right, Draco. Be polite and respectful tomorrow, and you have nothing to worry about.”

xXxXx

Around four in the afternoon, Danger called Harry out of the music room, where the Pride had been playing games all day. “You’ve been watching me cook for a while,” she said. “Helping me, too. Think you’re ready to go solo?”

“You mean make a meal on my own?”

“I’ll be there to give you advice, but yes.”

Harry glanced at Danger’s hands. “What’s wrong with your fingers?”

“Nothing,” said Danger, putting her hands in her pockets. “What would you like to make?”

Harry frowned. He’d been almost sure he’d seen swelling around Danger’s knuckles. But it might have been a trick of the light. “I think pasta,” he said. “Pasta with meat sauce. And a salad. Do we have any bread?”

“Yes, there’s a new loaf in the breadbox. Now, backtrack all that to where it starts. Pasta with meat sauce means...”

“I have to start boiling water,” said Harry, already on his way into the kitchen. “And get the meat sauce out of the freezer and start melting it.”

“Very good. And the salad...”

“See what we have in the refrigerator, and send Meghan outside to pick from the garden to add to it.” Harry pulled out a large saucepan for the meat sauce and a big two-handled pot for the pasta, set the pan on the stove, and stuck the pot in the sink. A flick of his hand turned the water on, and he headed for the refrigerator. A head of lettuce sat in the crisper, along with several carrots and a cucumber. He pulled them out and went back to the sink with them, setting them on the counter and turning the water off just as it came to the rivets in the pot.

“Very neatly done,” said Danger from her place at the table. “Keep going.”

Harry peeled and chopped and salted and seasoned, trying to keep everything in his mind at once. He remembered just in time to turn the oven on to heat up the bread, and swore when he forgot to stir the sauce and it stuck to the bottom of the pan and burned. “Happens to everyone, Greeneyes,” said Danger, unsticking it with her wand and removing the burned parts. “Either watch it better or get someone in here to help you.”

“Am I allowed to get someone to help me?”

“Of course. If they want to eat it, they should help make it.”

Harry grinned. “Watch it for a minute?”

“Gladly.” Danger chuckled.

Harry strode into the music room. “You!” he boomed out in a mock-authoritarian voice, pointing at Draco. “Come set the table! You!” Hermione. “Come stir the sauce! And you!” Meghan. “Go pick me some fresh vegetables for the salad!”

“And what should we do, oh grand exalted master?” said Ron, bowing low and pulling Ginny down with him.

“Clean this up and go home,” said Harry in his normal voice. “Your mum’ll probably be calling any minute anyway – where’s Neville?”

“His mum called a minute or two ago,” said Meghan. “So you’re right. Bye, Ron, bye, Ginny, bye, Luna.”

A general chorus of goodbyes reigned for a few minutes as people found possessions. Harry returned to the kitchen, finding Hermione already stirring the sauce gingerly. “It doesn’t bite,” he said.

“No, but it spits.” Hermione was holding the spoon high up on the end. “When it bubbles, bits fly up. I could get burned.”

“Then you suck it off and run it under cold water,” said Harry. “It’s part of being a cook.”

“That’s why I’m not a cook.” But Hermione lowered her grip on the spoon. “Is this right?” she asked Danger, who stood behind her.

“Better. Back and forth across the whole bottom, scraping as you go, so it doesn’t stick. It’s when it sticks that it burns.” Danger put her hand over Hermione’s and guided her stirring. “See? Like this, back and forth, back and forth, make sure you cover everywhere...”

Harry sneaked a look out the side of his eyes. Danger’s knuckles *were* swollen. Not much, but it was there.

I guess she doesn’t want to have to hold things right now. Maybe it’s the weather. He looked out the window at the lowering clouds, which had been threatening rain all day without ever delivering. *I’ll tell Letha about it later. And do more of the cooking, until she gets better.*

Meghan came in from the music room, carrying an armload of fresh vegetables. “Draco and Luna are still in there,” she said.

“Nobody likes a tattletale, Pearl,” said Danger, leaving Hermione in charge of the sauce. “Draco’s job can wait.”

“Wasn’t tattling,” said Meghan sullenly. “I was just saying.”

“Just saying sounded a lot like tattling to me,” said Hermione snidely.

“Stop,” said Harry, forestalling Meghan’s comeback. “Just stop. We don’t need to fight.”

The girls glared at each other, but got back to their jobs, Hermione stirring the sauce, Meghan washing the vegetables. Danger was sitting slumped in her chair, looking tired. There was still no sign of Draco.

Harry sighed to himself, opening the oven to check on the bread. *How long can I hold things together?*

xXxXx

“I’m worried,” said Draco, sitting on the couch beside Luna.

“If you’re scared, say scared,” said Luna. “Your voice says scared.”

“All right, I’m scared. I don’t know what irregularity they think they found. That magic Danger did was supposed to be undetectable, but what if it’s not? What if they find out Moony signed the contract after all, and decide I can’t stay with the Pack anymore?”

“Then you’ll go to a foster family for a little while. But you’ll be back at Hogwarts with us in two months anyway. You can stay over the holidays – we’ll stay with you – and that gives the Pack a year to get your custody again. I’m sure they can do it. I mean, you’ve been with them nearly ten years, and all that’s happened is that you’ve been turned into a fox for a little while, had a plant break your ribs, and nearly died from a curse. Oh, and had blood magic done on you, but that wasn’t really their fault.”

Draco burst out laughing, making Meghan, who was passing through with an armload of vegetables from the garden, look at him oddly. “I wish you could come to the hearing,” he said to Luna when he’d caught his breath. “You’d convince them right away.”

“I’ve been to one. When Mum died, they assigned somebody to watch me and Dad, and then after three months we had to go to a hearing. It was very boring. Just a lot of people talking and talking. Finally they said it was all right for me to go home, and that was all.”

Draco laid a hand on Luna’s shoulder. Luna turned her head to look at it.

“I’m hoping your luck will rub off on me,” Draco said, taking his hand away quickly. “So that’s how my hearing will go. A lot of talking, and nothing worse.”

“Don’t be silly. Touching shoulders isn’t how you transfer luck.”

“Well, how do you transfer luck, then?”

“I’ll show you.” Luna stood up and made Draco do the same. She stood directly in front of him, took his arms and put them around her shoulders, and put her own arms around his neck. Then she tilted her head back and pulled his face down to hers.

“There,” she said when they broke apart. “That’s how you transfer luck.”

“I get it.” Draco looked down at Luna. “I think I’m going to need a lot of luck for tomorrow.”

xXxXx

“So what have you been doing?” asked Danger when Draco meandered into the kitchen and started taking cutlery out of the drawer.

“Transferring luck.”

“What?”

“Luna had to go to a custody hearing when her mum died, and hers came out all right. So she was transferring some of her luck to me, for tomorrow.”

“I never knew luck was another word for spit,” said Hermione.

Meghan dropped a cherry tomato down the drain. Harry almost knocked over the pasta pot.

“Really, Hermione,” said Danger. “I wanted to say that.”

Draco’s face was bright pink.

xXxXx

Sirius arrived home in a marginally good mood. He’d been able to get a couple of hours off the next morning with no trouble, and he was now quite sure that no one would realize he’d been gone for that half-hour or so it had taken him to tip off Remus and get him out of the house. Aletha, too, was smiling when she got in, and a tired but triumphant Harry presented the dinner he’d made himself, and suddenly life didn’t seem so bad.

Danger, her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright, spent the meal telling everyone about Remus’ day. He’d found a place to live, a small flat in Muggle London, on the third floor of a somewhat dilapidated building, but it would do. The address was posted on the refrigerator. Sirius made a mental note to drop by and make sure his friend was handling himself all right.

It’s been a long time since he was out of Den. And he’s never been a very good cook.

Draco and Luna “transferring luck” came up as well, making Draco blush and everyone else laugh, and Aletha related a story about a teacher who couldn’t get her quill loaded. She’d dip it in the inkwell, and it would come up empty. Finally, she figured out that someone had slipped her a trick quill, made from an Augurey feather, which repelled any liquid that tried to get near it.

Altogether, it was almost a normal night at the Marauders’ Den, except for the one chair empty at the table, and the one voice missing from the conversation. And late that night, when he got up to get a drink of water, Sirius heard crying coming from down the hall, and it didn’t sound like any of the cubs.

xXxXx

Harry was up early the next morning, boiling water and starting toast. People trailed down to the kitchen little by little, snagging what they wanted to start. Sirius munched on his corn flakes, and sprinkled sugar on top when Aletha wasn't looking. "Eat well," he advised Draco. "These things sometimes run overtime."

"Danger, what's that on your face?" asked Aletha as Harry brought a bowl of eggs to the table.

"What? Oh, that." Danger scratched at her cheek. "I think I just slept funny, either that or I'm having a reaction to something. Did you switch detergents when you washed the sheets the other day?"

"No, I'm still using the same kind we always do. Maybe it's something you ate."

Danger shrugged. "It's not a big deal. Probably go away in a few days. Pass the bacon, please."

Sirius looked down the table. Danger's cheeks were both covered with a delicate-looking red rash. He frowned. *Not that I want to bring this up, but that looks like something you could get if you were crying and rubbing your face a lot...*

So, like she said, not a big deal. He checked his watch. 8:30. *About time to go.*

"Ready, fox?" he asked.

"Almost." Draco shoveled another bite of eggs into his mouth. "Now I am," he said around it.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Good luck," she said.

"Break a leg," said Aletha.

"What kind of wish is that?" asked Sirius.

"Stage wish," said Draco. "The luck spirits are always listening, and it's bad luck to say good luck. So you wish someone symbolic bad luck, and they give you good luck."

"Break both legs, then," said Harry, sitting down to his own breakfast.

"Will do." Draco headed for the music room.

"Take care," said Aletha, tilting her head back to kiss Sirius goodbye.

"You too. Break a leg on that test."

"Thank you."

xXxXx

Aletha had gone off to classes, her wonderful sister had volunteered to do the dishes, and Harry was at the Burrow, so she could lie down on the couch and have a rest...

“Danger?”

Trying not to groan, Danger opened her eyes and sat up. “Yes, Pearl?”

“Are your hands all right?”

Danger smiled a little, taking her hands out of her pockets. “I don’t know, really. They’ve never done this before.” All the joints of her knuckles were swollen, and it hurt to bend them. She thought Harry suspected, and had thanked him gratefully for making breakfast for everyone.

Meghan took one of Danger’s hands in her own and massaged the knuckles. The swelling receded slightly, and the pain went away. Danger smiled. “That feels good. Don’t overdo, though.”

“I won’t.”

Meghan moved along her Pack-mother’s hands systematically, making sure to get every joint of every finger. When she was done, Danger shook her hands out and flexed the fingers. “Meghan, you’re marvelous. Thank you, love.” She kissed the little girl’s head. “Madam Pomfrey will be sorry to lose you to regular schooling.”

“I’ll still be in the hospital wing. Free times and weekends, and whenever I get my homework done early. Maybe I can even use some work there for class projects.”

“I bet you could. Go on, now, I think they were going to play the strategy game today at the Burrow, and you don’t want to miss that. I’ll go finish the dishes and send Hermione along.”

Meghan grinned and ran to the fireplace as Danger went into the kitchen.

xXxXx

Sirius pulled Draco aside in the Atrium. “Listen up, Draco,” he said sternly. “This is no time for games. You say what you’re supposed to, or you might not come home tonight, understand?”

“I understand.” Draco was leaning against the wall, and his voice sounded sullen.

“I don’t think you do.” Sirius shook the boy lightly by the shoulder, then looked him straight in the eye. “I said, do you understand, warrior?”

Draco straightened up. “Yes, sir,” he said, meeting Sirius’ eyes.

Sirius smiled. “That’s better. Come on, let’s dazzle ‘em.”

For a moment, as he stood in line for the lift, Sirius thought he heard a buzzing sound.

xXxXx

Remus knew he should get up. But the bed felt so good, and there wasn't anyone else here to nag him or push him to do anything...

But that also means no one else here to do anything for you. You want food, you have to make it. You want clean clothes, you have to wash them. And you want money, beyond what you've saved, you have to go and get a job.

It wasn't a bad idea, but later. Remus snuggled down into the sheets again, wishing Danger was beside him, but being perfectly willing to stay there even though she wasn't...

Suddenly he sat up. His pendants were hot.

He flipped through them quickly, then frowned. Sirius *and* Draco? **What's going on?**

I don't know. Sirius was taking Draco to that custody hearing... He heard Danger swear aloud. **Something's gone wrong, it must have, that's the only reason – hold on, there's the Floo.**

Remus lay down again quickly, closing his eyes and abandoning his own body in favor of Danger's. "What happened?" she demanded of Sirius, who was sitting in a chair in the music room looking stunned.

"I didn't mean it like that," said Sirius plaintively, looking up at Danger. "I was just telling him not to fool around. It wasn't a threat."

"What *happened?*" Danger repeated a little louder.

"When we were on our way in, I told Draco not to play games, or he might not come home tonight. I just meant he might have to go somewhere else – I wasn't threatening him, not like that! And I didn't shake him hard, just to get his attention!"

"What does that have to do with anything? Where is he?"

"Someone must have heard me and seen me, and thought I actually meant it, and told the committee – I no sooner got in there than they were accusing me of threatening Draco and abusing him, I couldn't get a word in edgewise, and they took him off to some other part of the offices and wouldn't let me see him again, they said they'd send him to a volunteer foster home and I'm supposed to pack a bag for him and take it back there..."

"You bloody idiot," Remus snapped through Danger's mouth, forgetting he wasn't there in person. "Can't you do anything right?"

Sirius stared at him/her/them in shock. Danger seemed rather shocked herself. **Whatever happened to asking permission?**

Remus yanked himself back to his own body and shut down the connection without answering.

It's starting. They're pulling apart the Pack. One by one, they're going to come for us and take us away from each other, or make us not want to be with each other anymore...

He pulled the sheet over his head and closed his eyes, feeling tiredness overtaking him again.

Sleeping a little later won't hurt. And maybe I'll ache less when I'm more rested.

xXxXx

Draco was mad.

Not mad at Padfoot, not anymore, at least. He had been, for the first few minutes, but he knew that sometimes, when the Ministry started working, there wasn't much one person could do about it. And he knew Padfoot hadn't meant what he'd said and done in the Atrium the way the casewizards seemed to think he had. He'd tried telling them that, but they just shook their heads at each other and used long words.

He wished Hermione was there.

“Ah, Draco, there you are,” said one of the casewizards in a hearty voice.

Yes, here I am. Where I've been for the last hour.

Draco stood up quickly, though, when he saw what the wizard was carrying. “Yes, this is yours,” said the man, handing the duffel bag to him. “We've searched it thoroughly to make sure those people didn't leave anything in there you wouldn't want.”

To make sure they didn't give me anything you don't want me to have, Draco translated, slinging the bag over his shoulder. It didn't matter anyway. His bag, like all the Pack's luggage, had a surprise or two built into it.

“Now, I'll be taking you to your foster home. I'm sure you'll like it. The family has a boy just your age – you're in the same year at Hogwarts, I think – and it's a lovely house in the country with plenty of room...”

xXxXx

Remus had just got out of the shower when he heard someone knock on his door. Wrapping a towel around himself, he limped through the flat and opened the front door.

Sirius stood there, looking very nervous.

“Come in,” said Remus flatly, stepping back.

Sirius stepped over the threshold. “I'll... let you get dressed...”

“No, just say it.”

“Say what?”

“Whatever you came here to tell me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Spit it out, Sirius.”

“Remus, I’m sorry. I don’t know how it happened, really I don’t...”

“I *said* spit it out.”

“Draco’s been sent to the Notts.”

Silence ruled the room for three seconds. Then Remus took two steps forward and punched Sirius as hard as he could in the left eye. Sirius staggered backwards and hit the wall with a thud.

“Get out,” said Remus, advancing on him. “Before I give Letha more work to do. Out.”

Sirius fled. Remus slammed the door behind him, then dropped to one knee, shivering with more than cold.

My Draco. Living in a house with a Death Eater. I’m dangerous, I’m not allowed anywhere near him, but Patroclus effing Nott is just fine...

He wiped his eyes roughly with his bath towel.

xXxXx

Draco sat beside the bed in the guest room he’d been assigned, the apparently empty duffel bag in his lap. He pulled his wand out of his pocket and touched it to one of the short sides inside the bag. “*Quo vadis?*” he said quietly, and grinned as the side under his wand suddenly developed a large lump. Quickly, he unzipped the hidden compartment and plunged his hand in.

The first thing he felt crackled. He pulled out a letter, addressed in Hermione’s handwriting, and ripped it open eagerly.

Dear Draco,

We’re putting this in the hidden pocket because we don’t want those people to see it. We all love you and hope you’ll be well, wherever they put you. When we find out, I’ll find some way to come and visit. Meow! ;-)

Harry’s handwriting took over. *This sucks big-time, fox. Sorry about it. Maybe they’ll still let you come to the Quidditch Cup with us – we’ll be with the Weasleys, not the Pack-parents, so that shouldn’t be a problem.*

We'll write you every couple of days, Meghan wanted him to know. Watch for Hedwig and Maya and Morpheus.

Draco, I am so sorry about this, wrote Padfoot. I am going to find out who told them what I said in the Atrium, and I'm going to kick that person's arse.

And now you see another reason this has to be in the hidden pocket, said Letha's writing. We'll get this sorted out as quickly as we can, Draco, and get you home soon. Don't forget to brush your teeth.

Moony sends his love with mine, Danger's handwriting picked up. I know we said you were big enough to take care of yourself, but we didn't think it would be tested again this soon. We do trust you, though. Just don't blow anything up, please, unless you have a really good reason.

I'm sending you something I think you need more than I do right now, wrote Harry again. But remember, it's just a loan, and if you mess it up I'll take it out of your hide. Or maybe Neville's hide – that would work better...

Harry! Draco grinned. Meghan could even screech on parchment.

Everybody else sends their best too, scribbled Hermione quickly. Especially Luna. She says the luck you got from her will work some other way now, maybe by making your time away from home easier. I hope it will. I love you very much, twin. Don't do anything too dumb when I'm not there to watch.

Everyone had signed their names at the bottom. Draco put the letter away quickly before it got spots on it. When he was in control again, he reached into the compartment, his heart beating a little faster. Harry had loaned him something he didn't want messed up, something he could take out of Neville's hide... Neville, who was in training to be a demiguise Animagus...

Silvery fabric spilled from the pocket, and Draco let out a breath of wonder. "Harry, I owe you," he said quietly.

He could think of so many great things to do with an Invisibility Cloak at Nott Manor.

The other things in the pocket were more mundane – his stuffed lion, his flute and recorder in their cases, and a small box of Danger's homemade fudge. Someone, probably Harry, had dug holes in the top of one piece that looked like little feet. Draco had to laugh.

I'd better eat the evidence before someone catches me making fun of the Minister of Magic...

With his lion in his lap and the rich chocolate taste in his mouth, Draco almost felt like he was home again.

Almost would have to do for now.

xXxXx

Danger got out of her cot the next morning in a foul mood. *What's the good of making a sacrifice if it leaves me hurting all over?* Meghan's treatment had only salved the pain in her hands for a few hours before it had come back. All her joints ached, in fact, making her move like an old woman.

What time is it, anyway? She checked the clock. *10:30 ? Well, I was lazy. Everyone should be gone by now... no, wait, it's Saturday. They'll all still be here. Or out doing other things.*

She limped into the bathroom, flicking on the light along the way, and yawned before she looked at her face in the mirror.

Good grief. The rash on her cheeks was worse. The two sides were connected now over the bridge of her nose, making her look like someone had sponge-printed a huge red butterfly on her face. There were other red patches on her skin as well, she noticed, on her arms and legs, and when she lifted her shirt to check, on her stomach.

She fanned herself with the cloth. *It's hot in here. I need to get a window open.* She took two careful steps to the toilet and sat down on it, panting, then stood up to open the window, breathing hard when she'd finished.

Maybe I'm coming down with something.

The light over the mirror caught her attention as she stood again. It seemed brighter than it usually did.

No, it's just got more light all around it. Like a halo, or an aura...

Her muscles suddenly tightened to the point of pain, and she cried out in fear. Something was terribly wrong with her, and she couldn't stop it, she was falling, falling and falling and not breathing...

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 27: Reach Out and Touch Someone (Year 4)

Chapter 27: Reach Out and Touch Someone

Sirius sat in his writing room, surrounded by piles of parchment, all of it dealing with magical law surrounding child welfare.

He was ready to scream.

I don't understand any of this. I don't think even the people who wrote it understand it.

He had picked up a few salient points, though. The Wizarding Family Services people were within their rights, though only just, in what they had done with Draco. Neither a suspicion of abuse nor a possible irregularity about guardianship would have allowed them to act immediately, but both together did.

But we can petition to get him back. We have the contract, and that proves that Narcissa intended us to be his guardians. They can always claim that she didn't know what we were really like, though, or that we're worse now than we were then.

He wished for a moment that Narcissa had lived. Legally, Draco could not have been taken from her as he had from Sirius. A child's adult blood relatives of the first degree, parents or grown siblings, were automatically his/her guardians under wizarding law, unless they were somehow invalidated (being sent to Azkaban sufficed).

But if Narcissa were still alive, we'd never have had Draco in the first place... unless they both came to live with us...

Never mind. This is ridiculous in any case. No one who knows me could possibly believe I actually abuse Draco. Or any of the cubs. It's just stupid.

The morning's post had brought another letter from WFS, stating that interviews would be set up at the WFS offices for Harry, Hermione, and Meghan, as well as for Danger, Aletha, and Sirius himself. The letter had hinted rather broadly that any intimations of abuse would be acted upon immediately.

As long as they play fair this time... but who'm I kidding? They won't. They've proved that already.

But the Pack had a stronger case for guardianship of the three remaining cubs than for Draco, so it was less likely that they would be snatched away as he had been...

I just stood there and let them take him away. Sirius dropped his face into his hands, taking perverse satisfaction in the ache around his blacked eye. Moony's right. I was an idiot, and I deserved what he gave me.

The hallway leading up to the room where the hearing was to be held had been rather dark, and the room itself brightly lit. Sirius' eyes hadn't quite adjusted when he'd heard a yelp of indignation. He'd blinked back tears just in time to see Draco being hustled through a door on the opposite side of the room. Sirius had tried to go after him, but three people had surrounded him and all started shouting at him at once, barking accusations that staggered him more than a barrage of spells.

He had only enough presence of mind to realize that making any aggressive moves would be a mistake, so he'd tried to sort it out verbally, but by the time he could say anything over the noise, Draco was gone, and the casewizard in charge, a rather smooth-talking fellow named Curcio, refused to let Sirius see him, or even pass a message along. "How do I know you're not trying to intimidate him?" Curcio had said with a sanctimonious look. "We won't let you endanger him any farther than you already have."

But we do have allies. I have to remember that.

The letter from WFS had also informed the Pack that people who knew them would be contacted to give accounts of their character and their interaction with their children. Sirius grinned.

I hope they ask Molly. That ought to be pretty spectacular.

The Weasleys had both been outraged by the actions of the Ministry, but Molly's outrage was generally more flamboyant than Arthur's. Still, Arthur was an excellent man to have on their side as well. He would be spreading the truth about them through the Ministry, through his wide system of unofficial contacts and friendships.

Knowing Gerald might count against us... Sirius squashed that thought as unworthy. Gerald Lovegood was an unusual man, but a good friend and a good father, and it was hard to see how his testimony could hurt them.

After all, he can't ever have seen us do anything harmful to the cubs. We never have.

And Gerald was intelligent enough to keep things like the Animagus training under his hat.

I hope.

Finally, of course, the Longbottoms. Sirius stared out the window in the general direction of Fireflower House. *We'd never bring it up, nor would they, but they owe us. They owe us a lot. And even if they didn't, they're our friends. They'll do right by us.*

Not that we're asking for much. Just the truth.

But since when was the truth easy to tell?

The scream and the heating of his pendants were simultaneous. The crashing thud came only an instant later.

xXxXx

Draco sat under a tree with a music book in his lap and his recorder in one hand. He was trying to work out a high harmony to a folksong he knew. The challenge was keeping the melody line in his head at the same time as he played the notes of his new descant on the recorder, to see if they went together well.

It really isn't too bad here. The Notts' estate had meadows and woods, a pond which might qualify by some standards as a small lake, and extensive gardens around the house. Draco had walked in the herb garden the night before and gathered sprigs of four of the herbs. They sat in the crease of the music book now, slightly wilted but still recognizable.

He picked up the herbs and sniffed them. The scents, and the melody they evoked, took him effortlessly back to the Den. He had only to close his eyes to see the Pack, working and playing, singing and laughing...

I wonder if they miss me?

He shook his head, banishing such stupid thoughts. Of course they missed him. But they weren't going to let it ruin their lives. And neither was he going to let missing them ruin this opportunity to have fun and learn things.

"Patroclus Nott was one of the higher-ranked Death Eaters," said Padfoot's voice in Draco's memory. *"With Malfoy put away, Nott may actually be the highest ranked still out of prison. You could probably trace that diary that possessed Percy back to Nott if you tried hard enough, and we know his son tried to blackmail you lot back in first year with Moony's condition."*

Draco rolled his eyes. *Well, that's not a problem anymore. What I'm more worried about is how Nott kept trying to frame me for things at the beginning of last year. Or at least I think it was him. It was certainly him in Hagrid's class, with the Mackled Malaclaws, and it could easily have been him with Buckbeak and with the firework Harry shot. And – hang on a second –*

His mind had just presented him with a moment from a Potions class early in winter term. *Nott fell down, and Zabini was helping him up – only there was this noise before I heard him fall, like someone fighting... did Zabini stop him doing something to my potion?*

This was an entirely new idea – why would a Slytherin help a Gryffindor? *Slytherins never help anyone unless there's something in it for them. Not that they won't help people who need help, but they always want their share afterwards. So Zabini must have thought there was something in it for him if he stopped Nott. But he never approached me about it – it's like he didn't want me to know.*

Maybe it's something he wants from Nott. Blackmail, maybe – give me what I want or I'll tell Snape you were trying to mess up Black's potion – except Snape would be more likely to give Slytherin points for that.

And that puts me back at square one. Zabini didn't do it to get something out of me, and he didn't do it to get something out of Nott.

So why did he do it?

Or did he do it at all?

Draco leaned his head against the tree trunk and closed his eyes. *Now I'm confusing myself. I need something else to think about...*

His pendants heated almost to the point of pain.

He bashed his head into the tree once. *That wasn't what I meant.*

xXxXx

Sirius shoved his chair back, jumping to his feet, and spun in place, doing a spot Apparition, just from here into Remus and Danger's bathroom – he was almost certain the scream had come from there –

The squashed feeling lasted only an instant. His fear and shock, though, redoubled.

On the floor, Danger jerked spasmodically, her body stiff and rigid, her hands fisted and bent back at the wrists. Sirius yanked out his wand and spun it in a circle, hitting everything in her immediate area with Cushioning Charms, just in time, as her head contacted the wall with what would otherwise have been painful force. At the same moment, he shouted, directing his voice out the open window.

“LETHA!”

Aletha was at his side almost before his shout had faded. She must have already been on her way inside, Sirius realized. Her wand was out, her face professional, and a diagnosis took her exactly two seconds. “She's having a seizure.”

“What does that mean?”

“It could mean anything. But you did exactly right. There's nothing we can do at this point, just wait for her to come out of it on her own. They usually only last a minute or two. Intercept the cubs for me, tell them she's going to be all right, but don't let them in here. Especially not Hermione. I'll tell you when to send Meghan in.” Aletha was on her knees, holding her hand above Danger's skin. “Something's wrong here,” she murmured. “There's no way she should be this hot...”

Sirius turned as he heard a babble of worried voices in the hallway. “Everyone stay out,” he said, moving into the bedroom and pulling the bathroom door almost shut behind him. “Out. Danger's going to be all right, Letha says so, but she doesn't need a lot of extra people cluttering up the room.”

“Are you sure?”

“What’s happened to her?”

“What about me?”

“She’ll call you when she needs you, Pearl. Yes, Hermione, Letha’s sure, and you know she doesn’t lie. I’ll let her tell you what’s going on when she has a minute, Harry.” Sirius sat down on the edge of the bed and beckoned the cubs to him. Meghan and Hermione came immediately. Harry hung back a little.

Starting to get touch-shy. Had to happen sometime. Sirius held the girls, one in each arm, and kept his eyes on Harry’s for a moment, hoping he could show his godson how much he cared just through this. *I’ve seen it, Harry, seen how you’re trying to be the alpha for everyone, and I’m proud of you – you don’t have to, we’re not going to fall apart just because Remus isn’t here for a few days, but I’m proud that you’re willing to try...*

Something about that series of thoughts hung onto the inside of Sirius’ head and refused to let go. Frowning, Sirius mentally pried it off and had a good look at it.

Remus isn’t here because he’s not allowed to be. But he’s linked to Danger. Something like this ought to have brought him running, no matter where he was or who said he couldn’t come.

Why isn’t he here?

He stood up abruptly. “I have to go out for a minute,” he said. “Harry, you’re in charge right here. Do what Letha tells you and don’t get in her way, understand?”

The cubs all nodded. “Where’re you going, Dadfoot?” asked Meghan as Sirius pulled off his robes and grabbed a Muggle shirt off his dresser top.

“Just out. Behave yourselves.” Sirius spun in place again, this time fixing on an alleyway in Muggle London as his target.

There’s only one reason Remus wouldn’t have come to see what’s wrong with Danger.

If he couldn’t.

He hurtled through the compressing tunnel and came out on the other end breathless for an instant. That didn’t stop him – even before he had his breath back properly, he was racing out of the alley, headed for a small building at the end of the street. He took the rickety metal stairs three at a time and banged on the door at the top. “Remus! Remus, let me in!”

No answer. Sirius checked quickly for Muggle observers, then rapped the doorknob with his wand and let himself in. The kitchen looked almost exactly the same as it had the day before. There were still dirty dishes on the counter, in the same arrangement, and no more had been added.

This is not good.

Sirius changed forms, fearing that he would find only day-old scent traces of his friend, that the Ministry had arrested him for something, taken him sleeping so that Danger wasn't alerted, kept him unconscious so that he didn't know she was ill now –

But instead, Remus' scent hung over the whole flat like a pall, heavy and musky in a way Sirius hadn't smelled in years. And, at the moment, filled with the acridity of fear.

He's still here. Must be back in the bedroom or something.

He bounded forward, through kitchen and living room, into a tiny hallway which closed around him like Apparition, out again into the bedroom. Remus lay on the floor, dressed in crumpled and stained day robes, panting as from some great exertion, his eyes half-open. He jerked his head around to focus on Sirius, who changed back to human as he skidded to a halt. "Sirius... Danger..."

"She's all right," Sirius said quickly, kneeling beside his friend. "She's ill, Letha called it a seizure, but she also said it only lasts a minute or two and she'll come out of it on her own."

Remus slumped back to the floor. "Thank God," he breathed. "Can't move much."

"I noticed. How long has it been this way?"

"Don't know." Remus had closed his eyes again, as if even keeping them open was a strain. "Sleeping a lot... not too hungry... cold."

Something about this felt familiar to Sirius. He touched his friend's hand. It was indeed cold. Even Remus' face and chest felt cool. "How long has it been since you ate anything?"

Remus's shoulders jerked a little. "Morning," he said uncertainly. "Yesterday."

Sirius suddenly tracked down the familiarity of the scenario. It was exactly how Remus had always acted after full moons in school and during the war. He would sleep most of the next day, not want to eat anything, and bundle up in layers of clothes, complaining that he was cold, even if it was the middle of the summer.

But with Danger around, that doesn't happen...

"Let's get you back in bed." Sirius bent to help Remus up. He'd get his friend comfortable, then get in touch with Letha and tell her what he'd found. "You don't have a Floo, do you?"

"No." Remus leaned heavily on Sirius, but made it to his feet, wincing as he moved. "Wait, not bed – I need to..."

"Well, let's get you there, then, so I don't have to clean up after you," Sirius said, trying for levity. Remus didn't react, and that worried Sirius more than anything had yet. Moony without a sense of humor was Moony in a very bad way indeed.

He was even more worried by the time he got Remus out of the bathroom. His alpha had opted to

sit, and when he stood up again, his knees had buckled. Sirius had caught him just in time to keep him from replicating part of Danger's performance.

This is bad, and getting worse.

Sirius laid his friend in the double bed and tucked the covers around him, then performed a spot heating spell. Remus groaned pleasurably and nestled down into the bed. "Thanks... feels good."

"Don't go to sleep yet, Moony. I need your help."

"What?"

"I need some way to get in touch with Letha quickly, and you don't have a Floo."

"Call her."

"From here? She'd never hear me... oh, wait, you mean with that Muggle thing?"

"Phone's in the kitchen."

Sirius turned and took two steps, then came back. "What's our number?" he asked, feeling a little ashamed. "At the Den?"

His eyes drifting shut, Remus reeled off a string of digits. Sirius stopped him halfway through, conjured quill and parchment, and wrote it down as Remus recited it again. "Good. And what's yours here?"

Remus opened one eye. "Getting smart in your old age."

Sirius let out a breath of relief. Moony wasn't gone quite yet. "Letha's rubbing off. What is it?"

Another string of numbers. Sirius didn't know how Muggles remembered these things. "All right, I'll go and call her and see what's going on. You just stay where you are." He'd have to get something into Remus soon. Twenty-four hours without food would make anyone sick.

In the kitchen, Sirius found some apple juice in the refrigerator and mixed it with a bit of water and a little sugar. Conjuring a cup with a lid and straw, he poured it in, then picked up the telephone – a cordless type, he noted with pleasure, so he could do his talking without leaving Remus alone. Muggles had some good ideas sometimes.

We ought to have something like this. Portable Floo connections. Wonder if it's possible?

"Here," he said back in the bedroom, putting the cup beside Remus, who opened one eye again to regard it. "Drink that."

"What is it?"

“Juice.”

Remus sipped on the straw experimentally. Sirius sat down in the chair in one corner and punched the first string of numbers on his conjured parchment into the telephone, then put it up to his ear.

“Other way,” said Remus hoarsely.

“I knew that.” Sirius reversed the direction he was holding the telephone. A ringing noise sounded twice in his ear, then a clicking sound, and a well-known voice said, “Hello?”

“Harry?”

“Padfoot! Where are you?”

“I’m at Moony’s. Let me talk to Letha.”

“Um, she hasn’t come out of the bathroom yet. She called Meghan in there a minute ago.”

“This is kind of urgent. Try knocking.”

“If you say so.” There was rustling in the background.

“Wait a second,” said Sirius, an idea occurring to him. “Harry?”

“What?”

“Let me talk to Hermione while you’re doing that.”

“All right.”

More rustling, then Hermione said, “Hi, Padfoot.”

“Hi, sweetie. I’ve got someone here who wants to say hello.”

“Who?”

“I’ll let you find out. Hold on.” Sirius took the phone away from his ear. “How about it?” he asked Remus.

Remus looked torn. “I shouldn’t…”

“Why not? They said no letters and no firecalls. They never said anything about telephones.”

Remus rolled his eyes and held out one swollen-knuckled hand. “Sirius Black, master of loopholes. Give it.”

After a few moments of Remus assuring Hermione that he was fine, just a little tired, and that he could tell Danger was going to be all right as well, Remus handed the phone back. “Letha,” he

said.

“We’ve got trouble.” Aletha’s voice was brisk. “Are you somewhere you can talk without alarming anyone?”

“Hold on.” Sirius stepped into the hallway. “Now I am. What’s wrong?”

“Danger has a fever. Around forty-five degrees.”

“What?”

“Exactly. I have a feeling that magic of hers has something to do with it, otherwise she’d be dead right now. But her body can’t keep this up long, magic or no magic. What have you found?”

“Remus isn’t in good shape either.” Sirius summarized his friend’s symptoms. “It’s like he went through a bad full moon without Danger, except no blood,” he finished. “He’s getting a little better now that I got him to drink something and warmed him up, but he doesn’t look good either. He couldn’t even move when I found him.”

“All right.” Aletha hummed under her breath. “I had Meghan in here,” she said after a few moments. “She said she can’t find anything in Danger’s body that shouldn’t be there. So she doesn’t have a disease caused by infection, and we can also rule out poison.”

“Bloody-minded much, love?”

“It was a possibility. But that still leaves us with the same problem. There’s something wrong with her, and I don’t know what.”

Sirius could hear the frustration in his love’s voice. “May I make a suggestion?”

“Please.”

“I’m no Healer, but it seems a little odd they should suddenly both get ill within three days of their being separated.”

A loud hiss came over the phone. Sirius jumped, then realized Aletha had exhaled hard. “Of course. Of *course*. I’m such a... never mind. I’m on my way over. With a passenger.”

“We’ll be here.”

A beep signaled the end of the conversation. Sirius looked at the phone’s face, found a button marked “off” amid the multitude, and pressed it. “Good news,” he said, stepping back into the bedroom. “We’re going to have company.”

“But I look a fright, Mother.”

“Don’t worry, they’ve seen you worse. It’s Letha, and she’s bringing Danger.”

Remus closed his eyes, his lips curving up in a thankful smile. The Pack's Moony was still in there, Sirius saw, just hidden for the moment under fatigue and worry. He'd be back as soon as Danger was all right again.

As soon as they're both all right again. What is going on here?

"What about the cubs?" asked Remus, opening his eyes.

"They're big enough to take care of themselves for a little while. Or they'll go to the Burrow or somewhere."

"They should still know how to get in touch with us." Remus eyed the phone. "Call them back, give Harry this number. In case something else goes wrong."

Good idea, considering how much seems to have been doing that recently. Sirius dialed the first string of numbers again, and was soon reciting the second to Harry. "How is everything there?" he asked.

"All right. Meghan's here with me, and Hermione's in her room. She said to come and get her if anything happened."

"Letha and Danger?"

"Letha's getting Danger dressed. They're about to leave."

"Good. Call if anything happens there."

"I will."

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm proud of you."

"Me? What'd I do?"

Sirius laughed. "No, that's what you say when someone says, 'Why, you little—' When someone says, 'I'm proud of you,' you say, 'Thank you.'"

"Thank you. Why?"

"Because I've seen you keeping things on an even keel in the house. Stopping Hermione and Meghan quarrelling, pitching in to make sure we all get fed. It's been a big help. I'm proud of you."

A long pause, in which Sirius imagined he could feel the heat of Harry's blush rising off the

phone. "Thank you," said Harry finally. "I have to go."

"You're wel—" Sirius winced at the slamming sound in his ear. "Boy can't take a compliment," he muttered, turning the phone off again.

xXxXx

Hermione lay curled on her bed, regarding her Pack-pendants.

The jewels are one use only. I shouldn't waste them.

But this isn't wasting. Draco's going to be scared. And they probably won't even let him use the Floo. All right. I'll do it.

She closed her eyes, pinching one blue gem between thumb and forefinger. *I want to be able to talk to Draco in my mind without touching, she thought carefully. And have him talk to me. For as long as we need to.*

As long as you need to? The voice was powerful, almost frightening, but not menacing in any way. **A dangerous way to put things, little sister. Need is hard to define.**

Until we know that the danger is past, then.

Better. And you are willing to trade a gem for this.

Yes.

Very well. Speak the words.

So I speak, so I intend, and so let it be done.

And so let it be done indeed. A curious fluttering feeling invaded Hermione's mind, and then –

–don't even know what's going on and the damned house-elf won't let me near the Floo, I won't go groveling to that little Slytherin bastard even if he does owe me, I might need that favor for later but how can I need it any more than this, something's wrong with Danger and Moony and everybody else and I haven't any way to know what–

Have you tried asking? Hermione cut in.

Neenie? Is that you?

No, it's Celestina Warbeck. Yes, of course it's me. Who else would it be?

Wish fulfillment?

Not likely. I traded a blue jewel for this.

Oh. Then I'm not going insane.

Sorry. Maybe tomorrow.

Draco blew a mental raspberry at her. **What's going on?**

Danger's going to be all right, Letha said so. She was ill, but she'll get better on her own. And I just talked to Moony.

Relief rolled off Draco's mental tone. **That's good – but I thought we weren't allowed.**

It was on the telephone. The Ministry doesn't think about Muggle things very much, so they never told him he couldn't talk to us that way.

Draco laughed. **Too bad they don't have one here.**

He said to give you his love if I heard from you first. He sounds tired, but he said he'd be all right.

He'd say that no matter how he was, to keep you from worrying.

I know. But Padfoot's with him, and Meghan says Letha and Danger are going where he is too. They'll be all right. The pendants never got cold, did they?

No, but you can be miserable without being close to dying. Draco laughed humorlessly. Case in point.

Is it any better today than it was yesterday? The three remaining cubs had slept in the same bedroom the night before, Hermione and Meghan sharing Draco's bed, so that Meghan and Harry could use Hermione's chain to dream with Draco.

A little. But being tired isn't making it any easier. We're going to have to pick nights for dreaming together and not go over that – it does take some of our energy to do that, you know.

I know. I noticed that I was more tired when I woke up from a night of dreamscaping than I would be if I'd just slept and dreamed by myself. Except...

Except what?

Except if I was dreaming just with you. Then I would hardly be tired at all the next day.

I suppose we reinforce each other, take turns keeping the dream there. That way we don't get drained so quickly.

But with more people in the dream, we have to work harder. So we're wearing ourselves out. All right. Let's think. Hermione rolled onto her back and looked up at the ceiling. **Two nights a**

week shouldn't be too much. Tuesdays and Fridays, maybe?

That makes sense to me. Tuesdays and Fridays. And lots of letters in between.

And don't forget I promised to come visit somehow. Hermione giggled. I have a plan.

Why don't I like the way that sounds?

Don't worry, nothing could possibly go wrong.

Which means something will.

Stop being so pessimistic.

Draco snorted. Fine. You find something else for us to talk about.

All right. You said something about Nott owing you when I had just tuned in – what did you mean?

Oh, that. I was outside when my pendants went off. On my way in, I ran into him – literally, turned a corner and ran into him. He had a cloak on and his broom in his hand, he'd obviously been out flying. The house-elf popped out of nowhere and started scolding him, saying his father would be mad that he'd been out flying when he was supposed to be studying.

What did you do?

I told it –

House-elves aren't it. They're he or she.

She felt Draco roll his eyes. All right, her. I think it's a her. And she's a royal pain. I told her that Nott hadn't been flying, that he'd just been showing me his broom, and that we were both going right back to studying. So, of course, I had to go and study with him for a while. And he kept looking at me like I was one of those things Snape keeps on his wall in jars. Finally, when I got up to leave, he asked me why I did it.

What did you tell him?

Said I had experience with having a Death Eater father mad at me, and ran like hell.

Hermione groaned. I'm not surprised. Did he get you with anything?

A Twitchy Ears . I got rid of it.

Would you *please* not do that? It isn't good for you. And what if he'd hit you with something you couldn't reverse on your own? Do you really want Mr. Patroclus Nott fussing around

your body with a wand?

All right, point taken.

Someone knocked on the door. "Come in," Hermione called.

Harry stuck his head in. "We're going to wait downstairs," he said. "Do you want to come?"

Do I hear Harry?

You do hear Harry. Hold on a second. "Come here first."

"What's going to happen if I do?"

Hermione let her head fall back onto her pillow. **Prank-happy stupid idiot.**

He has reason.

Shut up. "You'll get to talk to Draco. I used a blue."

"Meghan!" Harry called over his shoulder. "Girls' bedroom!" He came in, sat down on Meghan's bed, and took the chain Hermione handed him. His greeting and Draco's reply were jovially disgusting.

"Boys," Hermione muttered under her breath as Meghan ran into the room, looking worried, a look which vanished as soon as she found out why she was there.

How long is this going to last, anyway? Draco suddenly asked a minute or two later. **Don't these have time limits on them?**

I said until we knew the danger was past, said Hermione. **So if they're better, it could be almost any time now...**

We should move downstairs, said Harry. **We'll be nearer the phone there. Moony's flat doesn't have a Floo, so that's how they'll be in touch.**

Still chattering, the cubs descended the stairs and established themselves in the music room, the cordless phone from the kitchen in Harry's lap.

No chance of getting anyone else over, is there? asked Draco a little too casually.

Anyone in particular you want to talk to? Harry asked.

I know who he wants to talk to. Meghan giggled. **He wants to talk to Luna.**

Mind your own business, runt. Actually, I have something I need to tell Ron. But I wouldn't mind talking to Luna if she's around.

Hermione was already at the fireplace.

They were waiting for Neville and Luna to come through the fire when a hooting erupted in the kitchen. Harry ducked out of the chain to go get the owl. "It's from Dumbledore," he said when he came back in. "Addressed to 'the Pack.'" He hesitated with his finger under the seal, looking at his siblings and friends anxiously. "Should I?"

"Padfoot left you in charge," said Hermione as the fire flared green for Neville. "You decide."

Harry looked tempted, but shook his head. "If it was urgent, he would have Flooed. It can wait." He went back into the kitchen to set the letter on the table.

So what do you have to tell me? Ron asked when the Pride was all in the chain.

Something to ask you, actually. Do you happen to know if there's a limit on the size of magical chess pieces?

Ron frowned. **Not offhand,** he said. **But there's laws about animating statues. How big are we talking?**

Person-sized or better. Like the set you faced back in first year, I think.

Well, that was special. On Hogwarts grounds, and protecting something important. But yeah, I think for just everyday stuff you're not supposed to have statues that are alive for more than... Ginny, do you remember?

Ginny wrinkled her brow. **Three hours a day,** she said finally. **And none at all if it's somewhere Muggles can see it.**

Not a problem here. But the Notts have this whole room for chess, life-sized pieces, and I think they're alive all the time. I was in there a good hour and they never shut up.

Do the knights have real swords? Neville asked.

Real how? They're sharp and pointy.

That's good enough. And the bishops carry big staffs?

Right. The castles have catapults on top, the queens have bows and arrows and the kings have maces. And all the pawns have pikes.

That sounds like a private army to me, said Neville. **Or maybe a torture chamber.**

Everyone stared at him. He shrugged. **Mum and Dad have been telling me some stories from the first war,** he said. **They're not pretty. And I think having chess pieces that big and with that many weapons might be illegal. I can ask.**

So can I, said Ron.

The conversation drifted to other topics. Draco related the story of the formal dinner he'd eaten with the Notts the night before. **There were four of everything, knives, forks, spoons, plates, everything. I'm glad Padfoot taught us to always work from the outside in.**

What's it like there? Meghan asked again, apparently still curious despite the night before.

Quiet. Very quiet. Like a tomb, almost. All the halls are covered in this carpet that muffles footsteps so you can't tell if someone's coming or not. It's not quite black, but you can't tell what color it is, it's so dark. It could be red, but it could be green too. No pattern at all.

Do they have a music room? asked Luna. **Is it carpeted too?**

Yes, and no. When Mr. Nott found out I play, he insisted on having a concert. Draco had told the other cubs this story already, but Hermione was willing to hear it again. **Theodore played first. It's obvious he's been taking piano lessons since he could reach the keys, and it's just as obvious he hates it and never practices. I had to make a couple of mistakes on purpose so I wouldn't look too good. Mrs. Nott thinks it would be sweet if we learned a duet.**

Sweet? said Ron. **She thinks it would be sweet?**

That's what she said. I don't know if she thinks her Dora – which she called him right in front of me, and I thought he was going to die – I don't know if she thinks he's gay or if she just doesn't realize how that sounds.

Dora, eh? Ginny sounded speculative.

Don't, said Harry sternly.

Don't what?

Don't start. We need that for security.

Security? Oh, you mean blackmail.

Be still, my heart, said Draco. **Harry Potter, bastion of all that's good and pure, is talking about blackmail.**

No, I'm not. I never said that word.

But you meant it.

Harry looked smug. **I might have. Dora. God, that's so wrong.**

Maybe Mrs. Nott wishes Theodore was a girl, said Luna.

The rest of the Pride fell over laughing.

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Aletha knocked on the door of Remus' flat, Danger standing beside her, eyes half-shut and muttering to herself. Sirius opened the door. "There you are – Danger!"

"Don't try it," said Aletha, directing Danger inside, then following her. "She's not going to answer."

"How do you know?"

"I'm controlling her."

"You're what?"

"She's delirious. Half-conscious at best. And I couldn't exactly float a stretcher up three flights of outdoor stairs in a Muggle neighborhood."

"So what did – oh." Sirius wasn't stupid. "Imperius."

"Going to arrest me for it?" Aletha set the package she'd taken from the refrigerator on the table.

"Not likely. Let's get them together."

"Not yet. I want to talk to Remus first, and do some tests."

Sirius frowned. "Tests? Letha, you said yourself her fever's beyond the level that kills a normal person. And Remus isn't looking so good himself. He's cold to the touch, and he keeps drifting awake and asleep. If being apart is what triggered this, we need to get them together."

"If either of them starts to go into crisis, we can get them together immediately. What we need right now is information. I have a hunch, but I have to confirm it. Catch her." Aletha ended the Imperius, and Danger sagged against Sirius. "Can you get her into a chair?"

"A hunch about what?" Sirius scooped Danger into his arms and carried her into the living room.

"What's wrong with Remus. I think I may know what's wrong with Danger. It came to me as I was bringing her over here."

"What is it?"

"It's a disease called lupus."

Sirius snorted, depositing Danger in the chair. "Appropriate. You think she got it from Remus?"

"Not exactly. Stay with her?"

“Sure. Anything I should know?”

“She might start talking. Don’t pay too much attention – she’s unlikely to remember anything – but answer her if you want. She probably won’t recognize you. Try to keep her there, and don’t let her do anything by herself even if she seems lucid. She’s not.”

Sirius sat down on the couch beside Danger. “Can do. Should I call the cubs?”

“Not yet. Let’s wait until we have some actual news to tell them.”

“Right.”

Aletha opened the package she’d brought and pulled out her Healer’s kit and a covered cup of chicken broth. A tap from her wand brought this to drinking temperature, and she carried it carefully back to Remus’ bedroom. “Knock knock.”

“C’min.”

Aletha obeyed and took a long, careful look at Remus. She didn’t like what she saw. His face seemed to have aged since she’d seen him last, with more wrinkles and pain lines in it, and the knuckles of the one hand she could see were swollen. “You look like hell.”

“Nice bedside manner, Letha.” Remus summoned up a small smile. “Feel like hell too.”

“I’m not surprised. Not eating for a full day? What *were* you doing, may I ask?”

“Sleeping.” Remus accepted the broth and took a careful sip through the straw Aletha had conjured in it. “Just wasn’t hungry.”

“Next time that happens, would you mind calling me *before* it gets this bad? Or calling Danger, maybe? She would have come right over and made you a decent meal, and maybe slept in a bed instead of in that cot.”

“Tried to talk her out of that,” Remus mumbled as Aletha checked his pulse. “She wouldn’t listen.”

“You of all people should know talking her out of things hardly ever works.”

“Does for me. Unless she’s being stubborn.”

“She was being stubborn.”

“How’d you guess.”

“Sheer dumb luck. I need to take some blood. Is that all right?”

“Want my first-born son too?”

“I already have him. Or not your first-born, but your first-loved. He’s been a big help since you left.” Aletha siphoned some blood from Remus’ forearm painlessly with her wand and deposited it in a glass vial. “Though he seems to think that since you’re not there, he has to be the alpha of the house.”

“How’s he doing?”

“Very well, actually. Though he’s been looking frazzled by it. I keep meaning to talk to him about it, but he keeps avoiding me.”

“Get Sirius to do it.” Remus’ voice was a little clearer, a little stronger. “Harry’ll listen to him.”

“I hope.” Aletha took a small box of metal shavings from her kit, then reconsidered. She stood up and moved across the room, as far from Remus as possible, before she opened the box, and cast a quick Shield Charm around herself to keep any stray particles near her.

I so hope I’m wrong...

She dropped a few shavings into the vial of Remus’ blood. The blood hissed and boiled, then turned black and congealed.

I’m right, then. Damn it.

She packed the silver filings away very carefully after Vanishing the vial, then returned to Remus’ bed. “I think I know what’s wrong with you,” she said.

“What?”

“You’re testing as a werewolf again. That means Danger’s taming power has worn off. There’s probably a set period it lasts for, and after that period is up, your lycanthropy reasserts itself with a vengeance. You’re paying right now for ten years of transformations.”

Remus blanched and characterized the situation with one short word.

“Precisely. It seems to be progressive, so we’re damn lucky we caught it when we did. I think if this had gone on much longer, maybe even another few hours, you both would have been dead.”

Remus went even whiter than before.

“But we did catch it. And we’re going to fix it. Oh, Sirius, darling!”

“Yes, Aletha, dear?”

“Would you please bring dearest Danger in here?”

“With all my heart, lovey duck.”

Remus had a small fit of laughter. “Lovey duck?” he repeated hoarsely.

“He’ll pay for that one.” Aletha smiled one-sidedly. “Trust me, he’ll pay.”

“Delivery,” said Sirius, squeezing sideways through the door with Danger in his arms. “Where do you want her?”

Aletha pulled down the sheets on the bed. Remus moved over a little, shivering as he did. “Right here. You won’t have to worry about being cold in a second,” she told Remus. “She’s got a fever like you wouldn’t believe.”

Sirius laid Danger down in the bed, pulling off her shoes after he’d got her positioned. Remus was already reaching out for her hand. Aletha quickly cast the Show-Me-Health spell on both of them. *I’ll want to watch whatever happens. If anything does happen.*

Danger glowed red-hot with fever, her joints little pockets of magenta pain, as were the irritated places on her skin. Remus’ joints, too, were magenta, but he showed as a dull blue, meaning he was borderline hypothermic, mixed with dots of a sickly green which meant minor malnutrition, as well as the odd shade of silvery-gray over the werewolf bite on his thigh.

Then Remus’ hand closed around Danger’s, and colors blurred before Aletha’s eyes with remarkable speed. When she could see clearly again, Danger lay nestled against Remus, her cheek against the part of his shoulder that his shirt left bare, both sets of eyes closed. Remus was no longer blue, and Danger’s redness was decreasing rapidly. The magenta ovals over their joints were shrinking, and the gray which indicated a werewolf vanished even as Aletha looked for it.

Thankfulness welled in her. She removed the spell to do a straight visual inspection. Things had improved just as dramatically here. The rash on Danger’s face, which had belatedly registered with her as one of the telltale signs of lupus, was all but gone already. Remus’ face, too, seemed less lined and worried than it had a moment or two before.

“That didn’t take long,” said Sirius.

“No, it didn’t. Which means you were exactly right.” Aletha hugged her love hard. “Thank you, so much. I might not have thought of this until too late.” The phrase chilled her. *Too late. We might have lost them – lost them both, because there’s no way one of them would want to live without the other...*

Remus’ eyes opened and focused on them. “Good morning,” he said.

“Morning,” said Sirius. “How you feeling?”

Remus brought a hand out from under the covers and flexed it, then looked down at the top of Danger’s head, which rested against his collarbone. “Normal,” he said. “More or less. Hungry is all.”

“That we can fix,” said Aletha, finding a smile coming easily to her. “Sirius, would you? I want to

check them both right away to make sure I know what's going on."

"Do this, do that. Bring this, get that. It's all I'm good for around here." Sirius grumbled his way into the kitchen, making Remus chuckle.

"Good to hear that again," said Aletha, sitting on the edge of the bed. "You started to feel better as soon as you touched her, didn't you?"

"Better isn't the word." Remus kissed Danger's head. "Letha, there's something between us. Something physical. I felt it, when we touched – my whole body reacted. It was like getting a part of myself back. Everything started working better, working right. We must be connected somehow. Like two kinds of creatures that need each other to live. What's that called – symbiosis."

"Magical symbiotes." Aletha tapped Remus' arm with her wand again, drawing another blood sample. "There's probably a paper in that somewhere. Or would be, if it wouldn't expose you to the entire world."

"Maybe someday." Remus watched her add silver filings to his blood without getting any reaction at all. "Someday when the world is better, and we don't have to hide anymore."

"If you're waiting for the world to be better, you'll have a long wait."

"Maybe." Remus smiled slightly. "My world got better today. What about yours?"

"Mine too," Aletha had to admit. "All right, maybe not so long at that."

Sirius reappeared in the room, floating three large containers of food, dishes and cutlery, and the telephone with his wand. Aletha conjured a table quickly, and Sirius lowered everything onto it. "Here, you can call the Den," he said, tossing the phone to her. "I'll serve."

"Spill anything on me and I'll kick your arse out the window," muttered a familiar voice.

"Look who's awake." Sirius reached over Remus and rubbed Danger's scalp briefly with his knuckles. "Feeling better?"

"Yes. Much." She turned her head upwards and smiled. "Of course, that could just be a function of the location."

"It is," said Remus, pushing himself upward in the bed with no apparent difficulty at all. "We'll explain after we eat. I'm starving."

"I'm not surprised! I knew you were sleeping a lot, but really, not eating for a whole day? Do I have to go everywhere with you?"

"It looks like."

“Excuse me a minute,” said Aletha, and stepped out of the room, ostensibly to make her call, really to have a moment where she wasn’t sure if she was laughing or crying with relief and joy.

What did I ever do to deserve people like this in my life?

And how can I do it again?

She dialed the Den’s phone number. This was one call she was happy to make.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 28: Herbs and Interviews (Year 4)

Chapter 28: Herbs and Interviews

Midnight had come and gone, but Remus felt no desire to sleep. He'd slept enough in the past few days.

Besides, asleep, I can't appreciate this.

Danger lay beside him, hair spread across the pillow, her bare arm entwined with his. He ran his foot up and down her leg and felt his spine prickle at the soft smooth skin against his own. His hand slid across her belly once, then ventured into other regions.

She shifted. **Stop that.**

Why?

Because I say so.

Not good enough.

Please?

Better, but still not quite.

I want to talk to you.

This will generate talking.

I said talk, not moan.

Aww , what's wrong with moaning.

Nothing. And I'll gladly moan after we talk. But we need to talk.

Remus grumbled a little, but desisted. **So what do you want to talk about?**

Danger opened her eyes. "We should get up. If we're not going to sleep, it's a bad idea to lie in bed. We'll learn to think of bed as a place to talk, not a place to sleep."

"What, are you a headshrinker now?"

"You're contrary today."

"I was scared today. Or yesterday, if you like." A trace of that primitive, heart-stopping fear touched him now. He'd been awakened by her shock and fear, then jolted into motion by her

unconsciousness and the convulsing of her body, the rocketing of her temperature upwards. He had tried to jump out of bed, to stand and Apparate home – rules be damned, Danger needed him – only to feel his legs fail to hold him, his arms unable to push him upright, and he'd collapsed on the bedroom floor.

It was a nightmare come to life – Danger in trouble, sick and frightened, and he too weak to help her, too weak even to help himself. He would have sworn that he'd lain on the floor for hours, alternately despairing and trying frantically to get to his feet, but Sirius said that only about a minute had elapsed between the onset of Danger's seizure and his own arrival in Remus' bedroom.

I think I know what I'll hear if I get too close to a dementor now.

Danger rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "I'm getting up," she murmured. "If you want to stay with me, come on."

"Slave driver." But Remus got out of his side of the bed, found his dressing gown, and followed a similarly-dressed Danger to the living room and the couch. "As if this is so much better."

"It is. It's not the bed, so we won't start associating the bed with long talks instead of sleeping."

"No, we associate the bed with long something else."

"A bit egotistical of you, I think."

"Pure fact, my dear, pure fact." Remus put on a lofty tone, and got the response he expected – a fist to the shoulder. "So what do you want to talk about?"

"Us."

"I still don't see why we can't do that in bed."

"Would you please attempt to stop thinking like Sirius for a few minutes?"

"Sorry. Being with you again seems to have given me minor testosterone poisoning."

"Thank you. I think."

Remus told his animal side to settle down for a while. He'd had ample proof that afternoon that Danger was present with him in the flesh once more. *I'm human. I can control myself.*

No one had ever said control would be easy, though.

"So what about us?" he asked finally.

"This... bond." Danger waved her hand through the air around them. "We've always known we were connected mentally. And I think we can safely say our souls are joined as well as our minds."

“The soul is the home of magic. If our magic is joined – which it is – then our souls must be.”

“Good point. So that’s mentally and spiritually joined. Emotionally too, I’d certainly hope.”

“Last time I checked.” Remus let his hand wander into Danger’s hair.

“Get out of there. But what happened today argues for a physical bonding. Beyond the obvious, Mr. My-Mind-Is-In-The-Gutter, so don’t even start.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Ha. What did you tell Letha we are? Magical symbiotes?”

“So it seems.” Remus smiled to himself. Danger might have said ‘get out,’ but she was holding still as he finger-combed tangles from her hair. “Our symptoms certainly disappeared as soon as we were together again. She said herself she couldn’t find anything wrong with either of us after fifteen minutes of skin-to-skin contact.”

“What do you think of her next idea?”

“Progressive intervals of being away from each other, to see when the symptoms start developing? I don’t like it, but we have to do it. We have to find out how long is safe for us to be apart. And I like Sirius’ idea of how to manage it – not to mention, it takes some of the burden for cooking off Harry. Has he really been doing all the meals since you started feeling ill?”

“Essentially. So I’ll go home tomorrow morning early and make breakfast, stay three hours and come back here, then head back for lunch and dinner, six hours, then back here for the night, and so on until we hit a time frame where we both start to show symptoms.”

Remus leaned back a little, stretching his spine. “I have a guess about it. I know I didn’t start to feel physically ill until the morning after I left the Den. That would make it about twenty-four hours. What about you?”

“That sounds about right. I woke up sore the morning after you’d left, and my hands were to a point where I didn’t want to cook by that afternoon.”

“So we have a tentative timetable of twenty-four hours apart for symptom onset, and gradual worsening over the next forty-eight, until after we’ve been apart for seventy-two hours we’re both exceptionally ill.”

“I’d rather not replicate *that* .”

“Nor I, and it probably won’t be necessary. But we do need to track down exactly when symptoms start showing up.”

“So we know how long it’s safe for us to be away from each other.” Danger sighed. “We’ve essentially been sentenced to being together for the rest of our lives.”

Remus looked down at her. “What a horrendous hardship,” he said levelly. “I believe I shall faint from the tremendous strain this condition places on me.”

Danger made a face at him.

“Don’t stick that tongue out at me unless you intend to use it.”

She squealed. “*Remus!*”

“We’ve established that’s my name.”

“That does it.” Danger stood up, wrapping her dressing gown around herself. “I’m not sitting here any longer and listening to this.”

“No?”

“No. I’m going to stand at the stove and listen to it. I’m hungry.”

“So am I. What are you going to make?”

“I don’t know yet. Any preferences?”

Remus grinned. He knew a cue when he heard one. “I enjoy pasta dishes, but really, anything will do.”

Danger blinked once, then smiled. “Have you ever had pasta with peanut butter sauce?”

“Why, yes, actually, now that you mention it. A long time ago in a little house in Surrey, cooked by a delightful young woman – now what was her name again...?”

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Sirius read Dumbledore’s brief note again. “Anything strike you as odd about this?” he asked Aletha and Danger.

Aletha exhaled pensively. “Where do you want me to start?”

“Begin at the beginning,” advised Remus’ voice from behind her. “And go on until you reach the end. Then stop.”

“Moony, that’s just scary,” Sirius said.

Danger turned around and made a rude gesture. Blue eyes gleamed incongruously in her face for a moment before whirling into brown again. “That’s from both of us, by the way,” she said in her own voice.

Aletha looked up at the ceiling. “Why did I tie myself up to a crowd of overgrown immature

zanies?” she asked it.

“Because you love us,” said Sirius.

“That’s occasionally debatable. Anyway. That letter. For one thing, he said he’d been ill. Albus is almost never ill.”

“Neither am I,” said Danger. “Or Remus. But we were both pretty badly off yesterday.”

“But you’re nowhere near as powerful as Albus is. Forgive me, but it’s true. He can do things other people can hardly even imagine. Sometime I’d like to get a look at him with a magic-viewing spell. Even a mediocre witch or wizard has enough magic to weather most injuries better than Muggles do. I think Albus could take an avalanche in stride.”

“Tell you what I find odd,” said Sirius. “This thing about Snape. ‘Severus and Poppy forbid me to leave the grounds until the morrow, so I beg your indulgence until then.’ What is Snape doing taking care of him? He’s no Healer. Snape, that is.”

“He might need an unusual potion,” suggested Remus. “Something that requires rest to work properly. Letha, do you know of any like that?”

“One or two. It’s possible.”

“So we’ll bide our time until he arrives,” said Danger. “Which should be any minute now.”

It wasn’t, quite, but not many minutes passed before the Floo chimed and the Pack-adults went into the music room to welcome their guest. Aletha, nearest to the fireplace, shook Dumbledore’s hand first, but instead of releasing it, she added her other hand to the clasp. “Ill, were you?” she said very politely, but with a tone in her voice Sirius recognized. It was the one she adopted when one of the cubs was trying to fob her off with an incomplete or disjointed story.

“An old man’s vanity, not wishing to advertise his foolishness,” Dumbledore replied lightly. “Severus and Poppy have restored me as much as I think may be expected.”

Sirius glanced at Danger, finding her eyes whirling again. He made a fist, thumb in, thumb out. *What’s he talking about?*

We’ll find out, Danger signed back. “Is this a private conversation, or can anyone join?” she asked aloud.

“Danger, I am glad to see you well.”

“You too.” As Danger shook Dumbledore’s hand, Aletha moved out of Sirius’ line of sight, and Sirius suddenly understood her earlier comment.

What did he do, try to take food from a dragon? That’s a burn if I ever saw one.

“A shame Remus cannot be here.” Dumbledore’s tone now was more than it seemed – airy and nonchalant, yes, but with an undercurrent of meaning. He must have seen the blue in Danger’s eyes, and be partway to figuring out what it meant.

“I believe we all have some secrets to divulge,” said Danger, still in her own voice.

“Indeed. Sirius.”

“Albus.” Sirius shook the Headmaster’s blackened hand, trying neither to exert too much pressure or to let the older wizard know he was trying to be gentle. Fortunately, twelve years of simultaneous fatherhood and Marauding had left him an expert on walking thin lines.

“You will forgive me if I do not tell you the full story of this injury,” said Dumbledore when they had all found seats. “Suffice it to say, it has bearing on Lord Voldemort, and his eventual downfall. That is a part of the reason I have come, but mostly I am here to advise you in your present difficulties. Assuming, of course, that you wish my advice.”

“We’d hardly have sent you an owl asking for your help if we didn’t,” said Aletha. “Though I do find it funny that it’s almost always the males of this Pack who have to be got out of difficulties.”

“Hmph,” said Danger in Remus’ voice. Dumbledore raised his eyebrows.

The bond between the two was duly explained and demonstrated. Dumbledore didn’t seem surprised at all, Sirius noted sourly. *Does anything ever startle him?* “I have suspected this for quite a long time,” he said. “More so since last summer, when I used Legilimency on you, Remus, and found a third mind present as well.”

“And I thought I’d hidden so well,” said Danger in disappointment.

“I can understand your wish to keep the bond secret, and I thank you for your trust in telling me now,” Dumbledore concluded.

“You’re welcome,” said Remus. “I know there may not be much you can do about me at the Ministry, but can you at least get Draco home?”

“I could endeavor to expedite a petition for return of his custody to you. However, many departments at the Ministry are swamped with work because of the upcoming Quidditch World Cup, and some members from other divisions are moving over to help those who have too much to do. Pursuing Draco’s custody at this time would not be impossible, but it might not be wise.”

“So what do you suggest?” asked Sirius heatedly. “Wait until after the World Cup? That’s another month, and he’s living with the Notts! Death Eaters!”

“That is true. But they would hardly dare harm him, considering that he is in communication with you often, and through more routes than they know of, I daresay. Patroclus Nott may have been a Death Eater, but he is not a fool. It would look very bad if he were caught abusing the child supposedly sent to him for protection from abuse.”

“Yes, but the operative word there is caught,” said Danger. “What if he’s not caught?”

“How could he not be, if Draco is free to write to you? And if Draco’s letters cease, or if their tone changes for the worse, you would likely storm Nott Manor with fire flying from your fingertips.” Dumbledore smiled. “He may not know that, but he knows that the Pack is tenacious about guarding their cubs from harm. He will not forget what happened to the last man who threatened Draco Black.”

“That is true,” said Aletha, forestalling Sirius. “It’s not as if Draco’s cut off from us completely. He may be unhappy there, but he won’t be harmed. And if the Ministry’s busier than usual, our petition might not make it through channels before the World Cup anyway, even with you helping us, Albus.”

“That’s another thing,” said Danger. “Can you afford to be seen helping us? Aren’t you already under scrutiny for hiring Remus?”

“I can always afford to be seen working for a just cause,” said Dumbledore. “And I do not recommend waiting to file a petition, precisely. What I do recommend is that you not pressure the WFS office to process that petition quickly. You will thus establish a reputation as helpful people, not overly demanding.”

Sirius leaned his head back. “I don’t *want* to be helpful and not overly demanding,” he said. “I want our fox out of that damned house. Did you know Nott keeps a life-sized chess set animate at all times?”

“Arthur Weasley may wish to hear about that.”

“He knows,” said Danger. “Ron told him right away. They’re planning a search on Monday, as soon as they can get a writ for it. But Nott will probably get out of it somehow.”

“He could claim he just left the animation spells on from the last time he played and didn’t realize he hadn’t turned them off,” said Sirius. “Hell, it might even be true.”

“When our petition does go through, what then?” asked Aletha.

“There will likely be a hearing, with evidence presented on both sides. The Office will have to justify their decision to take Draco from you, and you will have to prove that it would be in his best interests for him to return home. I understand they have plans to interview those who know you best.”

Sirius sat up, grinning. “I want to get a transcript of Molly’s interview,” he said. “She’ll take them apart like she does the twins when they track in mud.”

“Frank and Alice won’t exactly be meek little lambs either,” said Aletha. “Though their testimony might be given less credit, since they haven’t known us as long.”

“Speaking of the Longbottoms,” said Dumbledore. “There is a possibility that the ruling at the

custody hearing might be split. In that case, under magical law, Draco would not be allowed to return to your home, but you would be allowed to choose a new foster home for him if you were dissatisfied with his current situation.”

“Which we are,” said Sirius and Aletha in chorus.

“You think we might send him to Fireflower House?” said Remus.

“I think that would be a wise choice. If the hearing board is biased against you, which may be the case, they will attempt to find reasons to bar any home you may name. The Burrow would likely be disqualified on the grounds that Draco would be an undue burden on the Weasleys, and the Landing Zone because the child of the house is a girl and not a boy.”

“But no one can say Draco would burden the Longbottoms unduly,” said Danger. “And Neville’s just his age. Frank and Alice have everything the Notts have – except a pile of gold and an obsession with purity of blood and Dark magic, of course.”

“I think we can do without those,” said Sirius, making everyone chuckle.

The talk turned to Remus’ situation. Dumbledore’s first piece of advice was much the same – wait until after the World Cup – but what he said next surprised everyone.

“You want me to try to *what?* ”

“Have your status as Hermione’s guardian recognized under magical law,” Dumbledore repeated calmly. “It is a simple request, one which should be granted without much fuss or bother. Obviously, it will not be, but the fact that it *should* be will weigh powerfully in your favor. As will your circumstances. This is no custody battle between a father and a mother, in which both sides have a genuine claim. Instead, it is clearly the work of an overbearing government, interfering in the lives of decent people.”

“You really think that will be enough to overwhelm my being a werewolf?” Remus said doubtfully. “Magical people have an awfully strong reaction to that word.”

“It will certainly be enough to make them think. And you have much in your favor. The only man you have ever admitted to attacking in your were form had tried to harm the very child you wish restored to you. You are rendered harmless on the full moons by the Wolfsbane Potion, I assume, knowing very little of your private lives...”

Sirius had to turn away for a moment to get his face under control.

“And if for some reason that precaution fails, you spend the full moons in a safe room, with three large Animagi who could control you if it became necessary.” Dumbledore frowned a little.

“Something must really be done regarding the Wolfsbane,” he said under his breath. “Perhaps a public-assistance program... but that is a fight for another day.”

“You’ll have our help when it comes around,” said Aletha. “So what will we need to pull together

to get ready to fight this?”

In the middle of a discussion about lawyers, the back door opened. Meghan stuck her head in. “Danger, may we have a snack?” she asked, then noticed who else was in the room. “Professor Dumbledore!”

“Hello, Meghan.” Dumbledore stood up to greet the little girl. “How are you this fine day?”

“I’m all right. What happened to your hand?” Meghan reached out to touch it, then pulled back. “I’m sorry. May I? Please?”

Dumbledore looked at Aletha, who nodded. “If you wish,” he said, sitting down and holding out his hand to Meghan.

“Look only, Pearl,” Aletha warned quietly.

Meghan nodded, her eyes half-shut, and began to move her fingers back and forth across the back of Dumbledore’s blackened hand. Movement outside the door caught Sirius’ eye – the rest of the Pride was headed for the house. He got up, went to the door, and tapped his lips significantly with a finger before letting them in. Most of them found seats around the room – Harry, to Sirius’ annoyance, took the chair he’d been using – but Neville went straight to Meghan and placed a hand on her upper arm, where her sleeve ended.

“Bad,” Meghan murmured. “You’re bad.” A pause. “I don’t care if you’re doing what you were supposed to, you’re still bad.” Another pause. “No, that’s wrong.”

It’s like hearing one side of a conversation. But who is she talking to?

Meghan went on, pausing after every sentence as if listening to a response. “Because it is. Hurting people is wrong. Don’t be silly, I’m sure you could do something else...”

“Weeds,” murmured Neville.

“Weeds,” Meghan repeated. “You could work on weeds. That’s all right, we can show you. Yes, they’re alive.” She frowned. “I suppose they do, somehow.”

“Of course they do,” said Neville matter-of-factly. “He has to eat like everybody else. And weeds make trouble for the plants that grow food.”

“That’s right. So yes, that would be fighting and blighting his enemies.” Meghan’s brow wrinkled, as if she were reciting something of dubious value. “And you know you can’t do anything else here. Wouldn’t it be more interesting to work on weeds? No one will stop you then.”

Dumbledore was looking from boy to girl very carefully, with – *am I imagining it? No, I think it’s real* – with a faint tinge of surprise on his face. *Well, finally. Something cracks the old man’s shell a little.*

“Dadfoot,” said Meghan without turning around. “Do we have any plants we don’t like? Living ones, in pots?”

“I’m sure I can find you one, Pearl. Wait here.” Sirius hurried into the kitchen, Danger at his heels.

“You leave my herbs alone,” she said severely, seeing him reaching for the plants on the windowsill over the kitchen sink. “I need those.”

“You can replace them, Danger. I think she’s doing something to help him – maybe get that hand back to normal, or at least more normal. Is a plant worth more to you than that?”

Danger blinked, her eyes suddenly very brown indeed. “Ow,” she said, rubbing the side of her head. “Fine, go for it. Take the marjoram, it’s not looking so good anyway. You can come back now.” This last wasn’t addressed to him. “Extortionist.”

Sirius frowned at the plants, then picked up one with woody stems about as long as his forearm and leaves like ovals with pointed ends, growing all the way up its length. Danger gave him a quick nod, and he carried it back into the music room and held it out to Neville.

“Can you put it on the floor, please, sir?” Neville asked without taking his eyes away from Meghan. Sirius set the pot down and backed away. Distracting someone who was doing delicate magical work could have extremely bad results, either comic or tragic, and he wasn’t eager to be in the middle of either.

Meghan looked up and met Dumbledore’s eyes. “Professor, can we – may we, I mean – try it? Please?”

“You have my permission.” Dumbledore placed gentle stress on the possessive.

Meghan looked over her shoulder at Aletha. “Please, Mama Letha?” she said. “I think we really can.”

Aletha looked torn for a second or two, then shot a glance at Sirius, one he knew well. *This is all your fault.* “Go ahead, Pearl,” she said. “But be careful.”

“Luna, I think we need you,” said Neville. “You saw it last time.”

“Everybody saw it who was there,” said Luna, getting up and coming across to him. “But you want me to show you, right?”

Neville nodded. Luna pulled out her chain and threw it over his head, and they stood still for a moment, eyes shut. Harry signaled to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny, and the four of them closed in around Dumbledore and their Pride-mates, sitting down on the floor in a rough half-circle. Aletha joined Sirius and Danger in the doorway to the kitchen, where they could see the faces of Meghan, Neville, and Luna, eyes closed in concentration.

Luna's eyes opened first. "Do you need it again?" she asked.

"No, I think we have it. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Luna reclaimed her chain and sat down at the end of the row, leaving a person-sized space between her and Hermione. The room had become very quiet.

Meghan's hands moved back and forth, her right waving an invisible wand, her left making plucking and pulling motions. It looked familiar, but Sirius couldn't quite place it. It seemed Ron could, though. His face had cleared from confusion to understanding within the first few seconds, and he'd signed something to the rest of the seated Pride, something Sirius could barely make out. It seemed the Pride had done more than just modify Marauder hand-sign.

Involves him and someone who's not here, that was all I could get from it.

Meghan's left hand tightened into a fist, and she and Neville knelt quickly beside the marjoram plant. Neville cupped his hand around the base of the stems, and Meghan opened her fist, letting out a breath of relief as she did. The marjoram quivered for a moment. Then its leaves began to shrivel and blacken.

Above them, Dumbledore flexed his fingers, then began to rub his injured hand with his good one. "It may never be as it was," he murmured, "but it seems it will be better than it is."

"We should take it outside right away," said Meghan. "It can't stay in the pot, that's not fair. We said it could have lots of things."

"You're right." Neville started to get up, slowly. Harry was beside him immediately, offering him a hand. Hermione helped Meghan to her feet, and Ron picked up the pot, looking askance at the marjoram, which was getting blacker by the second. Ginny ran to open the back door, and they all trooped outside, Luna bringing up the rear.

"What was that?" said Danger after a moment of ringing silence.

"I think she was transferring something," said Aletha. "Like Healer Young transferred that curse."

"That is precisely what she was doing," said Dumbledore, still rubbing his hand. "My injury resulted from a curse. Severus and Poppy were able to halt its spread, but the vestiges of it remained with me, preventing any healing where it had taken hold. Meghan has removed those vestiges."

"That must have been one hell of a curse," said Sirius. "If even its remnants could do that much damage."

"It was a rather vile spell," Dumbledore allowed. "I may never regain full use of this hand, but I believe some healing will now be possible. I certainly hope its appearance can be improved. I would be loathe to look anything less than my best this year."

“And why is that?” asked Aletha.

Dumbledore smiled. “You will know soon enough, if you do not already,” he said enigmatically. “And I fear you would not be able to resist telling your cubs the news, and they are not to know until the official announcement at the Opening Feast.”

Something triggered in Sirius’ mind. “I heard rumors at work about the Triwizard Tournament,” he said. “But that hasn’t happened in years...”

Dumbledore’s smile broadened.

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Outside, Meghan repeated her earlier movements, this time over the marjoram first, then over a particularly nasty weed that had resisted all efforts to root it out of the garden. “There you go,” she said. “You can have all the plants like this that you want. I think their roots are all connected anyway.”

The plant began to shrivel immediately. Meghan smiled slightly and pressed Neville’s hand. “Thank you,” she said. “You helped a lot.”

“I like helping you. And I hope it’ll get as far as our house. Not even Dad can get this weed to go away.”

“What did you just do?” Hermione asked Meghan, a little shrilly.

“She transferred a curse,” said Ginny. “She talked it into letting go, and then she transferred it from Professor Dumbledore’s hand to the plant, and from the plant to the other plant.”

“But how did you know that?”

“I knew it,” said Ron. “She was doing the same as the Healer did when he took the curse off Draco and put it on me. When it’s the last thing you see for two days, you remember what it looked like.”

“Why don’t I remember it, then?”

“Because you were worried about Draco,” said Harry. “You were looking at him, not at what the Healer was doing.”

“But I should remember. I should.” Hermione was almost pouting. “I don’t forget things.”

“Everybody forgets things sometimes,” said Ron.

“Not me. I don’t. I shouldn’t. I can’t.” Hermione’s breathing was coming faster. “I can’t forget things, I just can’t.”

Harry caught Ginny's eye. *Get the grownups*, he signed to her. Ginny nodded and ran inside.

Ron was staring at Hermione, who was pacing back and forth now, shaking her hands out as if ridding herself of cramps. Luna knelt beside Meghan and Neville, looking closely at the blackened weed in the middle of the garden. Harry took a deep breath and stepped in front of Hermione. "Stop it," he said.

"Stop what?"

"Stop doing this. You don't have to remember everything. It's not something wrong with you if you don't."

"Yes it is!" Hermione shouted. "I'm not *supposed* to forget!"

"Says who?" asked Ron, joining Harry. "You can't remember everything, Neenie."

"I can too. And don't call me that."

"Neenie," said Harry quickly. If he could just get her mad about something else... "Pretty Neenie."

"Sweetie Neenie." Ron was grinning.

"Cutie Neenie."

"Tckle Neeniekins."

Hermione shrieked with rage and leapt on Ron. Harry caught her around the waist and yanked her off, only to have her turn and scratch at his face. He let her go to shield himself, and Ron grabbed her instead, until she kicked at his legs, dropping him to the ground. Harry slammed his shoulder into her with carefully calculated force, knocking her down without (he hoped) actually hurting her, and Ron rolled over and pinned her with his hands on her shoulders. She screamed, writhing angrily under his hands, aiming kicks at him until Harry sat down on her legs.

"Stop it, Hermione," he said firmly. "Stop it now."

"Let her up, you two," said Danger, kneeling beside them. "Hermione, they're right. You need to settle down."

"I don't *want* to settle down! People are gone and I'm forgetting things and I can't talk to Draco any more until Tuesday and everything is all *wrong!* "

"I know you don't want to settle down. But you have two choices. Settle or be settled." Danger displayed her wand. "Your choice."

Hermione sniffled twice, then relaxed. Ron took his hands away and got up quickly. Harry stood up as well, signing thanks to Ginny, who was standing nearby. "Wonder what happened," he said to Ron as they moved out of Hermione's earshot.

“Dunno. Maybe she misses Draco.”

Harry snapped his fingers. “Draco. That’s it.”

Ron looked oddly at him. “Harry, he’s been gone for three days.”

“Three days, I know. And that’s just when Danger got ill with Moony gone. Three days after he left. Draco and Hermione’s bond isn’t the same, but it’s still a bond. Maybe that’s what’s making her act like this.”

“Or maybe she’s just in a bad mood,” said Ginny, joining them. “People do have those sometimes when there isn’t any magic involved. She might be mad that the jewel connection closed so fast when you got that phone call. She barely had time to tell him everything was all right and say goodbye before it snapped.”

Harry shrugged. “I still think she’d be better if she had some way to see him,” he said. “Be with him for a little while. I’d like to see him too, but I think she needs it.”

“So let’s come up with something,” said Ron. “Maybe she could turn cat and go stay with him for a couple days that way.”

“But how would she get there?” objected Ginny. “Cats can’t Floo, and she can’t Apparate.”

Luna came over to join them. “Meghan and Neville are going to need to go to bed,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“You,” said Harry, the beginnings of a plan appearing in his mind. “Or we will be.” Behind Luna, Padfoot picked up Meghan, while Professor Dumbledore helped Neville to his feet. Letha came out the door with two vials of a potion in her hands, probably a restorative. “Let’s go someplace private.”

“Wait for me,” Hermione called when they were halfway out of the yard. She came running after them, scrubbing at her cheeks with a hand. “I’m sorry,” she said to Ron and Harry. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Sall right,” said Ron casually. “You don’t hit that hard anyway.”

“It’s fine, Hermione,” said Harry, quickly interposing himself between them before Hermione could turn the statement into a lie. “Come on, we’re plotting and planning how to do things we’re not supposed to.”

“When are we ever not?”

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Frank Longbottom came over to the Den to collect his sleeping son. “Every time he goes out with your lot, he comes home like this,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s probably bad for him.”

“And yet you still let him go out,” said Danger.

“Who am I to keep him from his friends? I just need to encourage them to come over to our place more.”

“So that they can do strange magic and fall asleep under your eye instead of ours,” said Aletha.

“Exactly.” Frank leaned Neville against him and gripped his arm tightly. “Our interview at WFS is tomorrow,” he said. “Alice is home working out what we should and shouldn’t tell them. We’ll let you know how it went.”

“Thanks,” said Sirius as Frank Disappeared. He looked at Dumbledore. “And now, back to our regularly scheduled program?”

“A Muggle metaphor.” Dumbledore chuckled lightly. “How unexpected from you, Sirius.”

“Oh, Sirius is getting to be quite the expert on Muggle technology,” said Danger. “He can even figure out which end of the telephone to talk into now. Usually.”

“They look the same,” Sirius muttered. “Both funny shapes with little holes in them.”

“Was there something else you wanted to ask us, Albus?” said Aletha politely, though her lips kept twitching upwards at the ends. “I thought you had said there was another reason for your coming here.”

“Yes.” Dumbledore brushed at his robes. “I would ask your permission to take Harry to tea with an old friend of mine.”

Sirius frowned, confused. “You want our permission to take Harry to tea?” he said. “Why would you think we’d say no?”

“Because of the conditions attached. Harry must agree to this expedition as well, after I have explained the circumstances to him fully. And I would ask that you not question him about his experience if he consents.”

“Why all the secrecy?” asked Aletha. “I know, it’s a secret. But can you give us a general category that the secret falls into?”

“The same category,” said Dumbledore, “as this.” He extended his injured hand.

“Voldemort,” said Danger quietly. “Something to do with Voldemort.”

“Yes.”

Sirius chewed his lip for a moment. “Harry is the one who eventually has to deal with Voldemort,” he said. “Face to face, one-on-one. We can’t stop that, no matter how much we’d like to. I vote aye.”

“Harry’s sensible, most of the time,” said Aletha. “And you’ll be with him, Albus. Aye.”

“What’s going to happen to him at tea?” asked Danger. “Aye.”

“He has to start sometime,” said Remus’ voice. “I wish he didn’t, but he does. Four eyes, no dissent.”

“I thank you,” said Dumbledore formally, standing. “And on that note, I shall take no more of your time. Please thank Meghan for me when she awakens – I will thank her myself when I see her next, but two sets of thanks will not harm her.”

“Apart from giving her a big head,” said Sirius, standing up to shake Dumbledore’s hand again. It did feel a bit better, stronger under his grip. “But being the youngest will counteract that, I think.”

“It always does,” said Aletha. “Goodbye, Albus, we’ll be in touch.”

“Thank you for coming,” said Danger. “You go to a lot of trouble for us.”

“Trouble for which I am more than adequately compensated at every turn,” said Dumbledore with a smile. “I shall contact you with more details about tea. Farewell.”

xXxXx

“I have never harmed any of my children,” said Sirius for what felt like the millionth time, carefully resisting the urge to roll his eyes or talk through gritted teeth. “Or my wife, or my friends.”

“Yes, but can you prove that?”

Sirius took two deep breaths before answering. *I’d better never meet you outside this office, Curcio, or I’ll hex you so hard your head spins around.* “I don’t know. I haven’t kept documented evidence of every moment I’ve ever spent with them.”

“There’s a very simple way to tell,” said a casewitch. “One I’m a little surprised you haven’t used already, Curcio. We’ll simply watch them interact, see how they act towards each other.”

“Oh, really,” Curcio scoffed. “As if he’d be foolish enough to do anything actionable here.”

“He might not. But the children’s behavior will tell us much.”

“And if he’s already warned them, the way he warned the other boy? Threatening their very lives if they don’t behave as he wants them to?”

“I wasn’t threatening his life,” said Sirius, fed up. “I was reminding him that if he shot his mouth off, you might decide to take him away. Which you did anyway, so I might as well have kept my mouth shut. What were you doing, having me watched on the off chance I might say something that would give you the excuse to take him?”

Curcio jerked in surprise. Not much – only a trained eye would have seen it – but he was startled by what Sirius had said.

He was. This was all planned. Even if I hadn't said that in the Atrium, they would have found some other way, some other excuse to take him...

Thank God Remus remembered about Hermione in time.

Danger, Sirius, and Aletha had signed, in blood, a document stating that Sirius and Aletha were Hermione's guardians should Danger ever become unavailable. This covered for those times when Danger might be staying with Remus, leaving Hermione at the Den. Since Danger was Hermione's sister, a blood relation in the first degree, her word was absolute unless there was proof that Hermione was being abused where she was.

And if they find proof of abuse at the Den, I'll eat my manuscripts. All of them.

"I doubt any casewizard would so lower himself, Mr. Black," the casewitch said testily. She looked familiar, but Sirius couldn't quite place her. "As I was saying, you have vigorously denied abusing your children. Will you agree to an observation period?"

"Gladly," said Sirius. *Anything to convince you people to leave us alone.*

A different casewitch showed him to a comfortable room with one mirrored wall. Sirius looked at it dubiously for a moment, then touched his fingertip to it. There was no gap between his nail and his nail's reflection.

It's a window. Well, they did say observation. Sirius grinned. He could think of a lot of fun places to take this.

"*Dadfoot!*" screamed a voice, and Meghan slammed into him from behind, shoving him up against the glass.

They want to observe, I'll give them something to observe. Bug on the windscreen. Sirius flattened his face against the mirror and crossed his eyes, letting himself slide downwards.

"He's my prisoner!" crowed Meghan, sitting on Sirius' back. "I got him!" Sirius squirmed, making Meghan smack the back of his head. "Stop that. Harry, Hermione, help me, quick, before he gets away."

A heavier weight than Meghan's landed on Sirius' legs, and a shadow fell across his head. He looked up to see Harry. "Need some help?" the boy asked, indicating the two giggling girls perched on Sirius.

"Oh, all I can get."

Harry promptly grabbed Meghan and dragged her off Sirius' back. Hermione lunged forward to grab her sister, and Sirius took advantage of the lessening of weight to yank his legs out from

beneath her and get away.

Roughhousing's probably not the best idea right now. But what can we do –

Ah. Got it.

“All right, that’s enough now,” he said when the cubs had worked off a little energy. “Everyone gather ‘round who wants to hear a story.”

Immediately he had an audience. Even Harry was sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of his chair, looking up at him eagerly.

“This is a tale of the long ago,” Sirius began, signing as he spoke. *Mirror is a window. Behave.* The cubs all nodded gravely. “A tale of the long ago and the far away.”

Harry imitated a trumpet playing the first few bars of the *Star Wars* theme. Hermione and Meghan joined in, adding some of the other instrumental parts.

“Not that long ago and far away,” said Sirius, rolling his eyes. “A little closer to home. In this long ago and far away, there lived a lovely maiden, a simple village girl, who dreamed of adventure and romance, but knew her life would likely be much as her mother’s had been, having babies and tending the inn where they lived. And then one day, an armored knight rode into their village, and the maiden’s whole life changed...”

xXxXx

“Are you in a safe relationship, dear?”

Aletha stared at the elderly casewitch. *I cannot just have heard her right.* “I’m sorry?”

“Do you feel safe at home? You can feel free to tell me, none of this will go any farther than this room.”

“Why would I not feel safe at home?”

“Well, your fingers – they seem to have some odd burns on them...”

Aletha glanced at her hands. They sported two burns at the moment, better than her usual average of four. “I brew potions,” she said. “When you work with hot cauldrons, sometimes you get burned.”

“And your leg – forgive me, but I couldn’t help noticing your scars...”

“I got those playing Quidditch when I was sixteen years old.” Suddenly, light dawned. “Are you asking me if *I’m* being abused?”

“Well, we try to avoid that terminology – some women have bad reactions to it...”

“No,” said Aletha firmly. “I am not being abused in any way, shape, or form. Nor are our children. If Sirius ever raised his hand to the children in anger, I would personally make sure that he couldn’t raise anything for at least a month. And that would be before I sued him for a divorce and more than half of everything he’s got. No. Nothing like that has ever happened in our house.”

The casewitch blinked, seemingly startled by Aletha’s vehemence. “I – I see,” she said. “Very well. I’ll just put ‘Yes’ for safe relationship, then.”

Aletha had to bite her lip almost to the point of drawing blood to keep from laughing in the woman’s face.

xXxXx

“Well, I feel rather foolish. There’s absolutely no evidence of abuse in any of these three cases,” said Casewitch Felicity Davidson, flipping through her files. “And no *good* evidence of abuse in Draco Black’s case either...”

“Draco Black’s case is still mine,” interjected Christopher Curcio smoothly. “And I still say he’s safer where he is. These people are tricky, Davidson, very tricky. They lived with a werewolf for all those years – who’s to say they’re not using some Dark magic on the children to force the answers we want to hear?”

“A bit paranoid, aren’t you, Curcio? We’re trained to notice anomalies, and I noticed none. Marcia?”

“The only person in danger of being abused in that house is Sirius Black himself,” said Casewitch Marcia Hamilton, chuckling. “His wife was quite vehement about that. I felt rather a fool myself when I was finished there. Why don’t you just send the Black boy home, Curcio? Or at least give his case a review?”

“It wouldn’t be proper at this time,” Curcio said firmly. “His guardians are filing a petition to have his custody returned to them, very well, but it has to go through proper channels. Unless his mother suddenly returns from the dead, we have to follow procedure for children with undetermined guardians.”

“You know, I don’t think we’ve ever seen that contract you claim is flawed,” said Davidson suddenly, frowning. “And all we have is the evidence from the trial that Lupin signed it. What if he’s telling the truth, and the boy was just misled or mistaken about that?”

“He’s lying,” said Curcio certainly. “If that contract has only three signatures on it, they’ve altered it somehow. Which would make it void just as surely as Lupin’s signature on there. They’re not pushing for Draco to be returned to them, you notice. Could that be because they fear having the contract examined? At this point, we have done our duty, and matters can continue as they are until that petition comes through.”

“As long as it does come through.” Hamilton looked at him suspiciously. “What do you have

against these people, Curcio?”

“Nothing against them personally. I merely hate seeing abusers go unpunished.”

He had a hard time keeping from laughing aloud as he mouthed those words. Of course he hated to see abusers go unpunished. Most of them didn't go nearly far enough.

I smile and nod, make the right gestures, serve my clients well to build my reputation in this time of peace. But should my master ever rise again...

Then – ah, then he would be in a position to rebuild their ranks with the most violent witches and wizards in Britain, those most willing to rise up and fight for a new day, the day of the strong, the day of the powerful.

The day of the Dark Lord.

Giving those Dark creatures who knew their proper place a steady supply of half-breed and Mudblood children would be even more pleasurable than helping to find new recruits. But for the moment, reclaiming purebloods from mongrels and fools like Lupin, who dared pretend to be human, made a good start.

Nott will show the boy the truth. He'll be ours by the time that petition comes through, and beg to stay where he is. Perhaps even reclaim his proper ancestral name...

xXxXx

Theodore yawned as he sat in the corner of the library. He would rather have been somewhere else, but this was where Black was, and his father wanted him to keep an eye on Black as long as Lovegood was here.

Loony Lovegood. The Slytherins called her that, but never where any Gryffindors could hear. No one could forget that embarrassing incident in first year. Theo's face heated. *Four of them, three with wands, and they trounced all ten of us. We never even got a spell in edgewise.*

And as if Lovegood being here wasn't bad enough, she'd brought a cat. Its markings were pretty, Theo had to admit grudgingly – its face was all white, its chest black, and the top of its head down to its shoulders was orange. The rest of its body was covered in random splotches of those three colors. Half the things Black said were directed at the cat rather than at Lovegood, and he would sometimes pause for a moment, then laugh, as if an invisible person had told him a joke.

He's just weird. But I knew that already.

And I know he had something to do with those people from Misuse of Muggle Artifacts. His father had spent several uncomfortable hours on Monday dealing with Arthur Weasley and a team of MLE personnel. *But how could he have? There wasn't anything in his letters about the chess set. And none of the pieces remembered him – how could he have seen them if he wasn't in the room?*

The cat leapt from Black's arms and raced out of the room. "She does that sometimes," said Lovegood. "Nott?"

"What do you want?" said Theo as rudely as he dared. His father frowned on open rudeness to pureblood guests, even odd ones.

"Is anyone in your family allergic to cats?"

"No. Why?"

"Because when Neenie runs off like that, I usually can't find her," said Lovegood. "Not until she wants to be found. She might have to spend the night here, if I can't find her before I leave."

"I'll take care of her," said Black. "I think she likes me." He and Lovegood exchanged conspiratorial smiles. "Come on, Luna, I want to show you the herb garden."

Theo rolled his eyes, but got up and followed them.

They're holding hands. I think I'm going to throw up.

Halfway down the stairs, Lovegood turned to look at him. "You don't have to stay with us all the time, you know," she said. "We're not going to run away."

"It's my duty as a host not to leave my guests to fend for themselves," said Theo, forcing himself not to clench his teeth. "I'd be rude if I left you alone."

But when they got outside, he found a bench at the very border of the herb garden.

There. Now they're not alone, but I don't have to listen to them.

xXxXx

Luna gravitated to the beds of herbs Draco had picked sprigs from a few days before, rubbing some of their leaves between her fingers and sniffing. She plucked a long, furry, green leaf from one plant and offered it to him. He took it, but she didn't let go right away, tugging gently at its other end. He grinned and tugged back. "I've missed you," he said.

"I've missed you too." She let go of the leaf. "You might have to stay here until after the Quidditch World Cup, you know."

"I know. But it's not too bad. As long as I stay out of everyone's way, they mostly leave me alone. And I know they're going to the Cup, so I'll get to go anyway." Draco frowned. "But Nott keeps talking about how hard it is to get tickets for the Top Box, how he and his dad were lucky to get two, and I'll probably have to sit lower down, if they can get me a seat at all..."

"But you have a seat in the Top Box," said Luna. "With Harry and Hermione and the Weasleys."

Draco thumped his hand against his forehead. "I'm so stupid." He glanced at Nott, sitting sullenly at the edge of the garden. "You know, I don't think I'll tell him about that," he said. "I'll just follow him and his daddy all the way up. And when we get there and they try to tell me to go away..."

"You can just push right past them and go sit with the Pride." Luna giggled. "I like that."

Draco looked at the crushed sage leaf in his palm. "I like it too," he said. "I wish you were coming to the Cup."

Luna shrugged. "Dad's saving for another trip this Christmas," she said. "And I wouldn't have been able to sit with you anyway. So it's just as well."

Draco sighed. "I haven't even been here a week, and it feels like forever," he said quietly. "There are times I feel like I'm forgetting what the Den looks like. What the Pack and the Pride all look like. It's so hard to remember sometimes."

Luna stooped to brush her hand against the tops of green leaves. "You'll remember," she said. "Don't worry." She hummed a note under her breath, then began to sing. Her voice was every bit as sweet as Draco remembered, and the song was the one he'd been thinking of himself when he had plucked herbs from this garden only a few days ago.

Are you going to Scarborough Fair?

Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme;

Remember me to one who lives there,

For he was once a true love of mine.

Draco took the second verse.

Tell her to make me a cambric shirt,

Luna harmonized with him on the second line, weaving in a high descant.

Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme;

Draco took the melody alone again.

Sewn without seams or fine needlework,

For then she'll be a true love of mine.

Luna sang once more.

Tell him to find me an acre of land,

Now Draco added a low harmony to her melody.

Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme;

Between the salt water and the sea sand,

For then he'll be a true love of mine.

For the few minutes the song lasted, Draco could forget where he was, forget what was wrong in his life, forget everything bad that had happened. All that existed was his voice, and hers, and the savory smell of the herbs they held in their hands. The final verse was sung together, first one voice taking the melody, then the other.

When we have done and finished our work,

Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme;

Luna slid her hand along Draco's shoulder.

Then come you to me for your cambric shirt,

For then you'll be a true love of mine,

Only remembering that Nott was still watching them kept Draco from transferring luck with her then and there. He joined her on the repeated last line instead.

For then you'll be a true love of mine.

xXxXx

Theo stood up quickly as his father came out of the house. "Mr. Lovegood has called, Theodore. He wishes Miss Lovegood to come home."

"I'll tell them, Father." Theo hesitated a second, but he'd be in more trouble for not telling than for telling. "Father, Lovegood's—"

"Manners, Theodore."

"Miss Lovegood's cat ran away from her. It's somewhere in the house. She says it does this often, and usually it can't be found when it does. Black has said he'll take care of it when it comes out, until she can come back for it."

His father frowned. "Are you sure you don't wish your cat found immediately, Miss Lovegood?" he said, stepping into the herb garden. "I can send Brilly—"

"Neenie bites, sir," said Lovegood politely. "And scratches. But that's only if you try to make her come out. And she never hides for more than a few hours. I trust Draco to take care of her until

tomorrow.”

“Is this agreeable to you, Draco?”

“Yes, sir.” Black actually looked happy about it, Theo noticed. “I like Neenie.”

“Very well, I leave it to you, then. You may care for the cat and inform Miss Lovegood when it is found.”

“I will, sir.” Black looked at Lovegood. “Bye, Luna,” he said.

“Goodbye, Draco.”

They both brushed their hands down their faces and touched each other’s cheeks. Theo looked away.

Next thing you know, they’ll be kissing...

xXxXx

Sirius stared at Aletha, not sure he’d heard right. “Isn’t lupus a mostly Muggle disease?”

“Yes.”

“Rare among witches and wizards.”

“Yes.”

“But you’re saying everyone with lupus is actually a carrier for lycanthropy?”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I. But the tests always come out the same. Lupus is the way the carrier form of lycanthropy manifests itself in the human body.”

“So could anyone with lupus bite someone and make them a werewolf?”

Aletha shook her head, smiling wryly. “Not unless they’re an Animagus. It might even be necessary to be a *wolf* Animagus, but I don’t know that for sure. What I do know is that Danger’s saliva only tests for contamination when she’s in wolf form. Her human form is as safe as it ever was.”

“A debatable point.” Sirius rubbed the back of his hand.

“Just because she won’t let you snitch before dinner is no reason to make a fuss.”

“How did you find this out, anyway?”

“I backtracked a few magical cases of lupus and found preserved samples, and tracked down a few current patients and asked them if they’d donate some blood to a project. They all react the same way – half as violently as actual werewolf samples. There are differences, of course. People with lupus don’t have much of a reaction to silver, which is probably why this has never been noticed before. The silver test is the gold standard for lycanthropy, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

Sirius groaned. “Do I have to? That was awful.”

Aletha ignored him. “So I tried some of the more intricate spells with the samples from the lupus patients, and they showed a dimmer or smaller version of the lycanthropy positive. It’s possible, even likely, that lupus is transferred human to human, and that’s why cases in the magical community are so rare – most magical people shun werewolves, so they often live among Muggles.”

“But is it just touch transference? It can’t be, or you and I would have had it long before now, being around Remus for so long.”

“No, I think it’s bodily fluids. It might even be that if you’re bitten by a werewolf, you become a werewolf, but if you come in contact with a werewolf’s blood, or something else, you contract lupus. I really don’t know.”

“Someone must have known about this at some point.” Sirius picked at a small dent in the table. “I mean, look at the name of the damn thing. It can’t have been unknown forever.”

“No, but it was unknown to us, here and now. Until now.” Aletha sat down beside Sirius, a resigned smile tugging her lips upward. “I am going to have such a reputation by the time I graduate.”

“Your own fault for being too smart.”

“Too smart for what?”

“Your own good.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, really. So you’d better lower your intelligence right away.”

“And how would you suggest I do that?”

“Well, you could put your head in close contact with a stupid person. Maybe some brains would migrate.”

“Good plan. There’s only one problem.”

“What?”

“I don’t see any stupid people around here.”

Sirius opened his mouth to protest that he was, too, stupid, then closed it again. “Did I just outsmart myself?” he asked wistfully.

“It’s not terribly hard to do.” Aletha chuckled. “Although it is amusing to watch.”

Sirius put his head down on the table. “I can’t do anything right,” he told the wood grain by his left eye. “Not even call myself names.”

“You’d better get a brain transplant,” said Aletha above him. A firm hand caught the back of his collar and pulled gently. “I think I could find you a donor.”

“Is that full brain or just partial?”

“Partial, definitely.”

“Will I get a discount?”

“Discount? For what?”

“I’d be willing to pay full price for new brains, but these are going to be *used* .”

Aletha bristled up for an instant, then rolled her eyes and shoved him, laughing. “You’re horrible.”

“But you knew that when you married me.”

“No, I only thought I did. I’ve been rediscovering it every day since.”

“Would you care to rediscover it a little right now?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 29: Memories (Year 4)

Chapter 29: Memories

After seeing Luna off at the fireplace, Draco walked back upstairs to his room, humming “Scarborough Fair” under his breath.

Maybe we should have kissed after all, just to see the look on Nott’s face... but nah. Not worth it. Anyway, now I get to spend time with somebody else...

Neenie had told him about her meltdown a day or two ago, when Professor Dumbledore was at the Den, and he had understood. He’d been feeling similar lately – more irritable, more restless, more likely to snap at people or kick things.

But I just thought it was being away from the Den. Not that it isn’t, but it’s being away from Hermione, in particular. I don’t think we’ll get ill from being apart like Moony and Danger do, but we may get antsy. So we have to see each other and be together every few days.

Luna’s going to be losing her cat a lot until I go home again.

Draco frowned. Seeing Neenie again had brought her image into sharp focus in his mind, as had seeing and talking with Luna. But thoughts of the rest of the Pack and Pride, or of the Den, seemed scattered and unimportant. Other things and people were perfectly clear in his memory – he could practically count the towers on Hogwarts, or be able to tell what color Seamus Finnegan’s eyes were...

Not that I care, particularly. Does this mean something, or am I just being paranoid?

He pushed the door of his room open and smiled to see the calico cat on his windowsill, washing a paw. “Didn’t take you long,” he said, closing the door behind him and walking toward his bed. “So, where shall we start?”

With a hiss, Neenie leapt from the windowsill to the bed, landing just where Draco had planned to fall onto it. He pulled himself upright again just in time and stared. Neenie’s teeth were bared, her fur bristling. “What’s wrong with you?”

Neenie made another leap, this one towards Draco’s chest. He caught her and supported her back legs, allowing her to climb onto his shoulder and rub her face against his ear. **Don’t go near the bed. There’s something wrong with it.**

“Something wrong like what? Snakes under it?”

No. But the sheets smell wrong. Like something burnt, like hair or feathers. I don’t like it.

“All right, I trust you.” Draco frowned at the bed. “Why would my sheets smell wrong?”

Do we really need to answer that? Consider where you are.

“True.” Draco made for the chair in the corner, then paused. “This is safe?”

Let me check. Neenie jumped from his shoulder onto the seat of the chair and sniffed at the cushions. She sneezed once, then looked at him and nodded. Draco sat down where she wasn't, and she climbed onto his lap. **It doesn't smell like the bed, she said with a paw on his hand. Just dusty, is all.**

Draco stroked her back with his other hand. “I think I'll be sleeping sitting up tonight.”

Neenie purred.

xXxXx

“Remus' guess was entirely right,” said Aletha. “Your symptoms start to show up around a day away from each other. Two days makes it worse, three days makes it much worse. I don't recommend taking any four-day weekends.”

“Not apart, at any rate,” said Danger. “So it would be safe for me to be at the Den all day, even spend the night if I had to, but I should check in with Remus early the next morning if I want to stay totally healthy.”

“Yes. I don't know if there might be cumulative effects from repeated bouts of this, and I'd just as soon not find out.”

“I'll second that. So what's the news at home?”

“Hermione's due back sometime this afternoon, whenever Luna can bring her. You are aware we're insane, letting her do this.”

“We've just had the power of an overstressed magical bond very clearly demonstrated.” Danger shivered. “Granted, their bond is of a different order than ours, but do you want to risk it?”

“No.” Aletha shook her head firmly. “Absolutely not. Especially with Draco beyond our reach.” She sighed. “Sirius was saying the other day, if Narcissa was alive... but then we would never have had him in the first place, so it's not worth talking about.”

“Why Narcissa?”

“Well, even if the Ministry suspected abuse, which they do – groundlessly, of course, but try telling them that – if Narcissa was alive, she'd be Draco's guardian automatically, with no need for a contract. Obviously, of course, she was his mother. But any first-degree blood relative would do. Even if he had to be removed from their custody, they would still have a say in where he went. The problem is that his father...”

Danger scowled. “Yes.”

“And he’s an only child.”

“Was an only child. He has Hermione now.”

“That’s true, but she’s as much a minor as he is.”

Danger went very still suddenly. “She’s a minor,” she said. “But I’m not.”

“But the bond wasn’t with you...”

“Doesn’t matter. Or it shouldn’t.” Danger was starting to grin. “He’s blood to Hermione, he’s blood to me. Which means...”

Aletha returned the grin. “Which means we can tell the Ministry to go to hell.”

“Please.” Danger held up an admonishing finger. “Go to hell, *please*. We’ll be very polite about it.”

“All right, let’s think.” Aletha pushed aside the parchment holding the test results she and Danger had been discussing. “They probably won’t let him come home yet. Disproving the abuse allegation is going to take time. But we can get him away from the Notts if you designate another foster home.”

“Hmm, let me think about it for a minute.” Danger tilted her head to one side for all of a second. “Do you think he’d like Fireflower House?”

“I think he’d like it a lot better than Nott Manor.” Aletha rolled her eyes. “Ruddy purebloods, no imagination at all.”

“Probably been bred out over the centuries. Along with intelligence and politeness. Although I shouldn’t say bred... trained, maybe?”

“That’s more likely.” Aletha traced a shape on the table. “You know, I think we have a fairly convincing argument for nurture over nature in the form of our little fox.”

“But one for nature over nurture in the form of your loutish husband.”

“You have a point there. Why don’t we just say that life is a wonderful and complicated thing and leave it at that.”

“Works for me.” Danger sighed happily. “We have other things to think about in any case.”

“Like getting hold of Frank or Alice and asking very nicely if they’d put fresh sheets on the guest room bed.”

“Precisely.”

xXxXx

Sirius Apparated into the fringes of the Weasleys' orchard, and was immediately sure he was in the right place. That solid *whack* was made by only one thing – a Beater's bat coming into contact with a Bludger.

Whack. Pause. Whack. Pause. Whack.

He followed the sound towards the clearing in the middle of the orchard. As he got closer, he began to hear another sound accompanying the *whacks*. Someone was talking to herself, and judging by the tone, whatever she was saying was not making her happy.

He stopped just shy of the clearing, knowing that if he stepped out into view, the Bludger would see him as fair game. Besides, he wanted to watch this.

Aletha had her legs locked around her broom, allowing her to swing her bat two-handed. The Bludger looked rather wobbly on its nonexistent legs, but was coming after her gamely once more. She brought the bat around in a great sweeping rush and pelted the Bludger nearly to the trees at the other end of the clearing. “–flaming *berk* thinks he can do what he *pleases* just because he can *buy* the damned stuff–”

Whack.

“–*completely* inappropriate, not to mention *wrong*, and don't even get me *started* on the dosage–”

Whack.

“–hope I see him at the other end of my *wand* sometime, they'll be lucky if there's enough left to *charge* –”

Sirius whistled, catching Aletha's attention. She looked towards him, nodded, and spun back just in time to smash the Bludger away once more, then dived for the ground, where Sirius could see the box they kept the Den's Quidditch equipment in. The Bludger went after Aletha again as she dismounted, but she dropped on top of it expertly, flattening it to the ground, then drew her wand and immobilized it with a spell lasting just long enough for her to get it into its box and close the lid.

“Harry said you'd gone out for a fly,” said Sirius. “Said you seemed upset about something.”

“Upset isn't the word.” Aletha shook her head, droplets of sweat flying from it. “I'm just sorry there's no way we can prove this. It'd probably earn Nott a cell next to Malfoy if we could.”

“What?”

“I found Hermione in my potions room after Luna brought her home today. She was poking through my ingredients. I asked her what she was doing, and she told me that while she was with Draco, she'd been able to smell something odd on his bedsheets, like burnt hair or feathers. And

then she mentioned that Draco was complaining of not being able to remember things clearly.”

“I don’t like the sound of this.”

“Nor should you. There’s a potion Healers use to treat severely traumatized people, people who went through some horrific experience and are obsessed by it. The potion takes the memories that the person thinks about most and puts them at one remove, makes them a little more distant. Two of the main ingredients are singed pogrebin hair and the ashes of jobberknoll feathers. I was able to get some of it from the hospital, and Hermione identified its smell.”

Sirius frowned, thinking it through. “Takes the memories that you think about the most and puts them at a distance. But Draco would be thinking most about us, about being home again...”

“Exactly. This damned stuff would make him try to stop thinking about us. But that’s not even what got me maddest.” Aletha swung her bat at a nearby tree, shaking down several tufts of leaves. “I experimented with a set of our bedsheets and the vial I got from the hospital. I had to use ten drops before Hermione said it smelled like Draco’s did. *Ten*, Sirius. The maximum dose for use on adults is *three* .”

Sirius stuck out his hand. “May I use that?” he said politely.

“Be my guest.” Aletha handed over the Beater’s bat.

Sirius stormed over to the box holding the Bludger, kicked it open, and flicked off the restraints holding the black ball in place with the end of the bat. It rose up, hovered a moment, then zoomed towards him. Sirius pounded it away easily.

And the worst part is, I’m sure I know how Nott would justify this. “If the boy was abused, shouldn’t I be doing everything in my power to make this a happier place for him, to take his mind off his unfortunate past?”

He belted the Bludger again. *Unfortunate past indeed. Wonder what kind of life your brat’s had. Probably worse memories in his past than in Draco’s.*

“Hope I meet Nott in the dueling ring sometime,” he grumbled, slamming the Bludger once more.

“Not before I do,” said Aletha firmly. “I called it first.”

“Fine, fine.” *Whack*. “But I get what’s left of him.”

“Which will be precisely nothing.”

“Aww, you’re no fun.” *Whack*.

“Never have been.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that...”

xXxXx

The hearing on the tenth of July was rather anticlimactic. After everything he'd gone through with his first time at the Ministry, Remus rather expected to be greeted by Aurors watching him warily and a judge's voice thundering condemnation. Instead, the hearing was private, held in Amelia Bones' office, with only himself, Danger, and Madam Bones present. Remus suspected Dumbledore's hand in it.

Madam Bones heard what they had to say, then chuckled deep in her throat. "I'll find out who let this get as far as it has," she said. "Under the law, you can't be committing a crime if you're trying to stop one. Malfoy was trespassing and evading justice. You used what weapons you had available to stop him. And off the record, I think it's no more than he deserves. You're free to go."

It makes life easier, but I don't know if it's right, Remus said later as they walked down the street together.

Why should you be punished for what I did?

Oh, that's right. Remus smiled sheepishly. **I keep forgetting we're not telling the true story.**

Danger rolled her eyes. **Only you.**

xXxXx

Meghan sat on the den room floor with her legs extended fully to either side, leaning forward to read from the book on the floor.

Chapter 3. Intermediate Potion Making Techniques. Section 1: New Stirring Techniques.

A handwritten note at the bottom of the page caught her eye. She read it over twice, then got up and started through the kitchen, book in hand. "Mama Letha?" she called at the door of the potions room. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes, you may, Pearl," answered her mother's voice from inside the room. "You could even come in if you wanted to."

Meghan trotted inside, sniffing the fragrant air. "What're you making?"

"A project for school. Is that what you wanted to ask?"

"No." Meghan proffered the book. "What does this mean, here at the bottom?"

Mama Letha took the book from her, looked at the place Meghan had indicated, and chuckled. "Oh, that. I wrote that in my fourth year. Our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher was an old wizard who was more interested in the theory behind defensive spells than in actually teaching them, so we spent a lot of time tracing Latin roots of things. I learned more Latin that year than I ever wanted to. And Professor Slughorn, who taught Potions, was a good professor, but he favored

the Slytherins a lot.”

Meghan perched on a stool, listening.

“One Slytherin boy in my year loved to talk. I think he was in love with the sound of his own voice. Professor Slughorn would just let him go on and on and on. I wanted to hit him or curse him, but I didn’t want to get in trouble for it. Finally, one day, I worked out a phrase in Latin that sounded like a curse, but wouldn’t actually do anything, and I would say it over and over when this boy would start jabbering. It kept me from losing a lot of points for Gryffindor.”

“What does it mean?”

“Pueri stupidi sunt. Eos lapidate,” recited Mama Letha. “Boys are stupid. Throw rocks at them.” She laughed. “Of course, I was also working out how I felt about your father at that point.”

“Did you ever want to throw rocks at Dadfoot?”

“Constantly. Sometimes I still do.”

xXxXx

Two weeks to the day after the first time he’d walked into the Offices of Wizarding Family Services, Draco Black walked into them again. Patroclus Nott walked beside him, his face very smooth.

“You wait here, Draco,” he said, waving at a bank of chairs. “I must talk with the casewizard alone.”

Draco sat down, forcing himself to sit still and not fidget. He wished he’d brought the Invisibility Cloak, but he hadn’t known he’d need it.

Besides, eavesdroppers never learn anything good. I’ll just wait.

While he waited, he thought about his latest dream with the Pack...

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He was blowing off a little steam over what Nott was trying to do to him by yelling at Harry. “You’re supposed to be the one who attracts all the trouble! You’re supposed to have all the fuss made over you! You’re supposed to have people fighting and wanting you on their side! Not me! It’s like someone flipped a switch at the end of second year and I turned into the trouble magnet!”

“Well, I’d better flip the switch back, then,” said Harry. “And I know just how to do it.” He was grinning in his most Marauder way.

“How?” Draco asked warily.

“I’ll do the Trouble-Taking Dance.”

“The what?”

Harry walked right up to Draco, looked him in the eye, and jumped straight up in the air. As he landed, he let out a yelp, and jumped again. And again, and again, all around Draco, howling and screeching as he went. “Ow, ooo, eee, aahh, awk, awk, awk, awk, eech, eech, ooog, ooog, ark, ark, awwwwww...”

The rest of the Pack had thought it was hilarious. According to his owl that morning, Harry had started teaching it to the Pride as well, and they had scared the hell out of Fred and George by doing the Trouble-Giving Dance around them – it was the same as the Trouble-Taking Dance, except that it was done silently.

They must have thought everyone had gone nuts. Jumping up and down all around them, not making a sound, and just staring at them...

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Draco chuckled, then looked up as Nott walked back into the room, looking a bit rattled. *That’s probably good for me.* He stood up, stretching his back. *I wonder if he knows I’ve been sleeping in the chair?*

“Brilly says you haven’t been using your bed this last week or so, Draco.”

That would be a yes. “Sometimes I don’t sleep well lying down, sir. It helps to sit up for a few nights.”

“If you were unwell, you should have told me.”

Draco gave in to a wicked urge. “It’s not quite unwell, sir. It’s just an oddity. It’s as if there are gaps in my memory. Blank spots, or not quite blank, but places where it isn’t well focused. Like a bad photograph. I was thinking of writing to my guardians about it, but I guess I forgot. Do you think I should see a Healer?”

He had the satisfaction of seeing Nott swallow ever so slightly. “No, I don’t think that will be necessary. A large change in your life can often affect your memory for a short while. I’m sure it will settle down soon.”

I’m sure it will. Danger had told him, last Friday, what she and Letha had come up with, and he’d been more than happy to hear it.

“But we don’t know for sure if the bond will show up on standard lineage tests,” Danger had warned. “It ought to, but we won’t know until we try it. And we can’t try it without both of us together, and since I’m not supposed to go there and you’re not supposed to come here...” She’d chuckled. “And I don’t trust anything we try here in our dreams, because what we want to happen would probably color the results. So we’ll just have to risk doing it for the first time there at the

WFS offices.”

Draco hoped fervently that what they wanted would color the results here too. Two weeks with the Notts had been enough for him. He would have liked to get away earlier, but this had been the only time the Pack had been able to schedule an appointment.

How do purebloods stand it? I'd think they'd all die of boredom. Doing anything vigorously seemed to be frowned upon by pureblood society, and doing most things at all was seen as rather vulgar. Sedentary pursuits like reading or playing an instrument were the only amusements that were actually approved of. No wonder Nott sneaked out to fly.

It depended a lot on the family, though. Draco had the impression, vague but persistent, that the Notts were not quite as pureblood or as old a family as they acted like. *Social climbers, really. Trying to be more like what they think proper purebloods are like.*

But it wouldn't matter to him in just a few minutes. Or rather, it shouldn't. Draco held his shoulders steady as they turned into a small room off one of the main hallways.

Letha and Danger smiled brightly at him, and Mr. Longbottom nodded. Draco gave them a little bow, keeping his eyes on them, and caught Danger's wink as he did.

“All right, let's get started,” said Casewizard Curcio in a rather bored voice. “What is this new evidence you say you have that Master Black's custody was improperly removed?”

“Casewizard, are you proficient with lineage spells?” asked Letha.

“I am.” Curcio sounded vaguely offended by the question.

“Then would you mind casting one on my friend Mrs. Granger-Lupin and on Master Black?”

Curcio frowned. “Why?”

“The reason will become apparent. Would you please perform it?”

Draco stepped up to the table and pulled up his sleeve without having to be told. Danger was beside him, rolling back her own. As she laid her arm on the table, her fingers brushed his.

Hang in there, fox.

A sudden wave of hope rushed over Draco. If she could talk to him through touch like Neenie could, that must mean...

“*Revele cognationem*,” intoned Curcio, waving his wand over their two arms.

A plume of bright red smoke issued from the tip of the wand and sank to wreath Danger's arm and Draco's. Draco wanted to grin, but contented himself with a surprised look, as if this wasn't what he'd been expecting at all. The one on Curcio's face gave him an excellent template.

“As you see, the spell recognizes me as Master Black’s elder sister, which makes me his first-degree blood relation,” said Danger briskly, removing her arm and dissipating the smoke. “As such, I believe I have final say over where he resides, unless I myself have been charged with abusing him, which I have not. I would like to request that he move immediately to Fireflower House, home of the Longbottom family.”

“We’d be happy to have him,” said Mr. Longbottom, standing up. “I’m willing to take him home with me right now.”

Curcio and Nott both looked as if they’d just bitten into lemons. “Very well,” said Curcio after a moment, in a tone which suggested he was fighting not to scream. “As long as Master Black does not object.”

“Not at all, sir,” said Draco, fixing his eyes on the casewizard’s face and putting on his most innocent look. “It’s perfectly fine with me.”

Nott nodded curtly. “I’ll have your things sent along, then. I’m sorry to lose you, Draco. You’ve been an excellent houseguest, good company for my Theodore. Are you sure you wouldn’t consider staying?”

I’d rather live in a swamp. “Thank you, sir, but Mrs. Granger-Lupin wants me to go to the Longbottoms. I don’t want to disappoint her.”

“I understand. As I said, you’ve been a good guest. Fortune smile on you.”

“And on you, sir.” Draco shook Nott’s hand, keeping a vague, childish smile plastered on his face.

If fortune smiles on me, I’ll never see you again.

xXxXx

A group of very dignified-looking young people marched into Fireflower House that afternoon. Harry and Ron were in the front of the double line, with Luna and Hermione right behind them, and Meghan and Ginny bringing up the rear.

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,” said Neville in a very posh accent, stepping out of a side room. “To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?”

“We understand that you have a guest sojourning here,” answered Harry in similar tones. “We wondered if we might be permitted the pleasure of a few words with him.”

“I shall make inquiries. If you would be so kind as to wait here.” Neville went up three of the gently curving stairs. “DRACO!”

“WHAT?” floated down from above.

“SOMEONE HERE TO SEE YOU!”

“TELL THEM I’M NOT HERE!”

Neville turned around and came down the three steps. “I’m terribly sorry, but the gentleman is not at home.”

“Very well, we shall wait until he is. Where would it be best for us to wait?”

“I can escort you to a comfortable chamber, sir. And sir. And young misses.” Neville bowed punctiliously. “If you would follow me.”

The “comfortable chamber” was Neville’s bedroom, where the Longbottoms’ house-elf, Tapper, groaned as the Pride came in. “Master Neville, Tapper has just got your room straightened up!”

“We’ll try to keep it straight, Tapper,” Neville promised as the Pride found seats.

“Oh yes, you will try,” Tapper grumbled as he collected his cleaning materials. “You always try. And Tapper always ends up doing more cleaning because of your trying.” He disappeared with a loud snap.

“Shall I fetch the gentleman, sir?” said Neville, reverting to his snooty butler mode.

“If you would be so kind.” Harry had his nose so high in the air it was in danger of coming down on the other side of his head.

Neville stepped out of the room, and returned almost immediately, Draco behind him. “Here is the gentleman, sir.”

“Where?” said Ron. “I don’t see anyone.”

“I don’t see anyone either,” said Ginny.

“I suppose it’s because he’s not here,” said Luna. “What a pity.”

“I wish he was here,” said Meghan. “Then we could have fun again.”

“But I suppose just wishing won’t do any good,” finished Hermione.

Everyone sighed heavily.

Draco and Neville exchanged conspiratorial glances, then stepped out of the room together. “Ahoy there, Captain!” exclaimed Draco’s voice in the hall.

“Ahoy yourself,” Neville answered. “What’re you doing here?”

“Mooching off your parents until the Ministry gets its head out of its arse.”

“Going to have a long wait, then,” Harry called.

“Even longer, now that Percy’s working for them,” added Ron.

Meghan jumped up and ran into the hall, dragging the two boys into the room. “I’m glad you’re back,” she said to Draco. “Harry picks on me.”

“I pick on you too, runt.” Draco grabbed Meghan around the waist and tossed her over his shoulder. “Ahoy, Captain, look what I’ve captured!”

“Avast, ye swab,” growled Neville in his best pirate voice. “Don’t ye know the best of the plunder goes to the Cap’n? This one’s mine!”

“Oh, Captain, save me from the scary pirate!” Meghan cooed in a syrupy voice as Draco set her down.

“That I shall, me darling – for I am a dreadful pirate, not merely a scary one!” Neville threw an arm around Meghan’s waist. “Any of ye landlubbers care to contest me claim on the wench?”

“Who’re you calling a landlubber?” protested Ron.

Hermione leaned over to him. “It’s ‘who be you,’” she whispered.

“Thanks.” Ron grabbed her arm and pulled, tumbling her into his lap. She squealed. “This one be mine, Cap’n!”

“Oh-ho-ho, red hair,” chuckled Harry, stalking Ginny, who shrank back, warding him off with trembling hands. “Me father had a taste for red hair. Shall I see if he were a wise man?”

“Only one left for me,” said Draco in disappointed tones. “But wait – she be the finest of the lot! You all be blind, to pass by this beauty!” He swaggered up to Luna. “What say you, little lady? Would you care to be the wife of a pirate?”

Luna looked him up and down, then took his arms and arranged them so that he was holding them out stiffly at about mid-chest level. That done, she swooned into them artistically.

“We have triumphed!” shouted Neville, grinning. “The wenches be ours! To the ship, men! Follow me!”

They left the room at a gallop, boys dragging girls, girls trying to escape from boys, and it wasn’t until they were in sight of Neville’s room again (since it doubled as the ship) that Hermione shouted, “Wait!”

Everyone stopped.

“Unhand me, ruffian,” she said loftily to Ron. “I would speak to your Captain.”

“Oh, no, little lady,” said Ron in an uneven pirate baritone. “If you be wishing to speak to the Captain, I must go with you, to protect you. For the Captain loves his ladies, he does.”

“I can protect myself.”

“Well, then, I’ll go along for the company.”

Hermione snorted, but permitted him to accompany her to Neville. “Captain, I protest this shameful treatment of women,” she said emphatically.

“Do ye now. And why might that be?”

“Because we would be pirates ourselves, if you would only ask us! You never had to kidnap us and carry us away – we would have come with you willingly!”

Neville looked taken aback. “Ye – ye would?”

“Of course we would,” said Ginny. “We’ve always wanted to be pirates. But our parents wouldn’t let us.”

Luna, who had fainted again as soon as they stopped, revived. “I can throw a grappling hook and fight with a cutlass,” she said. “And sing ‘Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum.’”

“I want to learn how to buckle swashes,” said Meghan. “Can you teach me, Captain?”

Neville frowned. “I must consult with me crew,” he said. “Crew?”

The boys closed in. “No pirate ship has ever sailed with a crew of women,” said Draco. “’Tis something entirely new.”

“There be nothing wrong with new,” said Harry. “They look like strapping, sturdy wenches to me.” The girls giggled. “I say aye, let them sail with us.”

“But will the ship hold so many?” Ron asked doubtfully. “Eight instead of four?”

“The *Bounding Bedsheets* is a sturdy craft,” Neville declaimed. “She’ll hold any crew you may name.” He turned around. “Ladies, your kind offer be accepted! From this day forth, we be pirates together! Hip hip–”

“Hooray!” shouted everyone.

“No!” Neville looked disgusted. “Not hooray! There’s no hooray in pirates! It’s huzzah! Now try it again. Hip hip–”

“Huzzah!”

“Hip hip–”

“Huzzah!”

“Hip hip—”

“Huzzah!”

The newly doubled crew of the *Bounding Bedsheets* scrambled aboard their vessel, Neville shouting out nautical-sounding orders.

“What does huzzah mean anyway?” Ron asked Harry under cover of the noise.

“Same thing as hooray.”

“Thought so.”

xXxXx

“Why Captain, anyway?” asked Ron later when they were in the back garden having a snack.

“He said I looked like Captain Von Trapp with my guitar.” Neville lay full length along a bench, dangling his head off the edge to look at everyone upside down. “But I like being a pirate captain more.”

“I’m glad,” said Ginny. “Because if you’re Captain Von Trapp, and there are seven of us left...”

Everyone groaned. “No,” said Ron. “*Hell* no.”

“Besides, Meghan’s littlest, so she would have to be Gretl,” said Luna. “And everybody knows Neville would want her to be Maria instead.”

Draco snickered. “Look, he’s blushing.”

“I am not blushing,” said Neville firmly. “There’s just blood going to my head.”

“That’s what a blush is,” said Hermione.

“I’m still not blushing,” Neville sat up. “See?”

“Ahh, you just thought about ice water,” said Harry. “Not fair.”

“All’s fair in love and war,” said Meghan cheerily.

“And which one is this?” inquired Ginny.

This time there was no question. Neville was blushing.

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Harry ran into the kitchen, grinning. “I finished it,” he said.

“Finished what?” asked Aletha, looking around.

“This.” Harry waved a slip of parchment in the air. “Just finished.”

Sirius took it from him and looked it over. “Looks good,” he said, throwing an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Our little Harry, all grown up and an Animagus. Who’d’ve thought?”

“You would,” said Harry. “Back when you promised to teach us to do it.”

“He’s got you there,” said Aletha. “Harry, we’ve had a letter from Albus. He’s invited you to tea with him and an old friend, tomorrow afternoon. You don’t have to go if you don’t want to, but he very much wants you to come.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to?”

“Just thought you might not want to be on your best behavior for too long,” said Sirius smoothly. Aletha breathed a silent sigh of relief. It was up to Albus to tell Harry the true purpose of this visit, not them. “It might be a strain on you.”

Harry glowered at him. “I can behave.”

Aletha let her eyebrows climb towards her hairline. Sirius gave a loud, fake cough which sounded a lot like something else. Harry looked as if he was about to return the remark in kind, then, instead, stood up straighter and smiled. “My family is very well, sir, how is yours?”

The Blacks chuckled. “All right, now I believe you,” said Sirius. “This is tomorrow afternoon, so make sure to clear your calendar.”

“Right.”

“I’ll have clean robes for you,” said Aletha. “And you will wear them. And do your best with your hair – I’ll settle for the ‘breezy day’ look rather than ‘just got off my broom in a tornado.’”

“But I like that one better.”

“I know you do. So did your father. Until a certain Lily Evans told him he had a fat head and he made her sick.”

Harry stared. “She never.”

“Oh, she did,” said Sirius. “I was right there. He’d been hexing Snape—”

“*He’d* been?” inquired Aletha.

“All right, *we’d* been hexing Snape. And Lily walked up and told us off. What did she call him again? An arrogant, bullying...”

“Toerag.” Aletha had to work hard to keep a smile off her face at Harry’s expression. He couldn’t have looked more horrified if they’d told him he was never allowed to play Quidditch again.

“Right. Toerag. And told him she wouldn’t go out with him if it was a choice between him and the giant squid.”

Harry was staring from one of them to the other. “What did he *do*?” he finally managed to articulate.

“You mean when Lily told him that, or to Snape?”

“To Snape!”

“About the same as he ever did,” said Sirius evasively.

“Disarmed him and made fun of him,” said Aletha with a sigh. “Washed out his mouth with *Scourgify*. Lily showed up and yelled at them, Snape got his wand and cursed James back when he wasn’t looking – something I didn’t recognize, it cut his cheek open – and James hung Snape up in the air by an ankle.” She glared at Sirius. “Again with the *he* – it wasn’t James who cast that Impediment Jinx, or that Body-Bind either. And maybe it was James who threatened to take Snape’s pants off him, but I didn’t notice you telling him to stop.”

“Easy enough for you to act all righteous, but I didn’t hear you telling us to stop either!”

“As if you’d have listened! You were sixteen and so full of yourself I’m amazed you could even walk!”

“Full of – full of myself?” Sirius spluttered. “I was *not*!”

“You were. You and James strutted around like you owned the school – I know why now, you’d finished your Animagus work, you were running around with a werewolf, you thought you were invincible – but that translated into hexing people just for the fun of it, and that’s why I used to shout at you, because that wasn’t bloody funny!”

“So why the hell are you bringing it up now?”

“Because it happens to be part of the story, and I think Harry deserves to know!”

“Well, that worked out really well! He’s gone!”

Aletha looked around. Harry was indeed gone. She sagged against the wall, her head suddenly pounding.

I knew there was some reason we never got married when Lily and James did, she thought dully. Well, besides not having our first kiss until the day of their wedding. We just strike too many sparks – without someone else around, or two someone elses, we just fight all the time...

I suppose we would have worked it out some other way if we'd never had the Pack, but we do. Having just us here, alone together, is not going to work long-term.

She straightened her shoulders. So that's why we have to work on getting Remus magical custody of Hermione. Because if he's the official guardian of one child, they can't very well claim he's a danger to others. If we can get that custody claim recognized under magical law, he can come home, and everything will be all right again...

She wished she could believe it was that easy.

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Harry didn't stop running until he reached the Weasleys' orchard. It was deserted – most of the Pride, he knew, was at the Burrow doing something elaborate to which neither he or Neville was invited. At the moment, he didn't particularly care about that.

My dad threatened to take somebody's pants off? I mean, it was Snape, but still. He threatened to take his pants off, in public? And hung him upside down in the air, and cursed him and made fun of him – and Padfoot did it too, and laughed, and thought it was funny...

I suppose it is funny. Sort of. But not. Not really.

Moony would have been there too. Probably reading, Harry thought bitterly, not getting involved. He knew the stories – Moony had been the prefect in their year, to try to get his friends to settle down, but it had never worked, mostly because, by Moony's own admission, he had never been brave enough to confront them about anything...

He knew Snape hated him, and Padfoot, and Moony. Now he had a better understanding of why.

I think I'd hate somebody who did that to me.

He wanted to scream. No, he wanted to do something else. Something that came from deep inside...

He pulled the parchment out of his pocket, took a deep breath, and began to read aloud.

“Quia per circum vitri video, circi lumina viridantes mea coronit. Reno meus est furvus, et frons mea cicatrix fulgaris gerit. Corpus meum corpus lupi est, sed pectus meum pectus leonis est. Pugno populis meis fortiter, quod non dimittam illos qui mei sunt.”

For one second after he'd finished reading, nothing happened. Then everything happened at once. The world grew about a foot, lost all its color, tilted forward, and gained about a million times more smells and sounds. He itched all over, but when he tried to scratch, it was his foot that came up and not his hand –

He didn't have hands anymore. He had paws. Big, blunt-clawed paws, attached to furry legs, attached to a furry body. He nearly fell over trying to get a good look at himself. The spell had

worked. He was an Animagus.

Like my dad.

Everything he'd been feeling before the spell had taken hold rushed back, and now he knew what to do about it. He tipped his nose back and howled, a long, lonely cry.

Nothing is the way I thought it was, and I don't know what to do...

He slumped to the ground. His tail (he had a *tail*) gave a couple of desolate thumps, then lay still.

I always knew Dad and Padfoot hated Snape. I just never knew how much. Harry whined a little. How could they do that to anyone? Even Snape?

To make matters worse, his wolf form didn't seem to understand the problem. *Not-Pack punished. Good. Hunt now?*

No, not hunt now, Harry told it savagely. Because the only thing I want to hunt is my own Pack-fathers.

The wolf was shocked. Hunting one's own Packmates was not done, and hunting one's elders in the Pack, doubly so.

But what if they do what isn't Pack to do? What if they do wrong?

Challenge. Fight. Not hunt.

He could do that, Harry supposed. Except that he knew either Padfoot or Moony was far better than he with a wand – how could they not be? They'd had his whole life and more to practice. They'd never let him get a spell in edgewise, and if they did, it would be *letting* him, not because he'd actually bested them...

The wolf-brain processed the information Harry now had about his father and Padfoot. It was difficult. Wolves didn't often think in terms of times long past. But finally it had something to offer. *They were not-grown?* it asked, offering the image of long-legged, adolescent wolves, clumsy and unsure of themselves. Something which, Harry realized with some humor, he was himself at the moment, since his wolf form reflected his human form.

Yes, he answered. Yes. They were not-grown. Not cubs, but not grown.

Not-grown do wrong because they do not know.

No, they knew. They did it on purpose.

Then to test the grown. To see if Not-Pack would fight back. To win mate. Many reasons.

Harry felt his tail thump the ground again. *He's right. I'm right. There could have been a lot of*

reasons why they did what they did. Maybe Snape deserved it, kind of. Maybe Dad was showing off for Mum. And maybe they were just sixteen and stupid.

Padfoot's apologized to Snape for what he did in school, so he's sorry. Dad was probably sorry later. And it's not like I haven't done stupid things because I thought I was funny.

He got to his feet and stretched. *Reditio mihi*, he thought carefully, and a moment later was staring at very brown dirt through the lenses of his glasses. He straightened up slowly, rolling his shoulders.

“Did you see me, Dad?” he said quietly, looking up. “Did you see, Mum? I’m an Animagus now. I can do it. I can really do it.” He laughed. “And I did it faster than you did, Dad. Faster than any of you.”

It could have been just his imagination, but for one moment Harry thought he felt his pendants warm against his chest. And it could have been a trick of the patchy sunlight in among the trees, but the stag and the tiger did seem to be glowing, just the tiniest bit...

xXxXx

The next day, Harry Flooed to Professor Dumbledore’s office at the time on the invitation card. The old wizard greeted him politely. “We will be departing in half an hour for Horace Slughorn’s home, Harry. I asked you to come here first because there is much I wish to tell you before we go.”

“Slughorn,” said Harry slowly. “Wasn’t there a Professor Slughorn here...”

“When your parents and guardians attended Hogwarts, yes. Horace taught Potions here for many years, verging on fifty, I daresay. It was his retirement that left open the position which Professor Snape now occupies. He was also the Head of Slytherin House for many years.”

Fifty years... head of Slytherin House... “Sir, does this have something to do with Voldemort?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Sirius will be pleased,” he said. “I believe Remus now owes him money.”

Harry grinned. “They bet on everything, don’t they?”

“Not quite everything, but the events on which they would not wager were few. Your mother and Alice Longbottom were less than amused with the odds being given on who would deliver her child first, for instance.”

Harry snickered.

“But I digress. Yes, Harry, this has much to do with Voldemort.” Dumbledore came around his desk and opened a cabinet near the door of his office, removing a stone basin from within it. His right hand looked better now, Harry noticed – he still favored it a bit, but a casual look wouldn’t tell anyone it had been injured.

Dumbledore set the basin on his desk. It was curiously carved, with runes around the edges, and about half-full of a silvery substance which moved as though simmering on a stove. Harry frowned. The thing looked familiar, but not as if he'd seen it before – more as if he'd heard a description somewhere, and it seemed to be in Hermione's voice...

“Sir, is that a Pensieve?”

There was no doubt this time – Dumbledore was impressed. “It is, Harry. Have you seen one before?”

“No, sir. Hermione told us about them, though. They hold memories and thoughts, and let you look at them again, or put them together in different ways.”

“Ah, Miss Granger-Lupin. An inquiring mind and a true heart in one body. I have no doubt the Sorting Hat had difficulty with her.”

Harry glanced at that worthy object, sitting on its shelf behind the desk.

“As you so aptly put it, a Pensieve holds memories and allows one to look at them again. It can also allow us to travel into the memories of another, if we have those memories. And if we are sure that they have not been... altered.”

“Can you alter a memory, sir?”

“You can try. But unless you are very skilled, the alterations will be obvious to anyone who views the memory.” Dumbledore sighed, looking into the Pensieve. “Over the years, Harry, I have collected many memories having to do with the wizard who calls himself Lord Voldemort. You know, I think, the name under which he was born.”

“Yes, sir. Tom Riddle. Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

“What, if anything, do you know of his life?”

“He grew up in a Muggle orphanage, sir, I think. His mother died just after he was born. That was why he had to stop opening the Chamber of Secrets, so he wouldn't have to go back there for good when they closed Hogwarts.”

“Precisely. And you know where he was Sorted, of course.”

“Slytherin. So Professor Slughorn would have been his Head of House.”

“Yes. Tom Riddle was a handsome, intelligent, ambitious young man, and a great favorite of Horace's – I should tell you, Harry, that Horace Slughorn is not a bad man, but that he likes things his own way, and prefers comfort to austerity. He also likes to know, and be known by, people who matter. He will be delighted to meet you.”

“Will he, sir?” Harry looked up at Dumbledore. He remembered a few people in first year... “Or

will he be delighted to meet The Boy Who Lived?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "Both, I think. He was very fond of your mother."

Harry nodded. "So did Professor Slughorn give you a memory about Voldemort?" he asked, looking into the Pensieve again.

"He did. After much persuasion."

"And you think he changed it."

"I am sure that it has been altered," said Dumbledore firmly. "Horace would never have told Tom Riddle, a prefect and one of his favorite students, that he would 'go wrong.' Indeed, few who knew him at that time would have predicted it."

"You would, sir," said Harry. "You didn't trust him when he was opening the Chamber. You couldn't do anything because you didn't have any proof, but you suspected..." He trailed off. Dumbledore was looking rather oddly at him.

"That is quite true, Harry, but may I ask how you came by that knowledge?"

Oops. "Tom Riddle's diary," Harry admitted. "I used it once, when Ginny had it. He showed me the night he framed Hagrid. You stopped him in the hall and asked him if he had anything to tell you."

"I see," said Dumbledore slowly. "Very well. Then you have experience traveling in the memories of others."

"Only a little, sir." Harry decided not to mention going inside Ron's memory to see the prophecy Professor Trelawney had made. They didn't need more complications at this point.

"Good." Dumbledore placed his wand against the surface of the thoughts in the Pensieve and waved it in a circle, drawing them into a cohesive ball. A glass beaker came out of his pocket, and he deposited them within, then removed a small vial with another silvery memory from another pocket. "You should have no trouble, then, exploring this memory with me."

Harry swallowed a little and stood up straighter. "I'm ready, sir."

"Excellent." Dumbledore emptied the memory into the Pensieve, tapping the bottom of the vial softly to encourage it, then touched his wand to its surface, making it swirl very fast. "Put your face into it, Harry. You will not be harmed."

Harry took a deep breath in any case before plunging his face into the silvery fluid.

When he reemerged a few minutes later, he was still confused. "What's a Horcrux?"

"That, Harry, is what we must endeavor to find out."

As if he doesn't know. But Harry kept his mouth shut. If Dumbledore wanted him to ask someone else about this, there was probably a good reason. He switched to another question. "Why would he change his memory like that?"

"Again, something I hope we can discover through the course of this afternoon, and quite possibly a more fruitful line of inquiry than the other. You see, if he did not want to show us his original answer to that question..."

"He won't likely want to tell us now."

"You understand," said Dumbledore with a smile. "I am very pleased to have you by my side, Harry Potter."

Harry was certain his head had just swelled at least three sizes. *Better watch out – I don't want Cho telling me I make her sick.* He frowned. *I wonder if Cho would tell me that. I don't know how she feels about that kind of thing... but I'm sure she would. And I'd stop right away if she did.*

That is, if I did that kind of thing in the first place.

"How time has moved on," said Dumbledore, consulting a pocket watch. Harry sneaked a look at the face – it had little planets moving around the edge instead of numbers and an awful lot of hands. "We must be going. I am sure your manners are impeccable, and that you will not embarrass Professor Slughorn by asking him personal questions with someone else present."

Behave yourself, and don't start on him until I leave, Harry translated. He grinned to himself. Working with Dumbledore wasn't really that much different than working with Padfoot or Moony. "Yes, sir."

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Horace Slughorn was rather fatter than he had been in the memory, not to mention completely bald, and his mustache was now silver rather than gingery blond, but other than that, he looked just the same. As Dumbledore had intimated, he was wringing Harry's hand almost the instant Harry was out of the fireplace. "Harry Potter! Delighted to meet you, just delighted! Great Merlin, your father's face to the life, except for the eyes... Lily Evans' eyes..." He blinked his own rather prominent ones hard. "I knew her, m'boy, taught her seven years in Potions – one of the brightest students I ever had, such a charmer..."

Harry smiled. "Maybe you can tell me some stories about her, sir. My guardians tell me lots of things, but only Letha really knew my mum for most of their time at Hogwarts."

"Aletha Freeman, now there's another name I knew well." Slughorn looked reminiscent as he led Harry and Dumbledore to the table. "I used to joke that there must have been a potions leak somewhere in Britain for a year or so, there was just a rash of talented, talented potion makers – and Muggleborn or half-blood, most of them. Isn't that odd?"

“Not really,” said Harry, his respect for the man dropping several notches.

Slughorn seemed to realize he had made a mistake, and immediately began spouting stories about the fine Muggleborn students he’d known, and how so many of them had gone on to do great things. Harry noticed that quite a lot of these great things were thanks to Slughorn, and that every person mentioned showed their gratitude in a very material way, whether it was tickets to Quidditch games, hampers of sweets, or inside information about Gringotts...

Harry had a cup of tea and a few sweet biscuits, Dumbledore had a cup of tea and a small slice of cake, Slughorn had several cups of tea and both biscuits and cake. Harry and Dumbledore did very little talking, and most of it was things like, “Yes?” and “I see,” and “Oh, really?”

Finally, after what seemed like a very long time, Dumbledore got up. “I wonder, Horace, if I might use your bathroom?”

“Of course, of course, down the hall and to the right, but you know that.” Slughorn laughed. “You’ve been here before, it hasn’t been that long...”

The room was very quiet after Dumbledore had left. Harry sipped his tea, looking into the cup at the scattering of tea leaves on the bottom. They led his mind to Divination class, and from there to Ron’s experience with Professor Trelawney. For some reason, one line of the prophecy stuck in his head. *Revenge and mercy wreak havoc alike...*

Danger and Moony took revenge on Malfoy, with Danger biting him. And I know they wish they’d never done that. It’s wreaked enough havoc, that’s for sure. But mercy... how could mercy wreak havoc?

“You look just like your mother, staring into her cauldron,” said Slughorn jovially. “Hoping to find life’s answers in your teacup? Taking Divination, perhaps?”

“No, sir,” said Harry, looking up. “My friend Ron is, though, and he says it’s a bit dodgy.”

Slughorn waved a thick hand. “Hard to tell, my boy, hard to tell... most people who claim to be Seers are frauds, of course, but you get a rare genuine one... what classes do you take, then, Harry?”

Harry listed off his classes and told Slughorn a bit about each one. Slughorn seemed genuinely interested, but Harry reminded himself of the man’s patronizing words about Muggleborns and half-bloods, and of Dumbledore’s warnings. Finally, as he wrapped up telling Slughorn about Charms, he found an opening.

“...so for the essay on Charmed objects, Hermione, she’s my sister – well, close enough, we’ve grown up together – anyway, she picked out something called a Pensieve, and she likes to tell people what she learns, even if they don’t want to hear it...”

Slughorn chuckled at Harry’s long-suffering tone. “I’ve known a few of those myself. Handy to

have around when you need to know something, though.”

Harry nodded. “And one of the things she told us was that memories in a Pensieve couldn’t be altered. That you could always tell if someone had tried to change a memory you were looking at. Do you think that’s true, sir?”

Slughorn stared at him, an expression of shock sliding onto his thick face. “Dumbledore’s shown you,” he whispered, pulling out a handkerchief and beginning to dab at his face. “Dumbledore’s shown you that memory. Hasn’t he?”

Harry ducked his head, feeling rather ashamed of himself – first, because his ruse had been so transparent, and second because this was clearly something about which Slughorn didn’t want to talk. “Yes, sir.”

“It was obvious, wasn’t it?” Slughorn said with an air of dejection. “Obvious... it would have been even to a lesser wizard than Dumbledore...even to you, a half-trained boy...”

He stared into the air over the table. “You can have no idea, Harry, what it is to grow to be as old as I. Old enough to have a thousand regrets, a million things you wish you had done differently...”

Harry thought of his father hexing Snape, of Danger biting Malfoy, of his own rash chatter in first year Defense class. “I have a few,” he said.

“You’ll have more.” Slughorn sighed massively. It was like watching someone shake a mountain of pudding. “There are always things you don’t ever want to tell... things you’re ashamed of... things you’re afraid have done terrible harm.”

“But if you don’t tell anyone, nothing can ever be fixed,” said Harry. It was one of the Pack’s rules – *if you made a mistake, tell someone. Punishment can wait.* “You can never make up for it.”

Slughorn shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, Harry, it doesn’t matter whether I tell anyone or not. Some things can never be repaired...”

He caught himself up hastily, but Harry could tell, could almost taste, that he might still be willing to talk. “Dumbledore doesn’t think so,” he said quickly. “Dumbledore thinks it might still be fixed. And he always seems to know what to do.”

“Yes, you’ve noticed that, have you.” Slughorn’s tone was wry. “He believes the world rests on his shoulders, and for this part of it in any case, he’s not far wrong... he really thinks something could be done?” He peered at Harry intently. “He’s confided in you?”

“He said your memory might be the most important he’s ever collected.” Dumbledore hadn’t said that straight out, but he’d certainly implied it, and it sounded like the kind of thing Slughorn enjoyed hearing. Sure enough, Slughorn straightened up, shrugging his shoulders in a self-satisfied kind of way. Harry could sense his pride, but worry and caution were starting to override it.

Time to bring out the big guns. Harry looked straight at Slughorn. “He told me it might help him get rid of Voldemort.”

Slughorn jumped and made a squeak of protest. “He – you mean He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Really, Harry, you gave me such a start – don’t be silly, he’s gone. You of all people should know that – dead and gone these thirteen years...”

Harry shook his head. “He’s not dead,” he said. “He’s still alive somewhere. He doesn’t have a body anymore, but he’s alive.”

Slughorn looked horrified, but, Harry noted in a back corner of his mind, he showed no trace of surprise – it was as though he had been expecting something like this.

“I faced him,” Harry went on. “He was at Hogwarts, possessing two of the teachers there, trying to steal the Sorcerer’s Stone. He tried to kill me, but he couldn’t touch me without hurting himself.”

“Couldn’t... couldn’t touch you?” Slughorn’s eyes were riveted on Harry’s face, flicking upwards every so often to the lightning-bolt scar on his forehead.

“It was my mum’s last gift to me,” said Harry softly. “She died for me. Voldemort wasn’t planning to kill her, but she wouldn’t move – she wouldn’t get out of the way – so he killed her to get to me. That’s why I lived. Because she died.”

Slughorn’s breathing was coming faster, he was twisting his hands in his lap. Harry licked his lips, scenting prey almost run to ground, preparing himself for the spring and the crunch of jaws... “You liked her, Professor, you told me that. Were you sad when you heard?”

“Sad isn’t the word,” Slughorn whispered, closing his eyes for a moment. “I cried for a week... the war was over, people were celebrating everywhere, but I cried... just thinking of her dying like that, the last casualty of the war... all the others, I’ve done things for them, and they for me, but I could never do anything for her...”

The wolf pounced. “This is something you can do for her,” said Harry quick as lightning, but soft as rain. “She died for me. She must have loved me. All the stories I know say she loved me. And you can help me, Professor.” He kept his eyes – his mother’s eyes – fixed firmly on Slughorn’s. “I don’t know why Voldemort wants to kill me. But he does. And I don’t want to waste my mother’s gift. She gave me life. I don’t want to lose it.”

There was a long moment of silence. Slughorn broke it. “How old are you, Harry?” he asked conversationally.

Harry’s heart sank. He’d failed. “Fourteen at the end of the month,” he answered dismally.

“Fourteen. My goodness.” Slughorn gave a weak chuckle. “You will be quite a man when you’re grown. Quite a man indeed.” He drew a wand from his pocket and pointed it over his shoulder. A small glass vial with a stopper zoomed into his hand.

Wait – what’s he doing...?

Slughorn pulled the stopper out of the vial, placed the wand against his temple, and slowly drew it away. A silver strand of memory stuck to the wand’s tip. Harry watched it, fascinated. Was it possible...

Slughorn coiled the memory inside the vial and placed the stopper firmly in the neck. “Don’t think too badly of me, Harry,” he said a bit plaintively, shaking his head hard as if trying to rid himself of an odd sensation. “He was just a young man like yourself – very like yourself. Personable, handsome, intelligent... too intelligent. I should have known, I should have seen where he was headed...”

“A lot of people didn’t see where he was headed, sir,” said Harry, taking the vial from Slughorn and putting it carefully into his pocket. His insides seemed to be under the influence of a *Wingardium Leviosa*, while the rest of him was suffering from *Rictusempra*. “He’s very good at persuading people.”

“True, true, I suppose I wasn’t the only one.” Slughorn looked pensively at Harry’s pocket. “Well, what’s done is done. I only hope it can be of service to you.” He looked around. “Where has Dumbledore got to?”

“Here I am, Horace, here I am,” said Dumbledore cheerfully, reentering the room. “My apologies, but I was distracted on my way back to the table by your new collection of plants. Might I prevail upon you to show them to us?”

“By all means!” Slughorn, once again the jovial, beaming host, showed them not only the plants but almost the entire house, and it was dinner time and past it when Harry threw Floo powder into the fire. As the flames burned green, he looked back at Slughorn.

“Thank you, Professor,” he said. “Thank you very much.” He turned to the flames. “Headmaster’s office, Hogwarts!”

As he spun through the Floo, Harry kept one hand on the precious lump in the pocket of his robes.

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“Harry, I must now ask you to make a difficult decision,” said Dumbledore. They faced each other over Dumbledore’s desk, the vial with the memory and the empty Pensieve side by side on it. “If you wish it, I will allow you to witness this memory with me. However, you must realize that if its contents are what I suspect they are, Voldemort’s greatest secret will be known to us, and that he has killed before now to keep even a rumor of that secret from leaking out.”

Harry shrugged. “He already wants to kill me, sir. I don’t see how it could make much difference.”

“True, but here lies the catch. I would ask you to tell no one what you saw and heard. Not your parents, your siblings, or your closest friends. No one at all. Your parents have enough troubles of

their own at the moment, and your siblings and friends are well-intentioned, but I am not convinced they are trustworthy.”

Harry felt his stomach levitate again. “And you think I am?”

“I am sure you are. So. Will you see it and tell no one, or remain, for the moment, unaware?”

Harry looked at the memory. He’d worked hard for it, he deserved to see it... but half the fun of knowing anything was telling people about it, and talking about it late at night when you were supposed to be sleeping... and besides, if it was something about defeating Voldemort, it probably wouldn’t be much fun to know... and Dumbledore didn’t really want him knowing it yet, he was afraid for Harry, and Dumbledore was almost never afraid...

“Can I just know if it’s what you wanted, sir?” he asked, looking back up. “Can you look at it and tell me that?”

“Certainly.” Dumbledore opened the vial and emptied the memory into the Pensieve. “I will be only a moment, Harry.” He lowered his face into the basin and went completely still. Harry felt a strange urge to poke him and see if he’d react, but resisted.

I want to have one year when I don’t have to be The Boy Who Lived, he thought. One normal year. That’s all I ask. Maybe this can be it.

After a moment or two, Dumbledore lifted his face. “This is, indeed, what I sought, Harry,” he said quietly. “Has your answer changed?”

Harry shook his head. “No, sir. If you don’t think I should see it, I don’t want to.”

“I do not recall saying that I did not wish you to see the memory.”

“No, but you meant it, sir. You’re afraid for me if I see it.”

Dumbledore regarded him for a moment. “And you seemed to know Horace’s emotions quite clearly as well,” he said quietly. “Tell me, Harry, how are your... private studies coming?”

“You mean the ones like my dad did? And Padfoot?”

“Yes, those.”

Harry grinned. “I did it yesterday. It’s done.”

Dumbledore nodded. “That explains a great deal. I would suggest that you pay attention to your sense of smell more in the coming years than you have hitherto. I doubt it will lead you wrongly.”

My sense of smell? But it fit together... he could have been smelling those emotions from Slughorn, Moony and Padfoot certainly claimed they could smell more than most people, and they had always been disturbingly good at nosing out guilt among the cubs...

“I suggest you begin for home, Harry, you must be hungry,” said Dumbledore, breaking into his thoughts. “I am sure they will have kept supper for you, but mothers are prone to worry, and yours more than most, perhaps, to lecture...”

Harry nodded ruefully and headed for Dumbledore’s fireplace. “Thank you for taking me to tea, sir,” he said.

“Thank you for coming, Harry. Many times thanks.”

The last thing Harry saw in the office was Dumbledore lowering his face once more into the Pensieve.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 30: Birthday Surprises (Year 4)

Chapter 30: Birthday Surprises

18 July

Nott –

You still owe me for not telling on you with the house-elf. Give me my lion back and we're even.

– Black

xXxXx

Ron rubbed his forehead. He'd been staring at the same sentence for half an hour, and he still couldn't get it to sound right.

Why am I doing this on my own when any of the others could help me?

He knew why. He wanted to be the third one of the Pride to make his transformation, and he wanted to do it himself, without help from anyone else.

Well, without a lot of help.

But he was going to have to face reality. He could be the third one to transform, or he could do it all himself. Not both.

So I just have to decide.

“FREDERICK GIDEON AND GEORGE FABIAN WEASLEY!”

All thoughts of spell-writing disappeared from Ron's head. *Mum must have found something in their room...*

He slipped out his door and leaned over the railing. His mother stood a few floors below, sheaf of parchment in her hand, glaring down the stairs at the twins, who seemed to be trying to make up their minds whether or not to run for it.

Ron grinned. This was going to be good.

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“She set them on fire?” asked Harry incredulously. “All of them?”

“Every last one. The twins were mad as hell, they've been working on these for ages...”

“You’ve heard the explosions coming out of their room,” added Ginny. “We just thought they were playing around, hexing each other or something.”

“But they must have been working on this lot,” said Ron. “And it sounds really great. You know how Fred and George think – they know the kinds of things kids would buy, so the stuff’s bound to sell. They’ve got loads of trick sweets, things that turn you into a bird or make your tongue blow up like a balloon. I think they’re even working on their own line of fireworks.”

“That would explain a lot of the explosions,” said Draco. “But she only burned the order forms? Not the stuff itself?”

“Well, she told them to give her everything they had,” said Ginny. “But what do you think the odds are that they didn’t hide out a few things? And of course they still have all their notes and everything.”

“Have their O.W.L. results come?” asked Hermione.

“No, they don’t until the end of the month,” said Ron. “But they’ve never really cared much about tests and school and that. They want to have fun and make money.”

“Praiseworthy goals,” said Harry, leaning back against Neville’s bed.

“Mum got really mad when they told her they want to open a joke shop,” said Ginny. “She wants them to work for the Ministry like Dad and Percy.”

“They’d blow up the Ministry if they worked there,” said Luna. “And it would probably be a good thing. Minister Fudge is very corrupt, you know. He doesn’t like the way goblins run wizarding finances, so he’s trying to have all the goblin leaders assassinated. Then the Ministry can take over Gringotts.”

The Pride was used to Luna’s pronouncements by now, so no one tried to persuade her that this wasn’t true, although Hermione did make a small sound in her throat before Draco caught her eye and frowned at her.

“Maybe the twins could feed him a trick sweet to turn him into a hamster,” said Neville. “Then he could run on a little wheel all day and feel like he was going somewhere. It’s no more than he does now.”

Everyone looked at him. He frowned. “What?”

“You’re different than you used to be,” said Hermione.

“Everybody’s different than they used to be. It’s called growing up.”

“But you’re a lot different. You used to be so quiet we barely knew you were there. Now you just say things out, and people listen to you.”

Neville shrugged. "It just happened, I guess. Having Mum and Dad around helped." Neville's parents were getting ready to become Aurors again. The tests would be held as soon as the Quidditch World Cup was over. "And... other things. I just got tired of always being a nobody."

"You're not a nobody," said Meghan. "You never were."

"I was a lot more of a nobody before I met you." Neville smiled at her. "So now I'm a nobody with friends and a family."

"Aren't we all?" said Harry.

Ron snorted. "You? A nobody? Harry bloody Potter?"

"It's like being at school and wanting it to be holidays," said Hermione. "And then on the holiday, wanting it to be term again."

"Maybe *you* want it to be term again."

"If we didn't all have each other, this would be a bit boring, wouldn't it? Two months with nothing to do?"

"Speak for yourself, Hermione," said Harry.

"My *point* is, people always seem to want whatever they don't have. Because they think it's better than what they do."

"The grass is always greener?" suggested Draco.

"Exactly. If you're not famous, you think it would be wonderful to have everyone know who you are. But if you are famous, then no one will leave you alone."

"Unless you're a certain kind of famous," said Meghan. "What's that called? When you're famous because you're bad?"

"Infamous?" suggested Draco. "Notorious?"

"Yeah, like that."

"Well, then everybody leaves you alone," said Harry. "But they still look at you and talk about you."

"Speaking from experience?" said Ginny.

"Yes, actually. Remember first year?"

"No."

“I didn’t mean you. Ron, remember?”

“When you lot lost fifty points apiece – yeah, I remember. I still wish I could have been there. It would have been worth losing fifty points to curse the Slytherins.”

“No, it wasn’t,” said Hermione. “Because everybody hated us until the end of the year.”

“But we got it all back at the Leaving Feast,” said Harry. “All’s well that ends well, right?”

“Sometimes.”

“You’re no fun.”

xXxXx

23 July

Black –

What lion?

– Nott

xXxXx

Remus had spent the morning reviewing his correspondence with Charles Scribner, the lawyer Dumbledore had recommended. Scribner specialized in wizarding family law, and he was being cautiously optimistic about Remus and Hermione’s case.

“Your record is in your favor, and I’ve been keeping up with the files about your family at WFS, so I’m sure you’ll have no lack of character witnesses,” he’d said at their first face-to-face meeting. “But I think a major point will be Miss Granger-Lupin’s decision in March 1991 to add your name to hers. The only plausible explanation for that is the one Miss Granger-Lupin gave herself – she thinks of you as a father and wants the world to know it.”

Remus hadn’t been able to stop smiling for an hour afterwards. Thinking of it again still made him smile. *It may take time – it will take time – but we’ll win this. Once I’m legally confirmed as capable of being Hermione’s guardian, they can hardly deny me the right to live in the same house with her. And they can’t possibly claim that I’m dangerous to the other cubs and not to her, so that means we can all be together again.*

He finished preparing his bow and set his violin against his collarbone. *Something correct for my mood, I think.* The opening of “Tradition” from *Fiddler on the Roof* suited him nicely.

“I knew we were up high, but I didn’t think we were on the roof yet,” said Danger from the door.

“Poetic license,” said Remus. “I didn’t hear you Apparate.”

“I didn’t. I used a magical thing called a door. And I’m not alone.”

“Oh, really?”

“Oh, really.” Danger chirruped. “Here, boy. Come on.”

Remus set his instrument aside hastily as a mostly-grown and very dark-furred wolf bounded into the room, rumbled a friendly greeting to Danger, and then made straight for Remus. He knelt and rubbed behind the wolf’s ears, smiling into bright green eyes with circles of even darker fur around them. “What a handsome boy,” he crooned. “What a splendid boy. I’m so proud of you.”

The wolf nuzzled his arm. “Letha’s run tests,” said Danger. “Apparently we took enough precautions through the years – he doesn’t even test for the carrier form.”

“Wonderful.” Remus felt a weight lift he hadn’t known he carried. Danger having lupus and being contagious for lycanthropy was bad enough – if *Harry* had been contaminated with the disease...

But we would have known already. Unless it only comes on when a person achieves Animagus...

Never mind. It doesn’t matter now.

“And somebody else as well.” Remus looked up to see Danger stroking a calico cat, whose purring was audible even from across the room. “Oh, now this is interesting...”

“What?”

**I can hear her when we’re in physical contact. The way she and Draco can. A pause. She says to tell you that Draco could hear my thoughts as well at the WFS offices, when we touched...
hmm.**

Have Ron and Ginny see if they can speak with simple contact, Remus suggested. **A first-degree blood link may confer that ability.**

Sirius or Letha could try it with Meghan as well. Danger set Neenie on the floor, and the cat ran to Remus, planting her paws on his knee and purring even faster than before. **I think she’s happy to see you.**

I think I’m happy to see her too. Remus scratched the side of Neenie’s face and rubbed under her chin. The wolf grumbled enviously until Remus devoted one hand to petting each of them. “You need a name in this form,” he said. “Something simple.”

“What about Blackie?” suggested Danger. “No one’s going to pick up anything from that.”

The wolf narrowed his eyes and sighed.

“Not very dignified?” asked Remus.

The wolf nodded.

“We can make it Black Wolf for formal occasions, then. Or we could just call you Wolf.”

Neenie sniggered. Remus hadn't known cats could do that. The wolf, on the other hand, looked interested.

“Just Wolf it is, then,” said Danger, coming across the room to take up Wolf-scratching duties. “I suppose it's your duty to sound imposing for the girls...”

Wolf looked up at her soulfully, then planted his paws on her chest, knocked her over backwards, and washed her face enthusiastically. When he turned to Remus with mischief in his eyes, Remus quickly set Neenie aside and transformed himself. Wolf whined as a massive velvety paw pressed him gently to the ground.

Behave, cub, said Moony in animal-speech.

I will. I will. Promise. If Wolf had been abasing himself any more, he would have been in the next flat down.

That's better. Moony let Wolf up and licked his head thoroughly for good measure.

Wolf shook hard. Yuuuuuck .

xXxXx

Christopher Curcio sat in his office, staring at a stack of parchment sullenly.

Why? he asked himself for the thousandth time. *Why did I just let it happen? Why didn't I speak up, call her a liar to her face, find out how she tricked the spell? Why?*

But he knew why – he'd been too shaken by the unexpected turn of events. He hadn't thought there was any way to fake a lineage spell. It reported, supposedly unerringly, whether or not the two people on which it was cast shared blood, and if so, in what degree. He'd been expecting the spell to show the blue of non-related people, or the purple which meant some sort of cheap potion had been used to change one of the bloods and try to make it look related to the other.

Instead, the spell had turned the bright red which indicated a first-degree blood relationship, and the woman had clarified it herself as one of brother and sister. Obviously, it couldn't be a natural relationship – Lucius Malfoy was far too young to have a daughter this woman's age – but just as obviously, it was something the spell recognized as valid.

I wonder if it has something to do with the girl? Hermione? She is the woman's sister, and Draco's age – and those scars on their faces are interesting...

He dug through the parchment to find Hermione's interview. *Here it is. Felicity Davidson talked to her, before she came to sit in on my talk with Black.* Hermione had claimed adamantly that the

scar on her face was given to her by Lucius Malfoy during her short-lived kidnapping, along with the identical one on Draco's face.

Identical... A thought teased at the edges of Curcio's mind. Wasn't there that spell... yes, blood bonding. The closest possible bond is formed by making the cuts in the identical place on the two people to be bound. And a successful bond looks to all magic precisely the same as if the two were naturally related by blood.

Of course, that raises another question. Why in the world would Lucius Malfoy have blood-bonded his son to a Mudblood girl?

But whatever he did it, the evidence is clear that he did. And because Draco is Hermione's brother by blood, the spell recognizes him also as the woman's brother by blood. He sighed. Neat, logical, and beyond my power to alter without exposing myself as knowing far too much about very Dark rituals.

He slid Hermione's parchment back into the stack, and another fell from it. He picked it up, looked at it, and closed his eyes in pain. *The Weasley woman. I was a fool to let her be interviewed – I should have known by the name, Weasleys have hardly been bastions of pureblood culture and dignity...*

"If you think Sirius Black has abused his children, then perhaps you ought to investigate me," Molly Weasley had said, her eyes pinning him where he sat. "People tell me I'm quite harsh with my boys, but I don't see any Ministry workers on my doorstep. I've even spanked my children when they were young and truly needed it. I've never seen or heard tell of Sirius or Aletha or Danger, or Remus, and you may quote me on that, administering so much as one swat on the bottom, no matter what those children get up to."

He'd tried to say something, but the woman wasn't finished. "In fact, I'd say they let their children get away with a great deal, if it weren't for the simple fact that all four of theirs put together are still better behaved than either of my twins. They get into mischief, true, but what child doesn't? At least they clean up after themselves, and are polite and courteous. And that they were taught by their parents."

"Indoctrination, perhaps," he'd suggested. "Or the parents enforcing the rule of politeness outside the home with threats."

"I sincerely doubt it. For one thing, the children show no fear of the adults, even when those adults shout or become angry. For another, my two youngest children spend large portions of every day in that home, and they have never had reason to fear any of the adults there. Nor have I, since I recovered from a rather embarrassing and unbecoming bout with my own foolish prejudices two years ago. Sirius Black is no more an abuser than I am, nor is his wife, nor are the Lupins. If you want to do your duty by them as a casewizard, let Draco come home and leave them in peace."

Curcio smiled now as he had not been able to smile then. *But who says I want to do my duty by them? Or rather, who says I want to do my duty as a casewizard by them? I would far rather do my*

duty as a faithful follower of the Dark Lord. Reclaim a pureblood child for the right side, dishearten and distress Harry Potter and his family, to make the Dark Lord's eventual return that much easier...

I must simply find new ways to do it now.

xXxXx

The Pack had chosen Friday nights as their time for shared dreams. Everyone looked forwards to them as a little slice of normality, of the way things used to be. Tonight, they had decided they wanted to go swimming. A replica of Hogwarts grounds, complete with lake, therefore surrounded them.

Danger, Aletha, Hermione and Meghan were taking turns tossing rings for each other to dive after. Sirius and Remus, for their part, were doing their best to drown Harry and Draco, which would have worked far better if Draco hadn't been able and willing to change the dream in his and Harry's favor, creating enormous water bombs to hit the Pack-fathers with and enabling the boys to hold their breaths for longer than would have been physically possible in the real world. The men battled against the odds for a while, then admitted defeat, and the four splashed back towards shore.

Harry transformed as soon as he was out of the water and shook hard. Sirius did the same. Remus summoned little flames and set them racing all over himself. Draco just smirked and snapped his fingers, rendering himself dry in an instant.

"Show-off," said Remus, lying down on one of the beach towels.

"That's me." Draco lay down on the next towel over. "I miss you at home," he said quietly as Harry and Sirius ran back into the lake, still in their four-legged forms. "I miss being at home too, but I miss seeing you and Padfoot. Are you sure what you're doing will work?"

"As sure as we can be at this point. We'll set things in motion as soon as the World Cup is over. I don't know how long it will take to get a court date, or how long the hearing itself will take – they'll probably want to check and recheck everything, since this will set a precedent no matter which way it's decided – but it's our best chance, fox. My best chance." Remus said the last almost to himself.

Draco heard it anyway. He rolled onto his side and propped himself up with an elbow. "Because if you lose, you might not ever be able to come home?" He had the tone of someone hoping he was wrong.

Remus nodded.

"But if you win, then they can't keep you away."

"That's right."

Draco sat up. His outline blurred all over. Then a white fox was sitting where he had been. **You can do what you want, in dreams**, he said, stepping neatly from his own towel to Remus'. **And Harry says you give good ear scratches.**

Remus chuckled. "Hedonist." He reached down and caressed the fox's ears. "How's that?"

Mmmmmm ...

"Everything will be all right in time, fox," Remus murmured, hoping he wasn't going to become a liar. "All right in time."

xXxXx

24 July

Nott –

Don't play stupid. I know you were in my room at least once while I was there. You can't have missed the stuffed lion I had on my bed. It wasn't in my things when I got here. Give it back, or else.

– Black

xXxXx

"So why don't we get invited to these things?" Neville asked Harry, looking out the window of Fireflower House in the direction of the Burrow.

Harry didn't look up from his writing. "You really have to ask?"

"Why would I have asked if I didn't have to ask?"

"Come on, Cap'n." Draco's nickname looked as if it was going to stick with Neville. "What's coming up for both of us?"

"Um... oh." Neville smiled. "Birthdays."

"Precisely." Harry crossed two t's with a flourish. "Birthdays."

xXxXx

"So did it work?" Hermione asked Ginny as they rethreaded their needles.

Ginny nodded. "We could talk when we touched just like having the chains on. And it doesn't work with people who aren't Pride – I tried it on Fred and Percy both, and nothing happened."

"It worked with me and Mama Letha too," said Meghan. "And me and Dadfoot. But not me and

Draco. I guess you have to be what they called a first-degree relation for it to work.”

“I guess so.” Hermione guided her needle carefully along the chalked seam with her wand, watching it take neat, tiny stitches. Ginny and Meghan were doing the same, using the spells their respective mums had taught them. Luna didn’t care for sewing, so she, Ron, and Draco were working on the painting part of the project. They were all doing the other part of it, of course. Draco’s readdition to the group had been a great help.

“Do you think we’ll get in trouble for this?” she asked the other girls after a moment of silence.

“We could,” said Ginny musingly. “It is magic, and we’re not allowed to do magic outside school. But I don’t think anyone could argue we’re doing wrong with it. And how would they ever know?”

“Well, Danger and Letha are bound to suspect. I mean, I’m just not very good at sewing by hand. Neither is Meghan, really. We can work with yarn, but thread...”

Meghan made a face. “I am not bad at sewing.”

“Then why do you always come out with knots?”

Meghan disdained to reply.

xXxXx

Draco’s fourteenth birthday dawned chilly and rainy, and no sooner had he awakened than Neville walked in and handed him a slip of parchment.

“What’s this?”

“Rain check.”

“What?”

“A rain check for your party. It’s going to be an outdoor party, and it was supposed to be today, but it’s nasty outside. So we’re waiting until it’s not.”

Draco groaned. “So I miss out on my presents until then too, right?”

“They only get better because you waited,” said Neville sanctimoniously, and ducked immediately as Draco hurled a pillow.

xXxXx

26, 27, and 28 July were all rainy and grey. The Pride spent their time indoors, systematically wearing out their welcome at one house and moving to the next. By the time the third set of adults had kicked them out, they could start again at the first.

“This is ridiculous,” said Ron, tapping on his drums in his bedroom. “Your house is right over there. You spend the entire day going in circles around it. But you’re not allowed to go there.”

“I know it’s ridiculous.” Draco was sitting cross-legged on Ron’s bed, playing Exploding Snap with Harry, Neville, and Luna. Meghan and Ginny were on the floor, teasing cat-Neenie with string. “But it’s how the Ministry works right now. I can’t go home until someone signs some form somewhere that says Padfoot never actually abused me.”

“Snap,” said Harry. The cards on the bed exploded. Neenie jumped a foot in the air. Everyone laughed.

Neenie hissed, leapt onto the bed, and smacked Harry’s cards with her paw, causing them to explode as well. “Ow,” he said, rubbing his hand.

“Serves you right,” said Ron, grinning. “Nice one, Hermione.”

Neenie rubbed her face delicately against Ron’s hand.

xXxXx

28 July

Black –

I never touched your stupid lion.

– Nott

xXxXx

29 July was finally a nice enough day to hold Draco’s party. All four families met outdoors for a picnic followed by games – ground-based only, since there was always the chance of a passing Muggle – and then presents and cake. A large black dog gate-crashed the event, but no one seemed minded to turn it away.

The party could have been improved by the presence of one more guest, but this was tactfully left unsaid.

xXxXx

29 July

Nott –

Like hell you didn’t. Who else would it have been?

– Black

“Good morning, Captain, and many happy returns of the day.”

Neville rubbed his eyes. Draco was standing over his bed, looking very awake and very cheerful. “Thank you,” he said groggily. “What day?”

“You are tired. It’s your birthday. Come on, up you come. We have something big planned for you and Harry, and you have to be awake to see it.”

Neville let himself be dragged out of bed because it was easier than resisting, but started to move under his own power once he recalled that presents would surely be forthcoming.

Draco betook himself to the Burrow for breakfast, allowing the Longbottoms – all four of them, since Gran had come for the day – to have a family meal. After that came some strictly family presents, the kind of things Neville knew none of his friends but Meghan would really appreciate, clippings and roots and such. He spent a blissful morning in the greenhouse with his dad, getting all his new friends into the environments they liked the best, then it was off to the Burrow for lunch and presents from his friends.

There were extra guests at lunch, Ron’s brother Charlie and his girlfriend Tonks, who could change her looks just by wanting to. His mum was very interested in this, and spent a lot of the meal in quiet conversation with Tonks.

Finally, everyone headed up to the orchard for the promised entertainment. A backdrop painted with a large grassy hill, several trees, and a castle off to one side had been strung between two of the trees; a rectangular area had been marked off in front of it; and chairs were set up facing that. The two in the middle of the front row were ostentatiously labeled “Harry” and “Neville.” Draco and Ron made a production of ushering them into these seats, then disappeared behind the backdrop. A great deal of whispering ensued. Finally, Ron reemerged onto the stage.

Fred and George started applauding, and everyone else took it up. Ron was dressed in a fair mock-up of a knight’s clothes, right down to reproduction chain mail. “Fair ladies and good sirs,” he said in a deep voice, “I bid you good day, and welcome to Camelot. I am Sir Lancelot the Brave. Allow me to introduce to you my comrades who sit with me about the Round Table.”

That portion of the audience which had been exposed to Muggle culture was snickering.

“Sir Galahad.” Meghan scampered onto the stage in similar knightly gear. “Sir Bedevere.” Hermione walked on in a stately fashion, lifting her three-barred visor to look at the audience. “Sir Robin.” Draco pranced on, recorder in his pocket. “And our gracious sovereign, King Arthur.” All the knights bowed as Ginny, regal in crown and cape, stepped out from behind the backdrop. The only problem was, they were looking the wrong way, so that the “King” was confronted with a display of rear ends. She hissed at them, getting their attention, and they rapidly turned around and bowed again.

“In my court at Camelot,” said the King, walking across the stage, “we value many things. Courage. Loyalty. Intelligence. But most of all, we value the ability to sing and dance.” She waved off to one side, and Neville saw Luna, dressed in a tunic and tights and sitting at a piano one of the adults must have conjured. “Musician, play on.”

The knights arranged themselves hastily into a line, with Draco on one end and Ginny on the other. The audience was very quiet. Luna’s opening chords were anything but quiet, as the knights began to sing.

We’re Knights of the Round Table

We dance whene’er we’re able

We do routines

And chorus scenes

With footwork impeccable

We dine well here in Camelot

We eat ham and jam and Spam a lot

Neville cracked up.

I should have known.

Better even than the words of the song were the dance routines. Meghan had a pair of solos, during one of which she accompanied herself with percussion on coconut shells. The twins, for their part, were falling out of their seats laughing at some of the maneuvers Ron was going through, and Neville doubted all the red in his friend’s face was from exertion.

This is precious. I just wish we could have been in on it...

Maybe next year.

The twins nearly had a fit when Ron deepened his voice and sang, *I get to push the pram a lot* . Neville thought it was a good thing that the rest of the song was purely instrumental.

After “The Knights of the Round Table” had been duly cheered and encored, the players moved on to other portions of the program. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny made a convincing three-headed monster for Sir Robin to run away from, and Luna left her keyboard to join Meghan as a minstrel. King Arthur went adventuring with Meghan as Patsy, and Hermione and Draco provided the voices from behind the backdrop. Finally, King Arthur, Sir Bedevere, Sir Galahad, and Sir Lancelot approached yet another castle, and King Arthur called out.

An armored head appeared above and behind the backdrop, and everyone cheered. Draco, now

wearing an outrageously curled mustache and using an equally outrageous French accent, was obviously sitting on his broom to give the proper effect. The castle was painted off to one side of the drop, meaning that Ginny could shout her lines up to Draco while cheating front enough that people could see her face. The knights retreated in disorder after the Frenchman insulted them terribly and threw livestock at them, and the play was at an end.

“We should never have shown you that, should we?” said Mrs. Letha, laughing as she hugged Meghan, Hermione, and Draco all at once.

“Probably not,” said Draco, grinning at her. “And I’m sure Mrs. Weasley’s horrified at what Ginny was getting up to.”

“Don’t be so sure,” said Harry, nodding back to where Ginny was talking with her mother.

“—so funny, Ginny, love, I never knew you could make jokes like that, and your singing was beautiful, I only wish there was some way we could show the entire world how well you do—”

Draco shrugged. “Okay, so I’m wrong.”

“She was really good,” said Harry. “Whose idea was this, anyway?”

“Hers, mostly. Ron thought of it at first, but he didn’t want to get involved. Said the twins would laugh at him too much.”

“So how’d you get him into it, then?” asked Neville.

Draco grinned. “We wrote to Charlie and Tonks and set up a scam. They bet Fred and George ten Galleons that Ron wouldn’t go through with it, and then Ron bet them ten Galleons that he *would* go through with it.”

“Money’s not necessarily a bad incentive,” said Mrs. Letha thoughtfully. “Especially when the product is so... energizing. I’ll have to think about that for what I’m hoping to do this year.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked.

“Ah, ah, ah, Wolf. I don’t want to spoil it.”

“That sounds like what Percy keeps saying,” said Ron, coming over to join them with a jingling bag in his hand. “*Is there something special happening at Hogwarts this year?*”

“Yes. But that’s all I’m going to tell you.”

And try as they might, nothing more would Mrs. Letha divulge.

xXxXx

Remus awakened slowly. He had gone to bed feeling a bit sorry for himself, because he hadn’t

been able to be there for Draco's birthday or for the big entertainment (though he had watched through Danger's eyes and laughed as heartily as anyone). What had he ever done to deserve such treatment?

"Do you want that question answered?" asked a male voice very close beside him.

Startled, Remus rolled over and sat up. He was lying, or now sitting, on the grass near the lake at Hogwarts – no, the Founders' Castle, he realized on seeing the intensity of color and light, and the identity of the man who'd spoken to him. "Do you think I should want that question answered, Sir Godric?" he asked.

"Quite possibly. It has bearing on a decision your lady wife will have to make soon, and one that you all must make."

"Then yes, I do want it answered."

Gryffindor sighed. "You have done nothing, Remus. Or nothing more than any human being. Rather less than most. But bad things sometimes come to good people. It is simply the way of the world, and no one can change it. Not even we can change it. I know we seem very powerful to you, but so powerful do wizards seem to Muggles, and wizards cannot make the world run more smoothly than Muggles."

"It sometimes seems the opposite is true."

"Indeed. My point is, every man who has power seems infinitely powerful to the man who does not, but from that man's own point of view, his power is far less than it appears from the outside." Gryffindor regarded his hands pensively. "I wielded wand and sword once, wand and sword and fire. Now I use pure magical power, some subtle, some not. But I cannot take all the trouble from your lives, and I would be reprimanded if I tried."

"As nice as it sounds, I don't think we'd really care to have you do that either." Remus stretched his back. "That's the fun in life, really, isn't it? Finding ways to work around what comes at you?"

"It is." Gryffindor's smile was approving. "But that leads to the decision you will all have to make, each one for himself. You understand in your hearts and souls that we are powerful, more powerful than you. Your understanding that we cannot solve all your problems for you is as of yet only in your minds. You may harbor some resentment against us in future times of trouble. Would it be easier for you – and this I ask only of you, Remus, for everyone must answer for himself – would it be easier if you no longer came here for these yearly gatherings?"

Remus frowned, thinking. "I can't see how," he said finally. "At least, not at the moment. I might have a different opinion if something truly drastic happens to us, but right now, I think this is valuable just as one place and time where we know we can all be together, no matter what." He looked sidewise at Gryffindor. "Besides, surely we would never be able to gather any sort of information from the way you talk to us, or the things we do together."

“Never,” agreed Gryffindor calmly. “Absolutely not. Will you walk inside with me?”

“I would be delighted.”

There are times it's easy to remember that he was once Salazar Slytherin's best friend.

xXxXx

One by one, Pack and Pride were polled, and all gave the same response – they liked the birthday parties and wanted them to continue. Hermione detained Margaret Ravenclaw after she had asked the question. “I wanted to ask you something about my pendants,” she said. “About the jewels. Is there any way I could give one of them to somebody else?”

“And who might that be?” asked Margaret with a wry smile. “Your twin, perhaps?”

Hermione nodded. “I have two blue still,” she said. “If he takes one, that still leaves me with one if I ever need to call for help in an emergency.”

“True. But remember, that's not the only use the blue jewels can be put to.”

“It's not?”

“Oh, didn't you know that?” Margaret clapped a hand over her mouth dramatically. “Mercy me, I must be getting silly in my old age. Well, the answer to your question is yes. Yes, you may give one of your jewels to your twin, as long as he's willing to accept. Why don't we go and ask him...”

xXxXx

“Will one of my jewels turn red when I get Sorted into Gryffindor?” Meghan asked Maura Gryffindor and Sophia Ravenclaw.

The two women exchanged amused looks. “*If* you are Sorted into Gryffindor,” Maura began, ignoring Meghan's cry of indignation.

“Then yes, one of your jewels will turn red,” Sophia finished. “But that will still leave you with three blue ones. Use them only when you're sure you need them, because you know they cannot be replaced.”

Meghan nodded. “I *will* be a Gryffindor,” she said mulishly. “I *will* be.”

“With that attitude, I'm sure you will,” said Maura, chuckling. “Father's Hat is very like him that way. Sensible.”

xXxXx

Brenna Ravenclaw, her mother, and Danger were dipping crisps into a large bowl of onion dip. “We need to ask you a question related to the one we've been asking everybody,” said Brenna,

dabbing at her lips with a napkin. “About your dreams.”

“You must have noticed that you haven’t had one in quite a while,” said Ravenclaw, sipping her drink.

Danger nodded. “It’s been a year and more. Am I just going to stop having them?”

“No,” said Ravenclaw, shaking her head. “Your magic, once started, cannot be so easily stopped. But you must decide what form it is now to take.”

“You may dream one dream each year, giving general warnings and predictions for the coming months,” said Brenna. “It will be vague and difficult to understand, and you may be angry if you fail to interpret a portion correctly, or if you fail to do so in time. Or you may choose to have warnings come to you closer to the time of the trouble. There are some things about which you cannot be warned, and some for which warnings may come too late, but for other things these warnings may be helpful and even save lives.”

Danger sighed, crumbling a crisp between her fingers. “Why is it always me?” she asked no one in particular. “Excuse me a moment? I want to go talk this over with Remus.”

“Of course.”

Danger wandered away, finding her husband in conversation with several male scions of the Founders’ lines. They drifted off as she approached. “What is it?” Remus asked her.

Danger explained her predicament. “So I can either get general warnings for the whole year, or get more specific ones that might not come in time,” she finished. “What do you think?”

Remus twisted a napkin in his hands, thinking. “General warnings for everything would probably be the more useful of the two,” he said. “Because they’re guaranteed to come in time, and we’ll have lots of opportunity to work them out. It’s not as if we haven’t had practice.”

“That’s what I was thinking – I just wanted a second opinion.” Danger smiled, leaning into Remus’ chest. “I love you.”

“I’ve noticed.”

She pulled back, looking him over, then shook her head. “You’re not troublesome enough to be Han Solo.”

“Thanks, I think.”

xXxXx

Remus watched Danger go back to the Ravenclaws and tell them her decision, watched them nod solemnly and shake hands with her in turn, watched them stand and move away, only to have their places taken by a man in green...

“He likes her,” said a male voice by his elbow. Remus turned to see Paul Gryffindor beside him. “He’s always been pretty taken with her, ever since we first started watching you.”

“Taken with her?” Remus repeated. “Should I be worried?”

“Oh, no, no, no. We don’t... we can’t... feel that way. It’s just... not part of who we are anymore.” Paul shrugged. “It was a little weird for the first century or so, but now we’re all used to it. It makes sense, you know? If we still did, we’d be thinking all the time about the people we loved when we were alive. We were most of us married, you know. Brenna’s the only one who never did, and that’s just because the man she loved died at the Battle of Hogwarts.”

“The Battle of Hogwarts?”

“You don’t know about that?”

Remus shook his head.

“It’s how Dad’s big fight with Alex’s dad ended up.” Paul looked pensive. “I’m kind of hoping your blow-up down there doesn’t end up that way too, but it’s looking more and more like it will. We were all there – I wouldn’t ask Alex about it, though. It’s where his dad died.”

Remus closed his mouth. “Salazar Slytherin died at Hogwarts?”

Paul nodded. “It was down by the lake. I think he was hoping to get into the castle and into the Chamber of Secrets, bring out that basilisk, what’s her name, Sangre. But one of Dad’s students – a friend of mine, actually, a good friend – caught up with him first. He had a score to settle. His family’d been Muggleborn.”

“Slytherin killed them.”

Another nod. “And Will killed him. He had Dad’s sword – Dad got wounded in the leg pretty early, but he wouldn’t quit fighting until Maura and I made him get off the field. It’s why he still limps. But before he went, he gave Will his sword and told him to use it right. And he did.” Paul stared at the floor. “I grew up calling Alex’s dad ‘Uncle Sal,’ running to him as often as I’d run to Dad. Almost like your cubs with you and Sirius. But he wanted to kill people for things they couldn’t help. We couldn’t let that go on.”

Remus put an arm around Paul’s shoulders, fully conscious of the irony of the situation. An onlooker would have taken them to be about the same age, yet Paul had at least twenty-five times Remus’ experience, more than twenty-five times his knowledge and wisdom...

“Thanks,” Paul said quietly. “It doesn’t hurt as much now, but some things will have to wait to heal until it all comes to an end.”

“And when that is, not even you can see.”

“Exactly.” Paul turned his head, giving Remus the almost insolent smile that he shared with

Sirius. “So, why don’t we go raid the snack table and see what we can find to set on fire and throw at people?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

xXxXx

Aletha stretched luxuriously in her bed. The party had been marvelous fun, especially the point when Paul Gryffindor and Remus had thrown flaming peanuts at Sirius. Sirius had promptly upended the punch bowl over his head to put out the flames, then thrown the empty bowl, and the now quenched peanuts, back at them. Once everyone had stopped laughing, a Founders versus Pack-and-Pride Quidditch game had closed the party.

At least once a year we’re assured of one night of harmless fun, all of us together.

I’d give up a lot to be sure of that.

xXxXx

Neville went down to breakfast early that morning. “Dad?” he said. “Adam and Helga said to say hi.”

Frank Longbottom choked on his coffee.

xXxXx

The first week and a half of August were the idyllic days of summer that everyone had missed during July because of the worries over Remus and Draco. Granted, Remus was still away, and Draco still wasn’t allowed to come to the Den or be around Sirius (though it was amazing how often that black dog showed up), but there were always dreams, and plenty of hope for the future.

xXxXx

10 August

Black –

My dad has it. What will you give me if I get it back for you?

– Nott

xXxXx

Excitement about the Quidditch World Cup began to mount higher and higher as the second week of August drew toward a close. Still, no one would have dreamed of letting Ginny’s birthday go uncelebrated, so 11 August saw another party in the orchard.

Harry took the role of King Arthur this time, and Neville decided to be Patsy, so that they could do the opening of the Camelot scene and the scene at the castle properly. Danger sat on a broomstick behind the backdrop, and Letha cast a spell to show clouds opening around her face. Only the Pack knew that it was actually Moony's voice that boomed out of her in the role of God.

"I was good, wasn't I?" said Harry as he lay in bed that night.

"Brilliant," answered Hermione from the next bed over. After the fourth night in a row of discovering Hermione and Meghan together in Draco's bed in the morning, Padfoot and Letha had given in and moved a third bed in for Meghan. "Go to sleep."

"Fine."

A pause.

"I really was good, wasn't I?"

"Harry," said Meghan's voice from the darkness.

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

Silence.

xXxXx

Hermione was dreaming. She sat in a dirty, dilapidated room, Harry and Draco beside her, hearing voices shouting outside, footsteps pounding. Blue light shone between Draco's fingers. Harry clutched a small golden cup in one hand. She felt her mouth move, shape the words, *No, don't do it*, and didn't know which of the boys she was speaking to –

She awoke with a start. Meghan slept on peacefully before her eyes. She turned over to see Harry sitting up in bed, rubbing his forehead. "What's wrong?" she whispered, sitting up herself.

"I had a dream," he answered in the same low tones. "About Voldemort."

Hermione kicked off her covers instantly and climbed onto his bed. "Tell me," she said. "Quick, before you forget."

Harry closed his eyes. "It was a room in an old house," he said. "It must have been really fancy once, but now it's just old and dirty. Abandoned, it looks like, abandoned for a long time. There was a big snake named Nagini, and an old Muggle – the caretaker of the house, I think they said he was – and..." He opened his eyes. "Wormtail. Wormtail was there."

"What language did they speak?" Hermione asked urgently. "Not to themselves, to the Muggle – or didn't they talk to the Muggle?"

“Yeah, they talked to him. It was English, I think. But don’t you understand every language in dreams?”

“I don’t know. And you said Voldemort was there? How could you see him? Was he possessing someone again?”

Harry shook his head, hand still on his scar. “I don’t think so – I don’t know. I never saw him clearly. I just knew it was him from the voice. And because he spoke Parseltongue. They were talking about someone they killed – there was a name but I don’t remember it – and then they started talking about killing somebody else.” He looked down at his blankets. “About killing me.”

Hermione hugged him hard. “They won’t,” she told him in a harsh whisper. “They can’t. They’ll have to come through me, first. And Draco and Meghan, and Ron and Ginny, and – oh, everyone, you know that.”

“Yes, but I don’t *want* that to happen!” Harry’s eyes were desperate now. “Hermione, I don’t want all those people to die for me! I don’t want *anyone* to die for me!”

“I know. But we don’t want you to die either.”

“Nobody is going to die tonight,” said Letha firmly from the door. “Bad dream, Harry?”

Harry nodded. “It made my scar hurt,” he said, standing up and picking up his glasses. “And I think I saw Voldemort in it.”

Letha frowned. “I don’t like the sound of that. Does it still hurt now?”

“No, it’s better. But it kept hurting for a while after I woke up.”

Letha’s frown deepened. “Tell us right away if it hurts again,” she said. “Go back to sleep if you can, but if you can’t, go downstairs so you don’t wake anyone else.”

Harry and Hermione nodded. Letha smiled and came into the room to hold them both for a moment. “Our first cubs,” she murmured to them. “What a fine young man and young lady you’re turning out to be.”

After Letha returned to bed, a cat and a wolf went down the stairs together and out the front door into the end of the night, where they curled up on the lawn and watched the sky brighten into morning.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 31: Money and Honor (Year 4)

Chapter 31: Money and Honor

Mid-morning found the Pack gathered in the den room, all with large backpacks on. “Hold on tight, now,” said Sirius, extending his arm to Harry. “Don’t want to lose you halfway there.”

“Oh, please,” said Harry, rolling his eyes. “How often does that happen?”

“About once a week,” said Aletha, whose arm Hermione was grasping tightly. “A lot of splinchings happen with badly done Side-Along.”

“Great,” grumbled Harry, taking a firmer grip on Sirius’ arm. Sirius was sure he’d have to massage it later to return circulation. “Ready when you are.”

Sirius concentrated on his destination. A wood near a deserted moor, trees all around, maybe a bird or two singing – he wanted to be there, now, with Harry, he told himself, and turned in place, willing their two bodies forward through space.

Darkness and pressure, and then light again, and they were standing in a clearing in a forest. Harry let go Sirius’ arm and shook his head vigorously. “Everything still attached?” Sirius asked, only half-jokingly.

Harry rubbed his face. “Think so.”

Aletha and Hermione Apparated in with a snap, and a moment later Danger and Meghan with a louder popping noise. Danger had been a bit chary about taking Meghan Side-Along, but Aletha had talked her into it.

“That’s everyone,” said Sirius, feeling a trace of sadness as he said it, because it wasn’t true, not really... everyone was more than this, or ought to be...

Stop that. There’s no reason to ruin the World Cup with stupid “should be” and “could be.” We’ll get it sorted out. For right now, just live with it.

“Come on, then, let’s find our campsite,” he said, hoisting his backpack a little higher.

xXxXx

Hermione stopped at the edge of the wood, turning her head. “What?” said Harry, but then he heard it too. Someone was playing on a pipe, a tune that managed to be wistful and lively at the same time, as if forest spirits were dancing to it...

Meghan looked appealingly at Padfoot and Letha. “Oh, all right,” said Padfoot, holding out his hand. “Come find us when you’re done.”

Meghan clapped her hands, slithered out of her backpack and handed it over, and was racing along the edge of the trees towards the music before you could say “wand.”

“You too?” Letha asked Harry and Hermione. They both nodded. “Go on, then.”

“But human,” added Danger firmly. “No changing.”

“Aww.” Harry had been looking forward to tracking someone down by scent, and by her expression, so had Hermione.

“You want to get us in more trouble than we already are?” asked Letha, hands on hips.

“No.” Hermione sighed. “And you would be if someone saw us transform.”

“Correct,” said Letha. “So...”

“Don’t let anyone see us?” Harry guessed.

Danger winked at them. “That’s the rule. Backpacks, please, and don’t be too long.”

Harry handed his backpack to Letha, Hermione gave hers to Danger, and they both turned and ran into the forest, just far enough that they could no longer see the sea of tents. Once there, Harry stopped and closed his eyes, beginning to recite his Latin sentences. The change came more quickly now, so that he only needed two of them – oddly, the two Ginny had suggested, not the two he had come up with himself – to make the change.

Hermione, having had more time to practice, could change merely by wanting to, and was dancing in place with impatience by the time Harry finished. Slowpoke, she told him in animal-speech.

You didn’t have to wait. Nose in the air, Harry cast about for the scent he wanted, and found it within a few moments. Let’s go.

xXxXx

Even if they hadn’t had their animal forms, the growing crowd around the place they wanted would have made it easy to find. Hermione went aloft a few trees away, found a branch sturdy enough to support her human form, and changed back, as Harry did the same below.

Draco was sitting in a tree at the edge of the woods, one arm hooked around an upthrust branch, and playing something that sounded like one of his original compositions. Meghan was dancing below. Hermione wondered which of them had had the foresight to put out the hat sitting on the ground. There were already several Sickles in it along with quite a lot of Knuts.

Meghan sank gracefully to the ground on a long warbling note. The crowd applauded, and many of them tossed coins into the hat. Hermione jumped down and made her way up front. “Can you play ‘Magic Circle’?” she called, winking at Draco.

“I suppose I could do that.” Draco flexed his fingers, blew through his pipe once to clear it, then played the introduction to the lively dance tune. Harry made his way through the crowd on the other side to join Hermione and Meghan, and Neville came forward from his vantage point beside the tree to be their fourth. The crowd began to clap along, keeping time as the dance began.

“Magic Circle” was a round-dance tune, which could be done with any even number of dancers, though having a multiple of four made it easier. As they spun in their small circle, Hermione saw a number of familiar faces in the crowd. *This would be more fun with more people...*

“Grab new partners when we spin out,” she told Harry as she curtsied and he bowed.

“Right.” Harry turned to bow to Meghan, and Hermione heard him pass the message along to her. The spin came a few bars later, as each dancer whirled two steps outward and two steps back. Two steps out brought Hermione to the edge of the crowd, and she seized Seamus Finnegan’s hands and spun him back into the dance with her.

To her delight, Neville had caught Colleen Lamb as he spun out. Harry’s prize was a red-haired Hufflepuff girl Hermione knew only vaguely, and Meghan’s was a completely unfamiliar boy, who looked a bit puzzled as to how he’d come to be in the dance. The newly enlarged circle joined hands and spun around again.

Four iterations later, two subsidiary circles had formed of their own accord, and the original circle had split into two so as to keep dancing in the space available. Draco played the arpeggios which meant the dance was coming to an end, and partners bowed and curtsied to each other as the music slowed and stopped. Hermione looked up to see that her final partner was a tall, black boy with slanting eyes, who she thought was in her own year in Slytherin. “Hermione Granger-Lupin,” she said, offering her hand.

“Yes, I know.” He took it cautiously and shook it once. “Blaise Zabini.”

“You dance very well.”

“Thank you. So do you.”

“Hello, Hermione,” said Colleen, cutting across the eroding circle. “When did you get here?”

“Just now. You?”

“Oh, we’ve been here for nearly a week. I’m glad the match is soon, I don’t think I can stand my sister for much longer.” Colleen looked curiously at Zabini, who was regarding her calmly.

“Do you know each other?” asked Hermione, suddenly recalling her manners. “Colleen, this is Blaise Zabini, he’s in our year – aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“And Blaise...” She hoped she hadn’t offended him by using his first name, but he made no sign of

it. “This is Colleen Lamb, she’s one of my dormmates, another Gryffindor, obviously.”

“You’re... a Slytherin?” said Colleen hesitantly, extending her hand.

“Yes, but I hope you won’t hold that against me.” Blaise took her hand, but instead of shaking it, bowed over it and kissed it once. “*Enchante , mam’selle .*”

Colleen stared. “Thank you,” she said faintly as Blaise straightened up and released her hand. “I... have to go.” She dashed away into the crowd.

Blaise watched her go, frowning. “Have I offended her?”

“No, she’s just shy,” said Hermione. “I think you startled her, that’s all. She’s not used to people noticing her.”

“She should be,” said Blaise musingly. “She’s quite lovely...” He shook his head, as if recalling himself from daydreams. “I must go. I hope to see you at school, Miss Granger-Lupin.”

“Hermione.”

A smile flickered into view. “If you wish. Hermione.” He bowed to her slightly and was gone.

“What’re you talking to him for?” asked Draco, coming up beside her. “He’s a Slytherin.”

“As if I hadn’t noticed,” Hermione snapped, rounding on him. “Why can’t I talk to whomever I please?”

“I never said you couldn’t, I was just saying you might not want to talk to a Slytherin!”

“Why not? They can’t all be bad, can they?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Look at this.” Draco unfolded a piece of parchment from his pocket and handed it to her.

“My dad has it,” Hermione read aloud. “What will you give me if I get it back for you?” She looked up. “What is it?”

“My stuffed lion. I thought Nott – little Nott – took it just to be rude, but now he says his dad has it. I wrote back telling him what I’ll tell the school if he *doesn’t* get it back for me.”

Hermione grinned and touched his hand. **Dora?**

Exactly. “By the way, thanks for making me play my fingers off,” Draco continued as if they’d never spoken silently, rubbing his left hand with his right. “That’s a hard piece, and I did it three times over!”

“No one made you keep going. You could have stopped.”

“But you were all having fun. I would have been the rude berk who quit playing for no reason if I’d done that.”

Hermione groaned. “I give up,” she said. “How am I supposed to know what to do?”

“You’re not.” Draco chuckled. “That’s the way I like you. Confused.”

Hermione made a face at him.

xXxXx

After helping set up the tents, Danger had departed, leaving Sirius and Aletha alone with Harry, Hermione, and Meghan. She would be back Monday afternoon to watch the match with everyone, but this was something on the order of a holiday for her, time she could spend with Remus without feeling guilty about neglecting the rest of the Pack.

She shouldn't be in this kind of situation. None of us should. Aletha looked down the row of tents, finding the faded yellow one without much trouble, even in the gathering twilight. Draco was in that tent, she knew, just a short distance away from her, from all of them. He was safe and happy enough, certainly happier than he'd been with the Notts, but he wasn't home, and that rankled.

Don't any of them understand the kind of psychological damage you can do by yanking a child away from his family without warning? Draco's fourteen, and mature for his age, but he's still young, and with his history...

I'm not looking forward to his homecoming.

Not, she amended hastily, because she didn't want him home – heavens, no – but because she knew what was likely to happen.

He'll have nightmares for a while, be touchy and moody, clingy and pushing us away by turns. He'll need a lot of reassurance, and the worst of it is, we can't guarantee this won't happen again, because we didn't know it was going to happen in the first place.

And just to add to the fun, Remus was away indefinitely, banned from contact with the cubs, and Draco was still months away from being able to complete his transformation, so they couldn't even visit that way. Not that Sirius didn't care about Draco, or Draco about Sirius, but Remus understood Draco's quiet moods in a way Sirius seldom could.

The dreams are nice, but that's all they are, dreams. And something in us knows that.

Aletha dipped a stick into the fire and held it up, watching it burn down. She imagined Danger taking the flame in her hands and spinning it deftly into thread, Remus catching the end of it and whistling sweet, sharp notes to weave it into a complicated web, which would hang shining on the air before twisting into crowns and necklaces and bracelets for Hermione and Meghan and a fiery ball for Harry and Draco to bat back and forth between them...

She tossed the stick into the fire. *We need each other. We're like that web – strong as long as all the parts are there, but take away one strand and another, and it starts to weaken. We wove our lives together to make ourselves stronger, but we never thought of what would happen if we had to be apart...*

The wind picked up, blowing past her. Aletha felt a sudden and almost unbearable need to be part of it, ride it, let it carry her and move her as it willed. She poked her head into the tent. "I'm going out for a fly," she said. "I should be back soon."

"All right." Sirius didn't even look up from the diagram he was drawing for Harry. "Now if the Chasers move over here..."

Aletha chuckled as she let the tent flap fall. *I do love them, but they have such one-track minds some days.*

A quick Disillusionment Charm, and she stepped into the main aisle and transformed. Hooves beat the ground, great wings swept up and down again, bearing her aloft. Trumpets sounded in her mind, clear and triumphant, proclaiming her victory over gravity, however temporary. In the air, she had no troubles and no burdens, nothing could catch her or hurt her. She was invincible. It was always so, even when she did not fly with her own wings. The air was her friend. She loved it.

xXxXx

13 August

Black –

No need to be rude. I think I can get it for you after the Cup is over. Meet me near my tent an hour after the match ends, and don't tell anyone, or the deal's off.

– Nott

xXxXx

The Weasleys arrived the day of the match and set up camp a few spaces down from the Pack's tent. Since Ginny was the only girl in their party, the Pack had agreed to take her in with Hermione and Meghan, so that the Weasleys didn't have to bring another tent just for her.

"Going to be crowded in here," Padfoot muttered, staring at the small bedroom where Hermione and Meghan had slept the last two nights. "We might have to get a bunk bed in..."

"Wait a second," said Harry. "Don't the Weasleys have an extra bed?"

"I think they do. Why?"

"Because I can sleep over there for as long as the Cup lasts. Then Ginny can have my room."

“That’d work. Let’s check it with Arthur and make sure.”

Mr. Weasley was more than amenable. Within the hour, Harry was clearing the last of his things out of the room. “The bed on the right is more comfortable,” he told Ginny as she dropped her pack on the dresser. “And if Hermione starts yowling in her sleep, just bang on the wall.”

“Yowling?”

“She did it last night.” Harry tipped his head back to demonstrate. “Owwwrrrrr, owwwrrrrr, owwwrrrrr...”

Ginny had her hands over her ears. “I think I understand,” she said. “Do you howl in your sleep, then?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe I will when I get more used to changing. How are you coming?”

“Well enough.” Ginny shrugged. “I have two more of the partial transfigurations to do – one arm and my head – but I can’t understand how the spell works that will keep me thinking like a human while I have a lynx head. And that seems like an important one.”

“More important for some than others. I’m not sure Ron ever thinks like a human.”

Ginny chuckled. “He does seem to think with his stomach a lot. But he does more thinking than you realize. One of these days he’s going to surprise everyone.”

xXxXx

Danger was in front of the Weasleys’ tent when Harry and Ginny got back, teaching everyone how to make what she called foil meals. Mr. Weasley, of course, was delighted to see this new piece of Muggle ingenuity, and everyone else was just interested in the food. Harry and Ginny took their turns assembling the meals, taking a piece of foil, placing ground meat and cut-up potatoes and onions on it, sprinkling on salt and pepper, folding the foil around it, and placing it in the fire to cook.

“It takes some time,” Danger told them, “but when it’s done it’s delicious. And not a bit of magic about it – I used to do it with my parents in the back yard when I was little. They’re all yours, Arthur, they should be done within an hour – we’ll be over to claim our share about then.” Danger ruffled Harry’s hair and dropped a kiss on Hermione’s head as she passed.

Harry took a quick count of the foil packets in the fire and came up with fourteen. “Are Padfoot and Letha eating here?” he asked Hermione.

“I don’t see why not. Danger brought the meat and the foil with her.”

“Oh.” Harry relaxed. He didn’t often think of the Weasleys as poor, but he was always careful to invite Ron and Ginny over to meals at the Den as often as Mrs. Weasley invited the cubs to eat at the Burrow. It was just good manners, really.

Ron and the twins returned with a kettle and a pair of saucepans full of water just as Bill, Charlie, and Percy arrived. "There's loads of people here we know," said Ron, setting the kettle on a rather precarious rig Mr. Weasley had built for hanging it over the fire. "Wood said hi, Harry – he's just been signed by Puddlemere United for their reserve team."

"That's great!" Harry poked at one of the meals with a stick, pushing it a little farther into the coals. "Who'll be captain this year, I wonder, now that Wood's left?"

"Usually decided by seniority, isn't it?" said Ron. "Could be them." He jerked a thumb at the twins. "Though how they'd decide which one, I don't know."

"They won't do it," said Ginny. "They're too busy with their joke shop to want to be captains of anything. It'll probably be Angelina or Alicia. More likely Angelina, I think."

"And we won't need any more reserve players either, because we've got two good reserves already," said Harry, leaning back contentedly. "You and Draco could both play almost any position – even Beater, you'd be good for, not that Fred and George are going to give it up."

"Maybe they'll poison themselves with their concoctions," said Hermione. "Weren't they looking a little odd last week?"

Ginny chuckled. "I don't know what they're working on, but if it's supposed to make you sick, then they're doing perfectly," she said. "Remember, Ron?"

Ron made a face. "I couldn't walk past their room without wanting to hurl," he said. "Because that's what they were doing. All the bloody time. Mum was starting to get suspicious of the smell."

Meghan came running along the path and slid into a sitting position between Ron and Harry. "Hello," she said breathlessly, grinning at them. "Look what I have." She pulled three fat gold Galleons out of her pocket.

"Where'd you get that?" said Ron and Harry simultaneously. Hermione and Ginny leaned in to look.

"Earned it," said Meghan smugly. "Dancing. Mr. Longbottom changed the silver to gold for me."

"You really shouldn't do that," said Harry.

"Why not? It's not wrong. I like dancing, and people like watching me dance. Why shouldn't they give me money?"

"And that's only half-shares, isn't it?" said Hermione.

Meghan nodded. "Draco gets the other half for playing."

"You got three Galleons for dancing, and that was just half of it?" Ron looked amazed. "Maybe I

should take up dancing.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” said Ginny. “Remember what we learned for the birthdays?”

“Yeah!” Ron’s eyes lit up. “I bet people would pay to see that!”

Harry’s scruples fought a brief battle with his avarice and lost. “We’ll have to do the singing a capella,” he said. “Luna’s not here.”

“We’ll manage,” said Hermione. “There’s plenty of it that doesn’t have anything to do with singing anyway.”

“I’ll go tell Draco and Neville.” Meghan jumped up. “When?”

Harry sniffed. He could smell cooking meat. “Maybe in about an hour,” he said.

“All right.” Meghan was away again, dashing toward the Longbottoms’ tent. She nearly collided with a rather large blond man in yellow and black robes, who caught her by the arm.

“Careful, there, miss,” he said with a laugh. “You don’t want to get hurt, not with the match tonight!”

Meghan smiled at him and ran on. Mr. Weasley looked up. “Ludo!” he called happily to the man. “Ludo Bagman, everyone, he’s got us our tickets... how are you, Ludo, how is everything?”

“Spiffing, Arthur, just spiffing. Look at that weather, will you – not a cloud in the sky. Who was that I just bumped into, d’you happen to know? Charming little thing, very sweet...”

“Her name’s Meghan, Meghan Black. Sirius Black’s daughter.”

Bagman’s blue eyes widened further. “His daughter, you say? Oh, that’s right, you’re friendly with him – know his family – are all these yours, by the by?”

“No, only the redheads. This is Percy, he’s just started work at the Ministry...”

“Pleasure, Mr. Bagman, truly a pleasure,” said Percy obsequiously. Ron made kissing motions upwards, causing Harry, Ginny, and the twins to have brief fits of laughter, while Hermione looked disapproving (though her lips were twitching, Harry noted).

“Bill, he’s with Gringotts, and Charlie, works with dragons in Wales – Fred and George, best of luck sorting them out – Ron, going into his fourth year at Hogwarts, and Ginny, in her third.”

“A Weasley girl!” Bagman exclaimed. “I thought there were no such things.”

Ginny smiled politely. “Now there are,” she said, carefully removing her hand from Bagman’s grasp.

“But then, who are these two?” Bagman gestured at Harry and Hermione.

“Ron’s friends, Hermione Granger-Lupin and Harry Potter.”

Harry kept a pleasant expression on his face as Bagman’s eyes performed the familiar flick upward, checking whether famous Harry Potter really did have the famous scar on his forehead. *What are they expecting, I’m not who I say I am? Or everyone’s lied about the scar?*

“Relax,” murmured Ginny.

Harry realized with a small start that his fists were clenched, and released them. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Bagman was sitting down now, still chatting with Mr. Weasley, as Charlie picked up a hot pad and poured the boiling water from the kettle into a large number of assorted mugs. Bill began handing them around, and Percy took two, delivering one ceremoniously to Bagman. “Has there been any news of Bertha Jorkins, sir?” he asked a little timidly.

“Bertha Jorkins,” said Padfoot from behind him. “Now there’s a name I haven’t heard in years.”

Bagman nearly spilled his tea in his hurry to get up. “You must be Sirius Black!”

“Must I?” asked Padfoot whimsically. “I suppose I must. You’re Bagman, aren’t you? Magical Games and Sports?”

“I am, I am indeed – and this is your wife, is it not – but who might this be?”

Letha and Danger were duly introduced. Bagman glanced from Danger to Hermione but didn’t say anything, sitting down again instead.

“What were you saying about Bertha Jorkins?” Padfoot asked, taking a mug of tea from Charlie with a nod of thanks and handing it on to Letha.

“Oh, she’s gone missing,” said Bagman, waving a hand dismissively. “Been on holiday for over a month now, gone to visit a cousin or something in Albania and just never came back. How do you know her?”

“We were at Hogwarts together,” said Padfoot. “She was a year above me, but I got to know her well enough...”

“You hexed her enough times,” Letha put in. “You see, Bertha had a crush on Sirius. She used to follow him around to see who he was kissing this week, and then tell the entire school. She hoped if she did it enough, he’d somehow be attracted to her – I don’t quite follow the logic myself, but it must have made sense at the time.”

Padfoot scowled as Harry, Hermione, and the Weasleys laughed. “You had to bring that up.”

“Of course I did.”

Bagman seemed to think it was funny as well, laughing heartily. “Anyone fancy a flutter?” he asked, jingling his pockets enticingly. “Loads of people betting, ought to be fine payouts...”

“I’ll put a Galleon on Ireland,” said Mr. Weasley thoughtfully.

“To win?” asked Bagman, his face falling slightly. “Very well...” He pulled a scroll out of one pocket and noted it down. “Any of you lot?”

Fred and George were whispering together. “Fifty-six Galleons, fourteen Sickles, eleven Knuts,” said Fred loudly.

Percy nearly spilled his tea.

“Well, well!” Bagman whistled. “High stakes – men after my own heart! And what’ll that be for, then?”

“Krum gets the Snitch,” said George. “But Ireland wins.”

“Bit odd,” muttered Harry to Ron.

“More than odd,” Ron muttered back. “That’s all their savings – they wouldn’t bet it unless they were sure...”

“Ireland’s Chasers are awfully good,” said Harry, thinking hard as he watched Bagman writing down Fred and George’s wager, ignoring Mr. Weasley’s attempts to stop him. “I suppose they could get Ireland more than a hundred fifty up, and keep them there.”

“But Krum’s probably the better Seeker – you’re right, Harry. They’re right.” Ron was frowning. “He’ll give them good odds, too, oddball bet like that. Wish I had some money, I’d go in with them.”

“Hang on,” said Harry, getting to his feet. He caught Padfoot’s eye and signed to him. *Talk privately? Now?*

Padfoot excused himself and got up as Fred handed Bagman a wand, which Bagman waved tentatively, only to have it whistle shrilly and turn into a toy locomotive. He followed Harry a few paces away. “What is it?”

“Can I bet too? May I?” Harry emended hastily.

“What on?”

“Same thing Fred and George did.”

Padfoot frowned. “Harry, I don’t like you betting with Bagman. He’s just this side of respectable,

Head of a Department or not. And he'll drop your name everywhere if you register so much as a Knut with him. No."

Harry sighed, kicking at the ground. "I just thought..."

"No." The tone was flat and definite. Harry knew there was no appeal when Padfoot sounded like this. "However..."

Harry looked up. "However what?"

A smile was beginning to flicker on Padfoot's face. "If you're betting the same way Fred and George did, I might be willing to accommodate you myself. Four to one."

"Done," said Harry immediately. "Ten Galleons – no, fifteen."

"Fifteen? Are you sure? That's quite a lot."

"I'm sure."

"All right, hand it over."

Harry rummaged in his pocket and found the required amount of gold. Padfoot took it and pocketed it himself. "No advances on your pocket money, now," he warned. "If you lose this, you lose it."

"I understand."

"Good. Let's go see if lunch is ready yet."

Harry followed Padfoot around the corner of the tent and nearly ran into him as Padfoot stopped dead.

"Black," said a precise voice.

"Crouch." Padfoot's answer was polite, but cold. Harry could feel ice in the single word.

Crouch? I know that name...

Then he placed it. Bartemius Crouch, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement at the time of his parents' deaths, the man responsible for Padfoot being sent to Azkaban without a trial. A cold anger to match Padfoot's welled in Harry. *If you'd just bothered to do what's right... if you hadn't been so damned sure you knew what was going on...*

There would never have been a Pack, said a more reasonable side of him. Moony might never have met Danger. You wouldn't have Hermione as your sister, or Draco as your brother.

Enough arguing with myself anyway. Harry stepped around Padfoot and got a look at the man. Mr.

Crouch, unlike most of the wizards around them, could have walked down a street in any city in England and got no attention at all. His suit and tie were immaculate, his hair and mustache strictly groomed, his shoes highly polished. Harry understood perfectly why Percy, who now worked for Crouch, spoke so well of him. He was obviously a strictly by-the-book type of man, and Percy respected that.

But he wasn't always that way, if the stories are true...

"Thank you, Weatherby, but not now," said Mr. Crouch, waving away the tea Percy was trying to hand him. Harry carefully avoided Ron's eye, since bursting out laughing in front of two Department Heads of the Ministry was not his idea of a good time. "The Bulgarians will be looking for us, Ludo, we should go..."

"See you in the Top Box!" Bagman told them cheerily, handing Fred his empty mug and jumping up. "I'll be commentating on the match from there!" With a friendly wave from him and a frosty nod from Mr. Crouch, both wizards Disapparated.

Ron exploded first, but Harry wasn't far behind, and the twins and Ginny tied for third place. "Weatherby?" Fred choked out, staring at Percy, who had gone rather pink. "He calls you Weatherby?"

"Yes, well, he's a very busy man," said Percy brusquely. "He doesn't have time for insignificant details."

This set Padfoot and Danger off. Percy stared at them, offended. "They're not laughing at you," said Letha, who was sitting suspiciously still herself. "It's only that you've just described yourself as an insignificant detail."

Luckily for everyone present, Danger recovered enough at this point to examine one of the foil meals and proclaim them done, and eating took priority over laughing at Percy.

After lunch, for which Letha had fetched Meghan by means of a Patronus messenger, the Pride went to find its remaining two members and prepare to start their money-making venture.

"There's just one thing," said Harry. "I did some investing. If you want a share, tell me now."

"Investing in what?" asked Ginny.

"The World Cup. I bet the same thing Fred and George are betting, only with Padfoot, and he gave me four to one."

"That's pretty good," said Draco. "How much?"

"Fifteen Galleons."

"Fifteen?" Ron looked awed. "That'd give you sixty if you win!"

“I know. So anyone who wants in, just tell me.”

Everyone did. “That works out well, actually,” said Hermione, scribbling figures on a scrap of parchment. “If you just keep whatever we make today, up to fifteen Galleons – if we make that much – then you’ll be paid back for all our shares, and then if we win...”

“When we win,” said Ron. “Fred and George wouldn’t bet on anything less than a sure thing.”

“If we win,” Hermione reiterated, “we can all share that money equally.”

Agreement thus made, the kitchens of the various tents were ransacked to find quick equivalents of knightly gear (the box of foil Danger had brought was much appreciated) and the seven members of the Pride betook themselves to a clear spot by the wood where they could begin their brilliant scheme. Neville began to clomp together the two coconut shells his mum had conjured for them, Harry assumed the proper knightly stance, and together they galloped forth. Hermione and Draco were already ensconced in a tree to be the answering voices in the castle.

The “I’m not dead” scene (featuring Draco with the cart, Ron as the carrier, and Meghan as the dead person) had an audience. The scene where Sir Bedevere (Hermione) judged a witch (Ginny) had a larger audience. “The Knights of the Round Table” had a chuckling audience. And the scene with the Frenchman in the castle had a cheering, laughing audience.

By the time they had finished everything they had learned, ending with Neville and Hermione, dressed as Aurors, coming onto the scene to arrest King Arthur and his knights, they had what looked like half the camp watching them, and applause and cheering rippled through the crowd as they took their bows. Quite a lot of people pushed forward to toss money into the hat.

“That was great,” said Ron, grinning and waving at the last of the audience, some rather giggly girls who looked like first years.

“No kidding,” said Harry, hoisting the hat. “There’s at least five Galleons in here – and I mean Galleons, as in gold. I don’t even know how much in silver and bronze.”

“Let’s get counting, then,” said Meghan. “We won’t have much time before the Cup starts.”

“I can do it with magic,” said Hermione. “But it’ll have to be where no one can see.”

“Be still, my heart!” Ron clutched at his chest. “Hermione Granger-Lupin, breaking rules!”

“I am the daughter of a Marauder, you know,” said Hermione, scowling at him. “Come on, in here, so no one sees this...”

In the shelter of the trees, Hermione waved her wand at the hat. The Galleons rose up and landed in a pile to one side. “Six,” she said. The Sickles were next, stacking themselves in neat piles of eight and nine, one each to a group. “Seventeen, and five left over.” The Knuts were last. “Three Galleons’ worth, enough to make up that one of Sickles, and forty-two more. So that’s...”

“Twenty-seven Galleons,” said Neville, who had been keeping notes. “One Sickles, thirteen Knuts.”

“Wow,” said Ron, staring at the money. “That’s a lot. And that’s just from one afternoon – imagine what we could make in a day...”

“This was special circumstances, though,” said Draco. “We had this big crowd here, with not much to do, and all worked up already. And most of them had never seen anything like what we were doing. We couldn’t get that kind of response from a Muggle crowd. Most of them have seen that.”

Ron nodded. “But we got a lot this time,” he said. “Fifteen for Harry leaves twelve for the rest of us – two for each. Works out nice, doesn’t it?”

“And that’s on top of the ten you got for doing it the first time,” said Hermione. “You’re making out like a bandit on this. Or maybe a pirate.”

“Arrrrr,” growled Ron, scooping two of the piles of silver towards him. “This be my share of the loot, mateys.”

A game of pirates occupied the rest of the afternoon happily.

As they headed back to the tents around dusk, Harry bought Hermione and Ginny Omnioculars, but Ron insisted on paying for his own, grinning happily as he handed over the ten Galleons Charlie and Tonks had won him. Draco, too, could purchase his own, and Neville and Meghan refused politely. “We’ll be so much farther down that we’ll be able to see without them,” Meghan said.

Draco handed around green rosettes which squealed out the names of the Irish team, and everyone bought a program, which had a velvet cover with tassels hanging from the top of the spine. Ron purchased a figurine of Viktor Krum, which walked around on his hand and scowled at the green rosette on Ron’s chest. Ginny used her two Galleons from the afternoon to buy eight hats with dancing shamrocks on them. “One for Luna,” she said. “Even though she couldn’t be here.”

“See you in the Top Box,” Draco said to Harry and Hermione as they reached the Longbottoms’ tent.

“See you,” said Harry. “Have a good game, Neville.”

“I will. You too.”

“Have a good time, Pearl,” Hermione told her sister, hugging her. “Don’t fall out.”

Meghan made a face at her. “Like I would.”

“Don’t fight,” said Letha, coming out of the tent. “Really, tonight of all nights.”

“Yes, save the fights until tomorrow,” advised a man’s voice, and Danger peered out of the tent,

grinning. “They’ll be so much more fun when you can see what you’re fighting about.”

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” Harry said. “It’s scary.”

Danger winked one very blue eye and pulled her head back inside.

“That was Mr. Moony, wasn’t it?” Ron asked as they walked back to the Weasleys’ tent. “Talking through her?”

“They can do that,” said Hermione. “It’s really scary sometimes when you’re not expecting it.”

“It’s scary when you are expecting it,” said Ron. “And weird.”

A gong boomed out over the camp, and red and green lanterns burst into life in the trees, in two straight lines, illuminating either side of a path. “That’s it!” said Mr. Weasley, coming out of the tent rubbing his hands together. “Let’s go!”

xXxXx

Draco said goodbye to the Longbottoms when they reached their seats and kept climbing. The witch at the entrance had told him to head straight back and all the way up.

“How much farther?” whined a familiar voice ahead of him. Draco hurried his steps a little, peering ahead.

“I told you, Theodore, we shall arrive when we arrive.”

“But my legs hurt. How far up are we going to be anyway?”

Draco couldn’t resist. “If it rains,” he said grandly, “we’ll be the first ones to know. Excuse me?”

The Notts, father and son, stared at him as he trotted past. Three more flights brought him to his destination, and he saw that only one seat in the front row was left open.

“Ah-ha,” said Fred Weasley, looking around. “There he is.”

“You see, sir, there is someone else with us,” said George, addressing – Draco stared – the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge.

“He just got delayed a bit.”

“Not his fault in the least.”

“Thanks,” Draco muttered, edging in front of the twins to take the seat between Harry and Hermione.

“Don’t mention it,” said George grandly.

“But aren’t you glad now you never killed us?” asked Fred.

Nott, sitting down gingerly beside a house-elf clad in a tea-towel, gave Draco a scathing look. Draco matched his glare. *After the match*, he mouthed.

“I have it, don’t worry,” Nott muttered. “You’ll get it back. My word of honor on it.”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “What honor?”

Nott flushed and didn’t answer.

A bunch of Bulgarians were now sitting beside Nott’s father, and a wizard with a very round and excited face had just charged into the Top Box. “Are we ready, Minister?” he asked Fudge.

“As soon as you are, Ludo,” Fudge said comfortably, settling into his seat.

xXxXx

Hermione, Ginny, and Draco descended the stairs from the Top Box first, since they were meeting other parties lower down. “So what’s sixty Galleons divided by seven?” Ginny wondered aloud.

“We’ll work it out,” said Hermione. “That’s really amazing, that it came out just like Fred and George thought it would...”

“It’s like Ron said,” said Ginny. “They’d only bet if they were sure. That was all their money. And it really paid off – what odds did he give them on that? Eight to one?”

“That’s at least four hundred Galleons,” said Draco, shaking his head. “Lot of trick sweets there.”

“Four hundred? I don’t think so,” said Padfoot’s voice from a side door. “I only owe Harry, or should I say the Pride, sixty.”

“We meant Fred and George,” said Ginny. “They have at least four hundred. Probably more like five.”

“I should go on down,” said Draco, edging away.

“Draco, it’s unlikely anyone will notice us right now,” said Letha quietly. “Come just for a second.”

Draco hesitated for one moment, then hurried into the box where Padfoot, Letha, and Meghan had been sitting. It was respectably high, only a few feet below the goalposts, and closer to the Bulgarian end than the Irish, but they would have been able to see more of the action here.

He took all this in over the course of one second. Then Padfoot was hugging him, and he was hugging back. He’d missed this, missed it desperately.

If I could just tell them about this feeling – like he'd fight off anything that wants to hurt me, with his bare hands if he has to –

But he couldn't tell anyone that. It was too embarrassing.

Not even if it meant you could go home again?

He put the thought away for later consideration as Padfoot released him. "You've been very brave through this, Draco," he said. "We're all proud of you. It should be over soon, we hope."

"I know." Draco debated for a moment with himself, then dropped to one knee and bent his head. Padfoot placed a hand on the back of his neck, and Draco fought back tears.

There's nothing to cry about, he told himself sternly. Don't be a baby.

But the action had filled the last of the unhappy emptiness within him. He felt stronger now, ready to go on. "Thanks," he said, standing up. "See you soon."

"See you." Padfoot clasped his hand briefly, then let him go. Letha, Meghan, and Danger escorted him into the hallway to hug him goodnight.

Even the Ministry can't keep this up much longer. I'll probably be home in time to leave for Hogwarts.

But first he was going to retrieve his lion. And that would happen tonight. He'd pulled Nott aside while everyone else was celebrating the Irish victory and set a definite time and place for their meeting – one hour from now, by a certain tree with both a red and green lantern in it.

I can handle him myself. Nobody has to help me.

xXxXx

Theo stood under the tree, holding a small bag in one hand. The words Black had spoken to him still smarted.

"What honor?"

He doesn't think I have any honor. He doesn't think I can be trusted.

And he's right. He stared at the bag he was carrying. He shouldn't trust me. Dad knows I'm here, and why. He helped me write those letters, he gave me the lion to give back to Black, and told me not to touch it myself. I'm almost certain he did something to it. But I don't know what.

He looked at his watch. One minute until their appointed meeting time.

I'll go find him and give it back to him, and warn him there might be something wrong with it. I'll do that. That's right. That's honorable.

He got about ten paces before running into something that knocked him flat on his back.

xXxXx

Draco cursed under his breath. Of all the bad luck, to run smack into Nott as he was approaching – he'd have to reveal himself now, show Nott he had an Invisibility Cloak...

Or maybe not. He slipped quickly between two of the nearby tents, took off the cloak, and stepped out. “What happened to you?” he said as Nott picked himself up off the ground.

“Don’t know.” Nott sounded surly. “Listen, there might be something wrong with this. I don’t know what. Be careful with it. Here.” He thrust the bag he was carrying at Draco. “Now get out of here. Hurry.”

“Oh, no. Not until I see this really is what you told me it was.” Draco walked back to the tree and opened the bag.

“Don’t touch it!” Nott half-shouted.

“Why not?” Draco stopped with his hand already in the bag.

“I – I think there might be something wrong with it. I told you that.”

“Something wrong like what? A contact poison?” Draco peered into the bag. His lion peered back at him innocently.

“I don’t *know!* Just – take it and get out of here! Please!”

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you so intent on getting me out of here?”

“I – I can’t – you have to go. You just have to. You can’t stay here – it isn’t safe...”

“You keep saying that. Give me a reason.”

“I can’t!”

“Why not?”

“Theodore?” called a man’s voice from somewhere fairly close by.

Draco dived on Nott before he could answer, clapping one hand over the other boy’s mouth and drawing his dagger with the other. He pressed the point into the soft skin under Nott’s chin. “Not a sound,” he hissed. Nott’s eyes were very big as he made small but frantic up and down motions of his head.

Draco dug out the Invisibility Cloak with his now free hand and threw it quickly over both of them. “Hold still,” he whispered, lying down beside Nott. “Pull your legs in.”

Nott obliged just in time, as two men in cloaks walked into the small clearing where the boys lay at the foot of the tree. Draco squinted. One of them was Nott's father – but he knew the other as well...

"I thought you said they'd be here," Christopher Curcio said to the elder Nott.

"This was the spot Theodore mentioned. Perhaps they went elsewhere."

"We can't put it off much longer, Patroclus. Everyone is getting restless. You may have to forgo your excellent excuse, and introducing your son to our pleasures, a while longer." Curcio chuckled. The sound made Draco's skin crawl. "But soon enough it will happen, will it not? He always said he would return to us..."

"He will be angry," said the elder Nott nervously, scanning the night around him. "He'll want to know why we lied."

"And we will tell him the truth – that we wished to be fit and well to serve him once more, that we wished to build up wealth and possessions to give to him. Don't fret so much, Patroclus, you'll get old before your time. Now come. The boys will wait. Our enjoyment will not. The Muggles await." A nasty chuckle. "Or rather, the Muggles are blissfully unaware."

"All right, *Christopher*, I'm coming. Jumped-up half-blood," the elder Nott muttered as Curcio slipped away between two tents. "Don't think I don't know you had Muggle great-grandparents..."

Draco counted a slow thirty after both men were gone before he moved, pressing the point of his dagger into Nott's skin again to keep the other boy still. Finally, he uncurled and sat up. "Nice," he said, staring at Nott. "Really nice. Going to meet me here alone, were you? Alone, as in without anyone else around?"

"I told you, didn't I? I told you before it happened."

"Five seconds before. Nice try."

"They didn't see us." Nott fingered the Cloak admiringly. "Is this an Invisibility Cloak?"

"None of your damn business." Draco snatched the Cloak off them. "Going to deny your dad's a Death Eater now? When they were talking about someone they serve, someone who they want to return, who'd be angry if he knew they lied?"

"You won't *tell* ..." Nott's tone was almost pleading.

"Who'd believe me? Beyond my own family, who don't really matter anyway because they don't give the Ministry loads of gold? Just tell me one thing, if you know. What are they going to do to Muggles? Where are they even going to find any?"

"The... the campsite manager, I think he is," Nott said hesitantly. "They were talking about a cottage, and going in fast, about not hurting them but just having a bit of fun..."

“I can think of a lot of things that wouldn’t hurt someone but wouldn’t be classified as fun,” Draco snarled. He couldn’t possibly get back to his own section of the camp in time to warn anyone – the Death Eaters would undoubtedly Apparate to the cottage, terrify the Muggle family within – and they were likely to be drunk, liable to misfire spells, one of the most common side-effects of a spell gone wrong was fire, and they were surrounded by flammable tents...

There, see?

Draco froze. *What the hell?* The voice was male, triumphant, indubitably in his head, and just as undoubtedly not his own.

I told you he’d be in danger again soon, the voice went on smugly. **And they haven’t used nearly all the magic in that jewel yet.**

This is really stretching it, Alex, a female voice warned. **You won’t be able to pull this one off again.**

I don’t think I’ll need to.

Draco groaned. This was all the situation needed. At least he knew who it was now. *Alex, get out of my head. Please.*

What’s wrong, you don’t like me?

I like you fine. But unless you’re going to help me talk to someone who can do something about this...

Well, as a matter of fact, I was about to do that very thing.

You were? Nott was staring at him, but that didn’t matter. *How?*

You may recall your conversation with Hermione got cut off rather abruptly about a month ago? That was me, conserving some of the magic from that jewel she used. I knew you’d need it again, and now you do. I submit, as your honorary ancestor, that danger has not yet passed you, and that the jewel link should therefore be reactivated.

I agree with whoever else that was. This is really stretching definitions.

If you’d rather not be able to get through... The voice was huffy.

No, no, that’s just fine.

Good. The next voice you will hear will not be mine.

Fine with me.

“What’s wrong with you?” Nott said in a high-pitched voice. “Your eyes keep doing some weird

swirling thing. And they're changing colors. They were green for a second, and now they're brown..."

"I'm talking to people in my head. Dead people." Draco gave Nott a maniacal grin.

Nott scooted rapidly backwards, still staring.

"And now I'm going to talk to live people." The link with Hermione was active, he could feel it. **Neenie!**

Draco? Her shock was palpable. **What did – how – you didn't use your blue already, did you? No, never mind, what's wrong?**

See for yourself. He spread the pertinent memory before her and focused his own attention back on Nott. "I'd run, if I were you," he said. "Into the woods. Get anything out of your tent that you want to keep. Tents burn easy."

"Nobody's burning anything," Nott said uneasily, standing up. "They're just going to play with the Muggles..."

"How long do you think they'll stay controlled?" Draco challenged. "How long will they keep from just blasting anything that's in their way? Don't be stupid. Get in the woods and stay there."

Nott nodded dumbly, then turned and started to run away.

"Nott!" Draco watched Nott turn back, his face white above his robes. "I was wrong. You do have honor. A little, anyway. You did warn me."

"Thanks." Nott turned and vanished amid the tents.

Draco sat down and covered himself with the Cloak again, hugging his lion through the bag. **What's going on there?** he asked Hermione, grateful beyond measure for her busily humming presence in the back of his mind – *thank you, Father, for that*, he thought ironically.

Padfoot cursed a little, then started sending people places. Letha and Meghan went to get the Longbottoms, Ginny and I are going to get the Weasleys. Padfoot wants us to do what you told Nott to do. Run in the woods and hide.

I'll meet you there, then –

No! Hermione's vehemence almost hurt his ears, even though he couldn't hear it. **He said to stay where you are – either Harry or I will come for you in animal form, find you and guide you back. Then we'll all go on together.**

All right. I'll stay here, or go a little farther in the woods if things start going wrong. Draco frowned as he felt a thinning, stretching sensation in the back of his mind. **Do you feel...**

I do. I think we're using up the magic – it was almost gone anyway, it was only luck that there was this much left...

Luck and something else – or someone. Tell you later.

All right. Love you. See you in a minute.

You too.

She was gone. He was alone.

No, not really alone. Never really alone. His hand found the Pack-pendants. *Never really alone with these. Or with this.* He squeezed the lion in its bag.

xXxXx

Although Draco did not know it, he was even less alone than he had thought. And far safer.

Few would dare dispute the right of a lion to his cub on open ground.

xXxXx

It seemed like hours later, but was only about ten minutes by his watch, when a soft whuff from the darkness told him Harry was near. “Here,” Draco whispered, pulling out his chain. “Where are you?”

Wolf emerged from the trees, showing himself for a moment then blending back in with the darkness and the night (the lanterns in the tree had gone out a few minutes before).

“Here, put this on.” Draco tossed the chain out through the Cloak, willing it intangible to the fabric. Wolf nosed at it, then got a purchase and wiggled his head under it.

You all right? he asked.

Fine. You?

Fine. Come on, they're waiting.

Draco stood up and started to follow Wolf, grinning. **I feel like I'm out for walkies.**

Don't even start. Wolf's tone was filled with gruff humor. **I could walkies you right into a tree, you know.**

Yes, but then you'd have to explain it.

True.

A distant explosion caught both their ears. **What the –**

Damn it, they weren't in time. Wolf stared into the distance. **Do you see it?**

See what?

The light.

Noooo ... wait, yes. Draco squinted, blocking the light from the nearby lantern with a hand, and could just make out a faint green glow in the distance. **What does it mean?**

Dark magic of some kind, I assume. Let's keep moving.

People had started to scream now, and Draco winced at each new flash of light. Wolf sneezed. **I smell smoke,** he said grimly. **Someone's setting fire to things.**

Probably tents. Draco kept his eyes on the green light, and suddenly saw two dark objects floating in midair. **What are those?**

Wolf trained his eyes on them as well. **People,** he said angrily. **Muggles. The campsite manager and his wife, I think...**

Draco, staring at the floating people, tripped on a tree root and fell. The lion squirted out of its bag and off into the darkness. He swore.

I'll get it, said Wolf, and trotted off, returning a moment or two later with the stuffed toy in his mouth and a look of disgust on his face. **Blah.** He spit it out. **What have you been doing with this thing? Playing in the sewers?**

"No." Draco snatched the lion up and stuffed it back into its bag. "You shouldn't have done that – Nott said something about it not being safe to touch..."

Now he tells me.

"You didn't give me a chance!"

No way to fix it now. Come on, we're almost there.

Indeed, a few moments brought them to a huddled group at the edge of the forest. Hermione had her arms around a shivering Meghan. Neville had wrapped his coat around them both, and Ron was holding Ginny close.

"We're back," said Harry, reassuming human form. "Let's get somewhere safe."

"If there is anywhere safe," muttered Ron, looking over his shoulder at the two floating figures.

"Safer," said Draco. "For Hermione especially."

"Why me?"

“They’re playing with Muggles now. How long before they move on to Muggleborns?”

“Good point,” said Ron. “Let’s go.”

The Pride slipped into the forest. People pulled out wands to light the way, but Harry hesitated. “What’s wrong?” Neville asked him.

“I can’t find my wand.”

“Can’t find your wand?” Hermione repeated. “When was the last time you saw it?”

“I don’t know. I think before the match, even.”

“You could have dropped it, I suppose,” said Ginny doubtfully. “But you were in wolf form most of the time you were out here, and you can’t drop things then...”

“You probably left it in the tent somewhere,” said Meghan. “You leave things lying around all the time.”

“But not my wand.” Harry looked uncomfortable. Draco could sympathize. Being without a wand in the magical world left you very exposed to other people’s wishes and whims.

Something rustled in the bushes. Everyone whirled.

“Bad wizards!” squeaked a high-pitched voice, and the house-elf in the tea towel from the Top Box struggled out of a bush, her movements oddly jerky. “Bad wizards, making peoples fly up high in the air! Winky is running, Winky is hiding where bad wizards is not finding her!”

“Why can’t she run properly?” asked Ron in confusion as the house-elf disappeared across the path.

“Maybe her master told her to stay put,” said Neville. “House-elves don’t like disobeying. It’s actually physically hard for them to do.”

A wisp of memory drifted across Draco’s mind – he was laughing as Dobby smacked himself in the head with a flatiron... “They sometimes punish themselves for disobeying,” he said. “Do things like shut their fingers in doors or hit themselves.”

“Ouch!” Meghan winced in sympathy.

“Let’s keep moving,” said Hermione, glancing over her shoulder as an explosion went off at the campsite.

They moved deeper into the wood, passing groups of people as they went. The girls carefully steered the boys away from a trio of veela, for which Draco was grateful – he hadn’t been as affected as Harry or Ron when they had started dancing on the field, but he wasn’t eager to test out his apparent immunity (which Ginny had joked might be caused by his having some veela blood)

with a close encounter just yet.

Finally they found a small clearing where no one seemed to have come yet. Everything was quiet. Harry and Hermione reassumed their Animagus forms, and Ron took out his figure of Viktor Krum and set it down on the ground. Cat-Neenie immediately began stalking the Quidditch player, and Ginny and Meghan and Neville came running to watch. Draco sat down with his back against a tree, feeling weary and dispirited.

I just want to go home.

Wolf sat down beside him and nuzzled his fingers. “What, you wanna scratch?” Draco rubbed his brother’s ears. “There you go.”

Wolf convoluted his body and turned into Harry again. “I thought I smelled something,” he said. “Another animal, out there.” He pointed. “But I might have been wrong. It was just a trace, like something was there and then gone.”

The boys got to their feet to peer into the darkness. “Stupid,” said Harry, after a moment. “I should...” He broke off and mumbled something else, and shrank and twisted back into Wolf. Raising his nose, he sniffed. Draco pulled out his chain again and tossed it around Wolf’s neck.

Something was there, said Wolf. But it doesn’t smell like a threat. It’s... familiar, but not... like I should know it, but I can’t place it. But... His sense flashed with alarm. **Everyone, quiet!**

“Shh!” Draco said aloud. “Harry hears something.”

The clearing fell silent, and the sound became apparent to all – footsteps, ragged and uneven, as though someone were injured and staggering towards them. Harry resumed human form once more, frowning fiercely. “Hello?” he called. “Is someone there?” Draco had his wand pointed towards the thicket, as did Ron and Neville and Hermione –

And then a voice shouted from that direction, and not a panicked scream, either.

“MORSMORDRE!”

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 32: The Middle of the Story (Year 4)

Chapter 32: The Middle of the Story

“Sirius, here!”

Sirius tumbled down behind a tent, next to Frank Longbottom. “What’s going on?” he asked. “I’ve been out pulling people in...”

“We’re lucky so far. We were able to stop the Death Eaters from getting at the Muggle kids, and the fires in the tents aren’t spreading – it’s like something’s controlling them, holding them back...”

“As long as whatever it is doesn’t suddenly let go. What about plans for getting them down?” Sirius nodded at the two Muggles floating high above the encampment.

“We’re forming a perimeter now. Last names R-Z to catch the Muggles, the rest—”

Sirius grinned. “Blast the bastards where they stand.”

“Exactly. Signal is one green flare – should be going up any minute now...”

A bright green light suddenly cast both their shadows on the tent in front of them. Sirius leapt up and fired a Stunner into the crowd of Death Eaters, yelling in triumph as one of them crumpled. *Wait – why didn’t anyone else –*

“Get *down!*” Frank pulled him back down behind the tent and shielded them from return fire just in time. “That’s no flare!”

“Then what was it—” Sirius’ question died on his lips as he turned around.

People had begun to scream all around. Green and ghastly, something out of nightmare, the Dark Mark floated over the wood.

Harry’s in there...

“*Catch them!*” shouted a trained female voice over the hubbub, and Sirius spun back just in time to add his “*Wingardium Leviosa!*” to the multitude. Most of the Death Eaters had Disappeared, leaving Mr. and Mrs. Roberts to their fate. Given the expressions on their faces, Sirius could almost believe they’d have preferred hitting the ground hard enough to get rid of the memories of the last few minutes, rather than being gently lowered as they were now.

The Obliviators will take care of them...

“Follow me!” bellowed Barty Crouch, eyes popping slightly. “To the woods! We can still catch

whoever cast that hideous blazon of evil!”

Sirius rolled his eyes and Disapparated. The last thing he saw was Letha stooping to check the identity of the Death Eater he’d dropped.

He popped back into reality as part of a circle of about twenty-five – a small group stood in the middle of the circle, wands out and facing them – Sirius’ Auror reflexes took over, and he swung his wand up for a Stunner –

“DUCK!” yelled a voice he knew, and the group in the center fell flat, some of them knocked over by their fellows, just in time to avoid the spells which shot over their heads – Sirius quickly shielded himself from bounce-back, shouting at the same time –

“Hold your fire! *Hold your fire!* ”

Behind him, a loud *whoomph* sound erupted.

xXxXx

He lay a short distance away, helpless. He’d been trying to do too many things – he should have known better than to try to Apparate so distracted, he should have just run –

Get the camp under control! he shouted mentally, feeling her starting to come to him. **Leave me, I’m fine here! Get those fires damped!**

Some people’s definitions of fine, he heard her grumble as she started concentrating on fire control. **One leg here, one leg there, a hand over yonder... what is this, Creative Splinching 101?**

I didn’t really need that. At least he still had his wand hand, and his wand. He could start Summoning his missing parts and putting himself back together...

Oh, no, you don’t. You hold still. I’m sending you some help.

Help like what?

Help like this. An image shot into his mind, a back view of Aletha running into the woods. **And she has good news for you, too. So you just stay where you are.**

Remus groaned, looking at where his legs had been. **This is so embarrassing.**

Deal with it. I’ll talk to you in a minute, this is getting out of hand.

xXxXx

Sirius was about ready to beat his head against a tree.

What did I say? I said go in the woods and stay out of trouble. Stay out of trouble. But I suppose that's too difficult a concept for them.

“What are you all doing here?” Arthur Weasley demanded of the Pride, now back on their feet and staring around.

“We weren't doing anything!” Ron said. “We were trying to stay out of the way!”

“Which one of you did that, then?” snapped Crouch, pointing upwards. “Speak up!”

“None of us!” said Harry indignantly. “We wouldn't!”

“Do not lie to me!” shouted Crouch. “You are standing at the scene of the crime!”

“I don't even have a wand!” Harry shouted back. “And we wouldn't know how to do that!”

“Barty, settle down, they're just kids,” said a witch in a dressing gown. Sirius squinted at her. *Let? No, that's not her, it's that casewitch. Davidson, Felicity Davidson.* “How would they possibly know how to conjure that... *thing?*”

“Someone shouted something from over there,” said Hermione, pointing into the woods to Sirius' left. “It sounded like an incantation...”

“An incantation, did it?” Crouch peered suspiciously at her. “You seem to know quite a bit about the Mark, young miss...”

“Are you finished accusing my children?” said Sirius, stepping forward. Draco was with them, he could see that, but he couldn't let that stop him now. Crouch was on the warpath, and he knew far too well what could happen in a situation like that. “None of them know anything about the Dark Mark.”

“Are you certain of that, Black?” Crouch glared at him. “What about this one?” His wand darted out, and a ball of light sprang from it, striking Draco on the chest.

Draco looked horrified. The Pride shrieked collectively in outrage, Ron grabbing Hermione as she lunged forward.

“Shut up!”

“You liar!”

“Take it back!”

“Effing bastard!”

All in all, Sirius thought, it was a good thing the cries had been so intermingled that there was no way to tell which of the Pride had shouted that last epithet.

Not that I don't agree, of course.

"He's been with us since we got into the woods," said Harry as Neville released his arm. His eyes glinted feverishly at Crouch. "If you're accusing him, then you have to accuse all of us. It wasn't us. It was someone over that way." He pointed.

"It'll be too late now, won't it?" said Alice Longbottom rather wearily. "We've wasted enough time over the children that whoever it was will have Disapparated."

"Not necessarily," said Amos Diggory thoughtfully. "We might have caught one in the crossfire... I'll go check it out..."

Sirius caught Crouch's eye as Diggory disappeared into the trees. "I don't care what you have against me," he said in an undertone. "Leave my kids out of it."

"That one's not even legally yours at the moment," said Crouch, indicating Draco with a trace of something that Sirius would have called a sneer in another man. "And I'll thank you not to interfere when I'm trying to find the truth in a case."

"Got one!" shouted Diggory's voice from beyond the trees. "Laid 'em out flat! It's – good Lord..."

"What?" Crouch sounded highly disbelieving. "Who? Who is it?"

Diggory walked back into the clearing with a tiny, limp body in his arms – house-elf size, and more than size, Sirius realized as he saw that it was wearing a tea-towel. Harry had said something about a house-elf saving a seat in the Top Box, saving it for...

Crouch had gone dead white. "Winky," he said under his breath. "Then... no..." He turned and stormed into the woods the way Diggory had gone.

"No use looking, sir," Diggory called after him. "No one else there."

"Amos, you can't think the *elf* conjured the Mark," said Arthur Weasley, coming in closer to look at the unconscious house-elf. "It's a wanded spell..."

"And she had a wand." Diggory pulled one from his pocket. "In her hand. You know the laws, Arthur – that's one she's broken right there..."

Sirius frowned, looking at the wand. "May I see that?" he said, and Diggory handed it over.

It took him only a moment. He had seen this wand before, and often. "Harry?" he said.

"Huh?" Harry looked up. He was very pale, even accounting for the green light of the Mark.

"You said you didn't have a wand."

"Yeah, can't find it. Think I must have dropped it."

Wordlessly, Sirius held up the wand he'd taken from Diggory.

“Hey, you found it! Thanks!” Harry pushed between his friends to take his wand back, but Sirius shook his head.

“It looks like whoever conjured the Mark used your wand to do it,” he said quietly. “You all heard it being conjured?”

The Pride nodded, several of them looking incredulously between the Mark in the sky and Harry's wand in Sirius' hand.

“Was it a human voice conjuring it?”

More nods. “A man's voice, I think,” said Neville. “But definitely human.”

“It couldn't have been a house-elf,” agreed Meghan. “They all talk squeaky.”

“Can I have it back *now*?” said Harry, grabbing for his wand.

“Not yet.” Sirius deflected his hand, then made a grab of his own. Harry's skin was hot and dry. He cursed. “You're getting a fever.”

Draco swore under his breath.

Felicity Davidson came over to them, ignoring the shouting match now taking place involving Crouch, Diggory, Bagman (when had he got there, Sirius wondered) and a reawakened Winky. “You really shouldn't be talking to the boy in public, Black,” she said quietly. “You know that.”

“No, he doesn't,” said Aletha's voice from behind him. “And neither do I. Casewitch Davidson, who was it that brought up the charge of abuse against Sirius?”

“Christopher Curcio, you know that.”

“Yes, but I was making sure you did.” Aletha had her arm around Sirius' shoulders, and her voice was filled with lazy good humor. “Now, what if it could be proved that Curcio had some ulterior motive in that allegation?”

“Well, it's already rather shaky – one unsubstantiated report, nothing to back it up, and mounds of evidence the other way... do you have evidence of some ulterior motive by the casewizard in question?”

“I'd say I do.” Aletha was practically purring. “He's just been arrested as a Death Eater.”

Davidson's face showed high glee matching Sirius' own for one second before it closed down to professionalism again. “I see,” was all she said. “Well, in that case... I think I can feel free to say the charge was groundless. Master Black, would you like to return home?”

Meghan and Hermione squealed together. Draco's smile was nearly as bright as the Mark overhead. "Yes, ma'am," he said firmly.

Sirius felt an honest-to-God smile on his face, for the first time since Hermione had blurted out her message in the tent nearly an hour before. "Thanks," he said fervently. "Thanks a lot." He took another look at the casewitch. "You're not related to Leticia Halcyon, are you? Auror Office?"

"No, not at all." Davidson chuckled. "She's only my sister."

Sirius snickered. "Your parents might have got along with mine," he said. "Naming children on a theme."

"I doubt it. Mine were Muggles."

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "Muggles named their daughters Leticia and Felicity?"

"It was just past World War Two. They were happy to have survived."

"Understandable," said Aletha.

"Black!" shouted Diggory, whirling around. "Where've you gone with that – oh, there you are. We need that wand."

"What for?"

"To do a *Priori Incantatem* on it, of course!"

Sirius drew his own wand and touched it tip to tip with Harry's. "*Prior Incantato*," he said, and a ghostly skull-and-snake shape appeared. "So it was used to cast the Mark," he said, dismissing the smoky shape with a wave of his own wand. "Doesn't mean anything – anyone could have picked Harry's pocket."

"She had it in her hand!" Diggory shouted, pointing at Winky, who was curled on the ground, weeping.

"Merlin's beard, Amos, she might have picked it up after whoever cast the Mark dropped it," said Arthur in disgust. "You said it was a human voice, you lot?" he asked the Pride.

"Definitely human," said Ron, casting a worried look at Harry, who was starting to shiver. Hermione and Ginny were standing close to him. "A man, I think."

"And whoever cast it probably Apparated straight out after dropping the wand," Sirius concluded. "Has anyone checked for traces?"

"I can do that," said a wizard in a set of plaid pajamas. He raised his own wand and waved it around the clearing once, squinting. "Lots of Stunner traces..." he muttered. "A few unusual wandless... one wandless, Dark-looking, that'd be the Mark... and yes, there, an Apparition..." He

chuckled. “Must have been distracted – the trace’s fractured all over. He’ll have splinched himself badly. Wherever he went, he’s in pieces now.”

“We should look for parts, then,” said Frank Longbottom, peering into the woods. “A part can lead us to the whole...”

“No,” said Crouch and Aletha simultaneously. They looked at each other in surprise, then Crouch waved for her to continue.

“The person who Apparated out of here is a friend of mine,” said Aletha. “He was keeping an eye on my children, as I’d asked him to, and was startled enough by the appearance of the Dark Mark that he Apparated away carelessly. I’ve helped him deal with that, it’s why I was delayed getting here. But he would no more conjure the Mark than I would.”

“The matter is closed, then,” said Crouch sternly. “Our perpetrator obviously escaped on foot, to avoid being tracked. His identity will be an issue for the Auror Office. And I shall deal with Winky myself, Amos, if you would be so kind as to allow it.”

“What do you mean, deal with her?” said Hermione before Sirius could stop her. “She didn’t do anything – she just picked up a wand she found on the ground.”

“She disobeyed me,” said Crouch, looking down at his sniveling elf without pity. “I instructed her to remain in my tent. I told her specifically to stay where she was. And she has disobeyed me. I have no use for a servant who cannot follow orders.” His eyes bored into Winky’s. “*This means clothes.*”

Winky let out a fresh howl and flung herself at Crouch’s feet. “Please, master, no! Not clothes!”

Someone cursed. Sirius turned to look. Harry was now leaning against Ron, his eyes half-shut. Aletha laid a hand on his forehead, her other groping for her wand. “We have to get him home,” she said over her shoulder. “Something’s wrong...”

“I have to tell you something,” said Draco urgently to her. “It’s about my lion.” He tapped the bag he had slung over one arm. “I got it back from Nott, and he said it wasn’t safe to touch – but Harry had it in his mouth, when he was Wolf, I couldn’t warn him off in time... and I touched it too, just for a second with my hand...”

Aletha snatched the bag from him and waved her wand around it, then frowned and repeated the motion. “What’s wrong?” Sirius asked.

Aletha shook her head. “Tell you later. I don’t think there’s any immediate danger, but we should get them home before Harry gets any worse, and before Draco starts.”

“By the way, who was this mysterious friend of yours who was watching the cubs? The one who splinched himself?”

Aletha chuckled. “None of your business.”

“That’s what I thought.” Sirius grinned. He now had something he could tease Remus about unmercifully. “Is he back together? All right?”

“Yes, and yes. Why?”

“Whereabouts is he?”

“That way – but you’re not to go looking for him now,” Aletha said, grasping Sirius’ wrist as he turned. “I don’t trust myself Apparating with someone Harry’s size. But he needs to get home now.”

“Fine, you go find him and tell him what’s going on, all right? Get him to pack up for us. I’ll take Harry home.”

“Draco needs to go too. And Meghan should go with you to keep an eye on them until I can get there. But you can’t take them all...” Aletha looked around. “Arthur!” she called out. “Alice, Frank! Do you have a second?”

“Of course,” said Alice, coming over as Arthur and Frank did the same. “What is it?”

“We need a hand getting the children home safely,” said Aletha. “Harry’s ill, and it looks like some of the others may go the same way soon, so we don’t want to wait for the Portkeys in the morning.”

“Understandable, not to mention how crowded they’ll all be after this,” said Arthur grimly. “I don’t think I can leave my own lot, though.”

“I’m not asking you to. But I was wondering if you could keep an eye on Neville long enough that Alice and Frank could help us get ours home – if you would, that is,” she said to Alice.

“Of course we will,” said Alice, turning to Neville. “I should have known you’d fall in with bad company,” she told him fondly, giving him a quick hug. “Well done. We’ll be back soon.”

“All right, who’s taking whom?” Frank asked, surveying the crowd of children.

“Hermione can come with me,” said Aletha. “We have a quick errand to do here before we go home, and I don’t think she’s getting ill. But Draco and Meghan should go straight home.”

“Very well, then.” Frank offered his arm to Meghan, who smiled and took it. Draco grasped Alice’s arm, nodding thanks to her.

Sirius lifted Harry into his arms, feeling his godson shivering uncontrollably, though his skin was hot to the touch. Closing his eyes, he envisioned the den room at the Den, small and peaceful and almost entirely empty of furniture, since they used it for other things... a turn in place, willing himself and Harry there, into the quiet and peace of a starlit night...

They hurtled through the compressing tube and popped out at the other end in the den room. Frank

and Alice, not members of the household, would be Apparating to the yard, as good manners and the house's wards called for. Sirius quickly knelt, laid Harry on the floor, and drew his wand to unlock and open the front door, then conjured a blanket to tuck around Harry. "Sorry, cub," he murmured, laying a hand briefly on Harry's cheek. "I'll be back soon, promise."

As Sirius came into the hallway, Draco darted in through the open door and jumped at him, hanging onto Sirius' shoulders with both hands. "I'm *baaaack*," he said in Sirius' ear.

"And I don't know why we wanted you so much," Sirius said, rapping Draco's knuckles lightly with his wand. "Gerroff there, you're too big for this. Go sit with Harry."

"Yessir." Draco dropped off and ran through the living room towards the den room. Meghan had slipped past while they were talking, Sirius realized when he heard her voice admonishing Draco to "sit down and be *quiet*, I'm trying to work here!"

"Quite a character, isn't she," said Alice, coming inside in time to hear this. "Frank's gone back to see to Neville, so I'm in no hurry – do you need help with anything here?"

"Not at the moment... well, actually, yes." He could do it by himself, but it would take a while. "If you could just give me a hand getting some of the mattresses downstairs from the bedrooms."

"Mattresses downstairs?" Alice frowned, following him up to the first floor. "For the boys, so they don't have to climb the stairs?"

"Yes, but... it's a tradition of ours, if someone's ill or unhappy, to sleep all in the same room. Moral support, I suppose. And also Letha's sneaky little way of making sure we all get exposed to the germs at the same time, so she can dose us all and be done."

Alice chuckled. "I like that. All the mattresses?"

"Eventually, yes. If you could just start in there, there should only be one bed..."

It was as he was wrestling the second double mattress down the stairs that Aletha and Hermione Apparated into the living room. "Thank you for sticking around, Alice," said Aletha, hugging her friend. "You're a gem."

"Oh, you're very welcome. It's not as if you wouldn't do the same for us."

"I hope we someday can." Aletha had her wand out already. "Got it, Sirius," she called. "You can grab another one."

Sirius ended his levitation charm and took the stairs two at a time to get the remaining twin mattresses. Atop them, he piled seven sets of pajamas. *It's new moon, Harry's ill, Draco might be getting it too, but he's home, so we are going to have a den-night no matter what anyone says. Make up for the one that didn't fly early this month.*

The five of them had tried to make that month's full moon a real den-night, but without three of

the eight Marauders present, the den room had felt big and empty, and no one had been able to get comfortable or enjoy the stories which were listlessly offered in reply to Aletha's listless invitation (she had told Sirius later that she felt wrong, saying what had always been Danger's words to say). Eventually, everyone had moved back upstairs for the night, the first time in going on twelve years that they had slept in beds during a full moon.

But we can have it now. Make up for everything. He descended the stairs carefully and levitated his burden through two doorways. "Scat, cat," he said, nudging Neenie with his foot. "I need to put these here."

Neenie stalked out of the way with a look of injured dignity, then leapt onto Draco's lap and began to wash a paw furiously. Meghan had a hand on Harry's chest and one on his forehead.

"Pajamas, all," said Sirius, tossing sets to various people. "Get changed."

"We need to talk," said Aletha, snagging her own out of the air. "Living room."

Sirius nodded and followed her out. "What's up?" he asked, kicking off his shoes and skinning out of his trousers.

"More reason to truly loathe Patroclus Nott." Aletha pulled off her blouse, and Sirius hastily used his wand to close the curtains on the front windows. The view was magnificent, but he didn't want it shared. "I don't know what is wrong with that man, but he seems to have it in for us. He put a contact poison on Draco's lion, one with symptoms a lot like the Muggle flu. But he did something to it regarding timing, something I can't quite figure out."

"How so?" Sirius took off his own shirt and pulled on the pajama top.

"Draco had agreed to meet the younger Nott at a certain time. If I'm reading the traces on the lion right, the poison would have been most virulent right then. If he'd touched it at that point, it would have gone to work on him immediately, and he would have been extremely ill. He'd recover on his own, it's not fatal, but he would have been miserable for a while."

"But he didn't."

"No, because Nott – the boy – warned him off touching it. So no one touched it for at least ten minutes. But then Harry, as Wolf, had it in his mouth." Aletha shook her head. "If the stuff had still been at full strength, he would have become ill almost immediately. But he didn't. I can only think that the poison was designed to fade away very rapidly from the lion as soon as that moment in time – the moment of Draco and Nott's meeting – was over. So that Harry got a lower dose than was intended for Draco, even though he had it in his mouth."

"And you can barely find traces of the stuff on the lion now," Sirius guessed, an idea starting to flutter in his mind.

"Yes. Draco was sure there was something wrong with it, so I tried the spell again at a higher

level, and found the traces there, but I wouldn't have thought to do it if he hadn't been so insistent."

"So it did what it was supposed to do," said Sirius. "Because if you hadn't known the lion was the whatchamacallit – the way Harry got ill..."

"Vector?"

"Yeah, that – you never would have known. You'd have thought he'd picked up the flu somewhere, not that he'd been poisoned."

"That's true." Aletha smiled suddenly. "By the way, nice shooting. You have the one confirmed catch of the night. A few other people got off spells – I was one of them – but it was your spell that downed Curcio."

Sirius leaped into the air. "Yes!" he half-shouted, remembering at the last second that Harry was ill in the other room. "Yes, yes, yes – I *told* that bastard! Well, no, I didn't tell him, but I wanted to – I wanted to tell him, I wanted to say, 'If I ever see you outside this office, I'll hex you so hard your head spins around,' and I *did* it!"

Aletha chuckled, watching him dance around the room. "I don't know about his head spinning, but he was caught in full Death Eater rig, taking part in Muggle-torture. That's at least five years, isn't it?"

Sirius shook his head. "Ten," he said gleefully. "Ten years." A thought struck him, and he started to sing. "Ten years, ten years, he's going to jail for ten years, hooray..."

Aletha caught his hands in hers, laughing, and they spun around the room together. "Ten years, ten years, he's going to jail for ten years – hooray!"

Someone cried out in the other room. The dance stopped immediately as Aletha ran to see what was going on, Sirius right behind her.

"No!" Harry was pushing Meghan away. "I don't want you touching me!" His eyes were bright with fever, his voice slurred but understandable. "It's too bloody hot in here anyway."

"Let's get you uncovered, then," said Aletha, stripping the blankets away from Harry with a quick, practiced gesture. "And it's time to get into your pajamas."

"Don't want pajamas."

"Too bad."

"Fight you," Harry said, bringing his hands up into a wobbly semblance of a boxer's stance. It would have been more impressive if he wasn't lying flat on his back.

"You can fight me later. You're getting into your pajamas now."

“No.”

Aletha drew her wand and waved it over Harry, and his clothes started undoing themselves. “Yes.”

Harry stiffened his body, resisting, but the clothes slithered off him anyway. “Cheater,” he said through gritted teeth. “Not fair.”

“Life’s not fair.” Aletha directed the pajamas onto his body. “There, isn’t that more comfortable?”

“No.”

“Fine, then it’s not. Is there something you want I can get you?”

“No. Go away.”

“In a moment.” Aletha laid a hand on his forehead and took it away hastily. “That’s what I thought,” she said in an undertone. “Harry, who am I?”

“How should I know? Never saw you before.”

Across the room, Draco stared. Neenie raised her head from his lap and hissed. Meghan froze in the act of unfolding a sheet.

“Do you know me, Harry?” Sirius asked, coming to his godson’s side.

“Sirius,” Harry muttered, focusing on him. “Shouldn’t be here... you shouldn’t... not safe...”

“He’s delirious,” said Aletha quietly. “His fever’s confused him. Stay with him, I’m going to get him some potions.”

“Don’t like potions,” Harry said clearly. “Don’t like Snape. He’s a bastard.”

“Probably is,” Sirius agreed.

“You don’t like him either.” Harry sounded as if he were drunk, Sirius thought – his voice was louder than usual, and he was taking special care to pronounce each word clearly, even though he sometimes failed. “You let him hit his head. And he doesn’t like you. He wouldn’t listen. I hexed him. Ron’n’H’mione helped. Remember? He smashed into the wall and fell down when we all hit him at the same time...”

“Sounds like it must have been fun,” said Sirius as Aletha returned. “Now, Harry, Snape didn’t have anything to do with these potions. This is Letha. Can you say hi to her?”

“I’m fourteen, not four,” grumbled Harry, but he turned his head to focus on Aletha. “Hi,” he said grudgingly.

“Hello, Harry.” Aletha sat down beside him. “As you said, you’re not a baby anymore. So you can

tell that you're ill right now.”

Harry nodded.

“These potions will help you get better. Will you take them?”

Harry eyed the bottles suspiciously. “Swear Snape didn't make them?”

“I made them,” said Aletha firmly. “Severus Snape has never been near them.”

“All right.” Harry looked back at Sirius. A lopsided grin split his face. “You *like* her,” he sing-songed. “Don't you?”

“Yes, I do,” said Sirius, keeping his tone light, although he was severely shaken. *If this is permanent, I'll kill Nott myself.* “I like her a lot.”

“You gonna marry her?”

“Maybe,” Sirius said. “Come on, Harry, you need to sit up to take these. I'll help you.”

“Don't need help.” Harry started to lever himself up, then stopped. Tried again, and stopped.

“Yeah, I do,” he finally admitted shamefacedly.

Sirius got an arm behind Harry's shoulders and lifted him up gently. Aletha was just uncorking the first potion bottle when Harry spoke up again.

“What's *he* doing here?”

Harry's tone was full of distaste. Sirius groaned under his breath. There was only one other “he” in the room. *We don't need this right now...*

“He's ill too,” Aletha said quietly. “Now take this, please. It will help you feel better.”

“Don't like him,” said Harry, pushing the potion bottle away. His eyes were fixed on Draco, who had turned his head away. “I'm gonna go hit him. Stupid little ponce. Or I'll get Hermione to hit him again. She hit him once pretty good.” He giggled. “She hit him right in front of everyone – just smacked him right across the face...”

“Drink this, now,” said Aletha firmly, closing Harry's fingers around the bottle. “Or I will make you.”

“Fine, fine,” grumbled Harry, still glaring at Draco. “Where'd he get the cat? I didn't think he had a cat.”

Aletha started to lift Harry's hand to his mouth. “I'll do it,” said Harry fretfully, pulling his hand away. Sirius hastily waved his wand, restoring the potion that had spilled. “Not a baby – I can drink on my own...”

He raised the bottle to his lips and drank the whole thing down, then licked his lips thoughtfully. “Doesn’t taste bad,” he said. “Tastes good. Not like most of Madam Pomfrey’s...” The final sibilant trailed off as he suddenly went limp in Sirius’ arms.

Aletha sagged. “Thank God it worked,” she said quietly. “Sometimes it doesn’t when they’re that bad. How does he feel to you, Sirius?”

“Heavy,” Sirius said, lowering Harry to the mattress again.

“No, I mean temperature-wise.”

Sirius laid a hand on Harry’s forehead and frowned. “Actually... no different.”

Aletha swore bitterly. “That’s what I was afraid of,” she said. “Resistant – he *would* have to lay in a resistant fever. That was one of the strongest fever reducers I’m allowed to give, since I’m not qualified yet, and it should have worked right away if it was going to work at all.”

Across the room, Meghan was hugging Draco. “He didn’t mean it,” she told him. “It’s the sickness talking, not him. He didn’t mean that.”

“Will I get that bad?” Draco asked under his breath, as though he were afraid of the question.

Meghan laid a hand on his wrist and shook her head. “You’ll barely get it at all. Just a normal fever and chills. Not deliriousness.”

“Delirium,” Aletha corrected absently. “Sirius, I don’t know what to do. We could take him to St. Mungo’s, but I don’t know that they could do anything more for this than I could. We may be stuck just waiting it out, and I don’t know how long this was supposed to last...”

Harry moaned a little.

“Let me guess,” said Sirius. “He won’t stay under as long as he should either.”

“No, he won’t. And I can’t give him another dose of that for at least an hour, it’s not safe.”

Meghan came across the room to touch Harry. “He’s not as bad as he was,” she said certainly. “It made some difference.”

“Thank you, Pearl.” Sirius saw his wife’s face lose ten years in age. “That’s good to know. But he’s still sick?”

Meghan nodded. “It’s all through him,” she said, her eyes half-shut. “A lot of it was in his mind, but your potion made it go all through him again. He’ll be more sick all over, but he won’t be sick in his mind now.” She let go of Harry’s hand and returned to the nest she was sharing with Draco.

“I suppose that’s good,” said Aletha unsurely.

“Definitely good,” said Sirius. “You can’t treat him properly if he doesn’t trust you.”

“Padfoot?” Harry’s voice was tentative. “Where...”

“Home,” said Sirius quickly, turning to face Harry. “We’re back at the Den. You’re sick.”

“No, really,” Harry said, closing his eyes. “Thought I felt like this every day.”

“You look like it every day,” Draco volunteered. “Like a drowned rat.”

“What’re you doing home?”

Aletha let out a silent sigh of relief. “Long story, Harry,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

“Awful.”

“Does anything hurt?”

“Everything.”

“I think I can do something about that.” Aletha sorted through her potion flasks. “Here.” She conjured a straw in the mouth of one and set it in front of Harry. “Sip on that.”

Harry sipped as ordered. “Padfoot?” he said uncertainly.

“Still here,” said Sirius, placing his hand over Harry’s.

Harry smiled a little and sipped on the straw again. “What’s wrong with me?” he asked after a moment.

“Another long story,” said Aletha smoothly. “Better for later.”

“All right.”

Sirius got up and stepped carefully over Harry, then changed forms and curled up at his back, first giving the back of Harry’s neck one soft lick. He felt rather than heard Harry’s tired laugh.

“Tickles. Where is everybody?”

“Mostly here,” said Aletha. “Do you want to see them?”

“Uh-huh.”

Neenie burst out of Draco’s cocoon of blankets and ran to Harry’s side, rubbing her face against his and purring loud enough to be heard at the Burrow. Meghan followed, leaning over Harry to hug him briefly, and Draco came over in a dignified manner on all fours, which Sirius wouldn’t have believed if he’d been told about it. “You look terrible,” he said conversationally when he arrived.

“Thanks. So do you.”

“I don’t look as bad as you.”

“No, but it’s your fault. You said not to touch that damned lion.”

“So you do remember,” said Aletha.

Harry nodded slowly. “Remembered a minute ago. Nott poison it or something?”

“Guess so,” said Draco. “You shouldn’t have done that dance. It’s already working.”

Harry gave a rough chuckle. “Danger’ll be mad,” he said. “She told you not to make a habit of it.”

“Of what?”

“Messing up and getting me hurt. Back with Buckbeak, at the beginning of last year.”

“How was I supposed to know you’d pick the thing up in your mouth?”

“How else do wolves pick things up?”

Draco spluttered a little. “Well... you could have let me do it!”

“And you tried so hard to go do it...” Harry broke off as a wave of shivering overtook him. Aletha put her hands against his face, changing them from his forehead to his cheeks. Harry leaned into them, whining in his throat. Meghan and Draco found places next to him, and Neenie lay on top of him, purring. Sirius wished he could will his own strength into Harry, or pull the fever out of him, but that was impossible.

“Where’s Moony?” Harry asked, looking around the room. “Where is he?”

“He can’t be here right now, Harry. Lie still.”

“No!” Harry shook his head, twisting. Neenie yowled and dug her claws into the blankets to hang on. “I want him! I want him to come!”

Sirius changed forms. “Harry, settle down,” he said, putting his hands on Harry’s shoulders to hold him still.

“Don’t wanna,” Harry complained, squirming restively. “I want Moony.”

“I know you do. But there are times when you can’t get what you want.”

“Fortunately, this isn’t one of those times,” said Remus’ voice above them. Sirius turned in surprise. It had to be Danger, Danger letting Remus speak through her...

Well, no, I guess it doesn’t.

Neenie's purring grew louder still as Remus knelt down. "Hello, Harry. Not feeling your best?"

Harry's face broke into a drowsy smile. "Better now," he said, reaching for Remus' hand. "Where were you?"

"Delayed. I'm sorry it took me so long to get here." Remus settled himself beside Harry and stroked his face. "I think you'll feel better now."

"Danger with you?"

"Right here," said Danger, sitting down beside Remus. "Maybe now you'll remember not to pick things up in your mouth if you don't know what they are. Even if your wolf form says, 'Oh, look at this, isn't it fascinating!'"

Harry laughed a little, but Sirius didn't hear his answer. He was on his feet, headed out of the den room.

Well, that's that. They've showed up, so there's no more need for me.

He sat down heavily in one of the chairs in the living room and started pulling moodily on a thread. *Not a word to me. Not even thanks. Just, "I want Moony," and as soon as he shows up, it's like I was never there.*

He stared towards the curtained windows, half-listening to the quiet talk and laughter from the den room.

I guess they don't really need me anyway. Not unless Remus isn't around. I'm the beta, the second-rater. He grinned humorlessly. And I'm a poet, and didn't know it.

Maybe I was being unrealistic. Harry's the alpha of the Pride. It's only natural he should want to be around Remus more now, to watch what an alpha should be like. It doesn't mean he hates me. Sirius bit his lip, trying to keep the inevitable from happening. *But why does it have to happen like this?*

"Knut for your thoughts," said Danger's shadowy shape from the corner of the room.

"Not worth it," Sirius said roughly.

"I doubt that. I got a good look at your face when Remus showed up." Danger slipped across the room and sat down on the floor in front of the chair, looking up at him. "What's wrong, Sirius?"

Sirius explained, haltingly. Danger listened quietly until he ran out of words, then shook her head. "What are we going to do with you?" she asked rhetorically. "You've completely missed the point of what it means that Harry was calling for Remus."

"No, I haven't. It means that he wanted Remus more than he wanted me."

“No, it does *not!* Would you kindly let me finish?” Danger glared at him until she was sure he was going to stay quiet. “What it means is that he cares for *both* of you. And he wants you *both* there when he’s ill and afraid. Or aren’t you aware that the first thing he said after you left was ‘Where’d Padfoot go?’ and the second was ‘Did I do something?’”

Sirius perked up a little. “He wants me back?”

“Yes.” Danger closed her eyes for a moment, to roll them, Sirius was sure. “He wants you back. He was afraid that he’d said something that had offended you. And he’ll be more coherent now that Remus has drawn some of the fever off him.”

Sirius’ mood shattered again. “Why should I come back? I mean, I will if he wants me, but what’s the point? I can’t do anything to help him. Letha knows what she’s doing with those potions, you and Remus can help keep him comfortable, but what can I do?”

“You can do what I saw you doing when we got here. Hold him when it looks like he might hurt himself. Sit with him when he needs you there. Talk to him, for God’s sake, be his father! The way most men do!” Danger swung her legs around and knelt up. “Sirius, is it at all possible that you’re feeling... how shall I say it... not special?”

“A little.” Sirius pulled at his thread again. “A little.”

“A little in the way that Severus Snape is a little prejudiced against Gryffindors, right?”

“Right.”

“Look at me.”

Sirius looked. The flat of Danger’s hand caught him between the eyes. “Ow. What was that for?”

“For being your wonderful, lovable, stupid, unthinking self. Sirius, don’t you understand what you do for us?”

“No.”

“No, you don’t, do you? Have you ever considered that you’re by far the most normal of this little crowd of crazies?”

“Hunh.” Sirius thought about that for a moment. “I guess I am.”

“All the rest of us like to think. And sometimes we think too much. If it wasn’t for you, we’d all go floating away on our grandiose ideas and plans and get so full of ourselves that no one would ever want to be around us. But we have you. And because we have you, we have to think about you, and we have to realize that no matter how special we are, we’re human, and we can’t do everything.” Danger stopped. “God, this sounds so pretentious.”

“No, go on.”

“All right. I think the reason you’re here with us – the big cosmic reason, not the practical reasons or anything, but the reason you are who you are – is to stick a pin in us and keep us from getting too full of ourselves. But even that’s not right, because it makes it sound like we’re your only reason for being here, and that’s not what I mean at all.”

“Really?” Sirius slipped a hand down to find the ticklish spot on Danger’s neck. “You all seem like a good reason for being here to me.”

“Yes, but not like that – stop it!” She smacked his hand. “I don’t mean that you’re not important except because of what you do for us – I mean that what you do for us *is* important, it’s vital – if it wasn’t for you, this whole Pack idea would never have worked – you’re our grounding pin, that’s what you are. You keep this whole family from short-circuiting.”

“If I knew what that meant, it would be very nice.”

“Ask Arthur, I’m sure he could explain it.”

“I’m sure.” Sirius slid out of the chair to sit on the floor next to Danger. “But I see what you’re trying to say. *Stop wallowing in self-pity, of course we need you, now come back in and sit with your sick godson who wants you, right?*”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Sounds like good advice to me.”

Harry’s face lit up again when he saw Sirius. “Hey, Padfoot,” the boy said, reaching up just as he had to Remus earlier. “Where were you?”

“Oh, I just had to go rinse my head out,” said Sirius lightly. “Get rid of some of that annoying waxy buildup.”

“That’s called brains. You need those.”

“Oops.”

Everyone laughed, and Sirius felt his spirits lighten. *That was stupid – more than usually stupid, I mean. Just because Harry wants Remus doesn’t mean he doesn’t want me. He doesn’t have to choose between us. And I’m glad Moony’s here too... though not if it means he’s going to get arrested...*

Aletha caught his eye. “Start the den,” she mouthed at him.

Sirius dismissed his worries for the time being and sat down cross-legged. “Be welcome, all, to this den-night,” he said, getting everyone’s attention right away. “We are Pack now. Pack together.”

“Pack forever,” the others chorused.

“Who will tell a story?” said Danger, her eyes on Remus, dancing with mischief. “Who will remind us of what it means to be Pack?”

“I’m not telling that,” said Remus firmly.

“Fine, then I will.”

“All right, I guess I am telling that.” Remus rubbed his forehead. “Do I have to?”

“Come on, Remus, two of us already know,” said Aletha, grinning. “And the cubs will find out soon enough.”

“Not if you don’t tell them,” grumbled Remus.

“Things get out,” said Danger lightly. “Even if you don’t mean them to.”

“You are mean, cruel, horrible women,” said Remus flatly. “Why did we marry them again, Sirius?”

“Because they asked us?”

“That has to be it.”

“What happened?” asked Harry, now propped on one elbow and looking far more comfortable.

Remus sighed and leaned back against the wall. “I splinched myself.”

Hermione gasped. Meghan squealed. Draco frowned. “Didn’t that one wizard say something about a failed Apparition trace back at the clearing?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Remus sourly. “It was mine.”

“I thought I smelled something,” said Harry. “It was you.”

Remus nodded. “I was keeping an eye on you,” he said. “And at the same time, helping Danger keep the fires under control at the campsite...”

“Of course!” Sirius slapped the mattress. “Frank said things weren’t burning like they usually did – that was you two, wasn’t it?”

“Well, it was just me after a while,” said Danger. “Remus heard something in the trees – must have been whoever conjured the Dark Mark – and went to see what it was.”

“I got a whiff of him,” said Remus. “And it was a him. Human male, not very old, and...” He frowned. “Not entirely sane. But that’s only a guess.”

“It sounds about right for a Death Eater,” said Aletha. “What happened then?”

“The Mark went up, you lot Apparated in, and I knew I had to get out of there – but I was so distracted that I couldn’t keep my mind on what I was doing, and the next thing I knew...”

“You were lying in the forest without either leg or your left arm,” Danger finished when Remus hesitated.

The cubs burst out laughing. “Thank you for letting *me* tell it,” Remus said wearily.

“Get over yourself, Moony,” Sirius said, chuckling. “There really isn’t much way to make that sound better.”

“You got splinched,” Harry chortled. “Moony got splinched...”

“See, this is exactly what I was hoping to avoid,” said Remus, shaking his head.

“Not going to happen,” said Danger. “Not with these cubs.”

“Lucky it didn’t happen while you were still teaching,” said Aletha. “It would have been all over the school by morning.”

Remus blanched. “Yes. Thank God.”

“Remus – why are you here?” asked Sirius, deciding to be direct. “Not that I’m not happy to see you, but I’d rather a den-night not get broken up by your being arrested...”

“No fear of that,” said Remus. “You made sure of it.”

“I did?”

“Yes. Or didn’t you know that Christopher Curcio was also the main force behind the directive that I couldn’t see the cubs *at all* ?”

Sirius shook his head. Remus nodded. “While I was packing up the tents, I ran into a casewitch, or rather she ran into me,” he said. “Felicity Davidson, she said her name was...”

“I know her.”

“She told me about Curcio getting arrested – which I knew – and that she would personally stand surety for letting me come see the cubs at least twice a week – which I didn’t. And which I was very grateful for. Especially because I knew *somebody* was sick.” Remus looked pointedly towards Harry. “And that when *somebody* gets sick, he likes to have everyone around him, because he likes to be the center of attention.”

“Wonder who that is,” Harry said with a sleepy grin, lying down again. “Padfoot?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell a story?”

“Yeah, tell a story,” echoed Meghan from her place next to Aletha. “Please.”

Draco nodded, settling himself more comfortably against wolf-Danger. Hermione pressed his hand once, then changed forms, whisked across the room, and leapt into Remus’ lap. Sirius watched his friend’s face melt into bliss as he stroked the soft tri-colored fur.

This is what it should always be like.

But that was why he liked stories. In stories, it always could be like this. At least at the end. There had to be a middle filled with problems, or what was the story good for?

You know, that’s our problem. We’re always right in the middle of the story. We can’t see the good parts coming, and we sometimes forget about the good parts we’ve had. But we just have to trust that they’re there, and that they will be again.

And that’s enough philosophy for now. The Pack wants a story, and I’m a storyteller.

Resting his back against the wall, making sure everyone could see him without straining, Sirius began.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 33: Wait and See (Year 4)

Chapter 33: Wait and See

He walked down stone hallways, sure-footed even in the darkness between torches, his confidence born of long familiarity with the curves and dips in wall and floor.

This is my place. This is where I belong.

He stopped before a piece of wall and spoke the words to open it, entered the room thus revealed, and sat down in a carved chair before the fire. Water swirled past outside the windows. Everything was as it should be.

But I don't belong here, a small voice said, deep in his mind. He banished it as stupid. Of course he belonged here. He recalled talking to the boy in Madam Malkin's, the boy who had turned out to be Harry Potter. "I know I'll be in Slytherin," he'd said. "All my family have been—"

I never talked to Harry in Madam Malkin's, insisted the small voice. *Not like that. And I'm not a Slytherin.*

He shook his head and pulled the letter from his pocket, smirking. His father had arranged everything; the hippogriff would have no chance.

You mean Buckbeak? the voice asked in surprise. *What did he ever do to you?*

It had attacked him, of course. It had to pay the price. And even if it was just an animal, killing it would hurt that lout Hagrid, and Potter and Weasley and Granger, his good little pets. They'd see they couldn't laugh at a Malfoy so easily.

I'm not a Malfoy! the voice shouted suddenly, making him wince. *And that's my family and my friend you're talking about there – Harry and Ron and Hermione...*

Draco stood up, disturbed. Something was wrong in his head.

I have to get to a mirror, the voice said urgently. *Have to see...*

That wasn't a bad idea. He hurried through the common room into the boys' dorms, into his own, to the full-length mirror that hung on one wall. His eyes were drawn to his left cheek. "Where did that come from?" he muttered aloud, raising his hand to his face to feel the slightly raised line of a scar, a vertical line marring his otherwise perfect skin.

Thank God, said the voice fervently. *You see? It's true, it's all true – you're a lie, a cheat, you're not real –*

"Where did it come from?" Draco demanded aloud.

Your precious father gave it to me. An image shot into his mind, but it was more than an image, it was a full-senses memory – he was sitting on a bed, his hands bound behind him, his father standing before him, speaking suavely about blood magic –

He blinked out of the recollection. “That never happened,” he said, his voice shaking. “It never happened...”

It did. And so did this. A moment of terror, darkness and inability to move, and then a voice calling his name, speaking life and comfort. *And this...* standing in front of a slim blonde girl, her arms around his neck pulling his face down towards hers... *and this...* a brown-haired boy laughing as his arm went protectively around a tiny, dark-skinned girl... *and this...* Quidditch practice in the rain, ducking a Bludger, looping a red-haired Chaser, and scoring past an equally red-haired Keeper, as a black-haired boy zoomed past chasing a tiny speck of gold...

Draco closed his eyes, but the images kept coming, faster and faster. He sat in warm darkness with a man and a woman, sweet spice on his tongue, and explained why he hated his face... he basked in the sunlight, glad to be alive, and listened to another man and woman talk to him about death... he lay in a room filled with people and animals, all of them sleeping, even him...

The whirl of images forced him to his knees, until finally he threw his head back in submission, eyes closed uselessly, as the images swirled within his mind. “Enough!” he shouted towards the ceiling. “You win! I’ll be whatever you want!”

No, I’ll be whatever I want. And I do know what I want...

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Draco opened his eyes, united in himself once more. He was alone in the shapeless void he often saw before he began to shape a dream. But the hair on the back of his neck was prickling.

Not completely alone, then.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” he said quietly.

“What a shame,” said his father, stepping out of a veiling shadow. “I had hoped you would enjoy that little diversion. It certainly gave me an entrance the likes of which I haven’t had for quite some time.”

“How are you doing this?” Draco demanded, turning to face the man. “It can’t all be through wishes. How?”

“After Christmas of last year, when I realized that our two shared dreams were exactly that, I brewed myself a potion that would allow me access to your dreams, so long as no greater power than my own blocked it. I never used it during your winter and spring terms, though, since I had hopes that my Christmas gift to you might be in use, and I had no wish to alter its working.” Lucius shrugged. “Obviously, the gift never arrived.”

Draco bared his teeth. “No, it got there. And it made me sure once and for all that you don’t really want me. You want a puppet, a slave, a little clone of yourself. That’s what it was for, wasn’t it? Taking me over, and turning me into another you?”

“You can have no conception of the heights to which you could soar if you would simply allow the inevitable to take place, my son. No idea of the greatness you could achieve...”

Draco groaned loudly. “Would you just *shut up*? God, you’re tedious. That’s all you ever talk about – singing the glory of your Dark Lord, and of yourself – have you actually looked at yourself lately? How much glory are you finding right now?”

“It will come,” said Lucius, and for a moment his eyes seemed to glow. “He is nearer than he has been in many years. I can feel his presence. The Mark lives again...”

“How did you know about that?”

Lucius laughed briefly. “How should I not know about it? It lives in my very flesh.”

“Ew. I didn’t need to know that. Never mind.” Draco was backing away, thinking fast. Obviously, being ill had lowered his dream barriers. But if he could call someone else, someone who wasn’t ill and could help him...

“No!” Lucius shouted, looking up from his contemplations. “You will not escape me again!” He lunged forward and caught Draco’s arm. Draco twisted, trying to get away, but Lucius only held on harder. “Third time lucky,” he whispered into Draco’s face. “Twice you have escaped from me – once when you were a small child, once when you were a cocky boy... we will meet again, when you are a man, and I will have you for my own then...”

“*Danger!*” Draco screamed, and the darkness writhed around him and reformed.

He walked down stone hallways, sure-footed even in the darkness between torches, his confidence born of long familiarity with the curves and dips in wall and floor.

Wait, weren’t we just here?

A searching hand found the scar on his cheek still present, but something else was not right...

“Malfoy!” a voice shouted down the hall. “He’s waiting for you!”

Draco looked around him. He was alone.

“Are you out of your mind? Hurry!” Patroclus Nott stood at the end of the hall beckoning him urgently, flaming torch in one hand. “He’s called for you! He wants you to help him decide what to do with a prisoner!”

Draco’s left arm throbbed with sudden pain as if reinforcing this sentiment. “Who is it?” he asked, starting down the passage after Nott.

“Oh, you’ll love this.” Nott chuckled. “Remus Lupin has finally come to pay us a call.”

Draco stumbled in shock and fell, landing painfully on one knee near a small cavity in the stone, filled with water. The rays of the torchlight fell on its surface with enough clarity for him to see his reflection.

His cheek was still scarred. But he wore his father’s face.

He screamed, a denial without words, begging it not to be true –

Draco, wake up!

Draco bolted upright, shaking. “Moony,” he panted. “Voldemort...”

“Easy, Draco,” said Moony’s voice from nearby. “You just had a bad dream.” Strong arms wrapped around him, holding him close. “Settle down, now, fox, it’s all right.”

“He said they had you,” Draco mumbled into his Pack-father’s chest. “I was Lucius, and they had you prisoner... I had the Mark, I could feel it...”

It’s all right, said Hermione’s mind-voice, and Draco felt her hand on his arm, her careful presence in his mind. **You know that can’t ever really happen. You’re you, not your father.**

“Draco, did you call me?” Danger asked, coming up beside Moony.

Draco nodded. “You heard?”

“Loud and clear. But I was in the middle of a dream of my own, and when I tried to get to you, I didn’t get out of mine cleanly. I’m afraid I may have accidentally triggered whatever you dreamed right before you woke up, whatever made you scream like that. Was it what you were just saying?”

“Yeah.” Draco leaned into Moony as Hermione began to rub his back gently. “I guess I was stupid to think it was real.”

“No, you were ill and faced with something terrifying, and you reacted like any normal person would,” said Letha from behind him. “That fever you were due for is probably hitting right now.”

Moony laid a hand against Draco’s forehead. “Definitely feverish, but not nearly as bad as Harry’s,” he reported.

“May I have him?” Letha asked, holding out her arms.

Draco smiled a little through his shivering as he changed Pack-parents, watching Hermione take advantage of his move to get her own hug from Moony. “I’m glad I’m home,” he said.

“I’m glad you’re home too.” Letha kissed his forehead, then massaged his shoulders through his

shirt, relaxing his muscles and calming the shivers that were beginning to shake his body. “You’re not so hot that the fever will hurt you, and it will burn what’s left of that potion out of you. It’s never pleasant to be feverish, but I think it would be better for you to just ride it out. I will give you something to bring it down if you want it, though.”

“It’s not too bad now,” Draco said. “And if it’ll get rid of the potion faster, I’m all for it.” Another brief wave of shivering overcame him, and Letha held him until it was over. “I don’t ever want to have another dream like that.”

“Arm,” said Padfoot, holding out his hand.

“Huh?”

“Give me your left arm.”

Draco frowned, but complied.

“Can we get some light here?” Padfoot asked Moony, who snapped his fingers to conjure a fireball in the air above them. “Hmm.” Padfoot pursed his lips, examining the inside of Draco’s forearm carefully. Hermione giggled at his expression of careful concentration. “No sign of a snake, nothing that could be a skull... you are officially Dark-Mark-free, young man.”

“Well, if you say so.”

“I do. And as your legal father, it is my duty to say so.”

Draco grinned a little. “And as your legal son, it is my duty to disagree with you on all occasions.”

“Oh, so you *want* the Mark?”

“No!”

“Do you mind?” said a rather crabby voice. “Some of us are trying to *sleep* here.”

“Our humblest apologies, O mighty exalted Pearl,” said Draco grandly. “We prostrate ourselves at your feet and beg for forgiveness.”

“Good.”

Draco grabbed Hermione’s hand quickly, so he wouldn’t laugh aloud.

Across the room, Harry slept soundly, and dreamed.

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He was in Ron’s room, though it looked rather odd with three camp beds crammed into it besides Ron’s own bed. Also, there seemed to be something missing near the bottom of Ron’s bed, though

he couldn't think what. He was just piling underwear into his cauldron when Ron made a noise of disgust behind him.

“What is *that* supposed to be?”

He was holding up something that looked to Harry like a long, maroon velvet dress. It had a moldy-looking lace frill at the collar and matching lace cuffs.

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Weasley entered, carrying an armful of freshly laundered Hogwarts robes.

“Here you are,” she said, sorting them into two piles. “Now, mind you pack them properly so they don't crease.”

“Mum, you've given me Ginny's new dress,” said Ron, handing it out to her.

“Of course I haven't,” said Mrs. Weasley. “That's for you. Dress robes.”

“*What?*” said Ron, looking horror-struck.

Harry made sure he turned away before he let himself snicker. He didn't want to be mean, but Ron was going to look awfully funny wearing that...

xXxXx

The rest of the Pride descended on the Den the next day, Ron and Ginny and Neville full of stories about what had happened after the Pack had left the World Cup.

“Everyone wanted to know if it was really You-Know-Who in the woods,” said Ron. “Dad told them it wasn't. But the paper this morning is all about it...”

“We saw,” said Hermione in disgust. “Rita Skeeter. Everything she writes is rubbish.”

“That's probably why people like it,” said Luna. “They'll read anything if it's sensational enough.”

“Mum and Dad were out most of the night helping to clean up,” said Neville. “I ended up sleeping in your bed, Harry.”

Harry shrugged from his place on the couch. “Not like I was using it.”

“Dad was out most of the night too, so he let me have his bed,” said Ginny. “Mum made him go to bed when he got home. He was saying he ought to go to work, but she wouldn't let him.”

“Percy can do it for him,” said Ron. “I think he'd do anything someone at the Ministry told him to do. And he did say he'd look in at Dad's office and see if Perkins needed any help.”

“I think it’s wonderful that Mr. Padfoot got a Death Eater,” said Ginny. “And that he turned out to be that casewizard. Do you think he was working with the Notts?”

Draco snorted. “If he wasn’t, he was doing a good imitation of it. But Nott doesn’t like him. Not that it matters now.”

“Going to jail for ten years, hooray,” Meghan sang lightly, making everyone laugh.

xXxXx

Aletha was sitting in a cubicle on the ground floor of St. Mungo’s, engrossed in her book, when the call light on her board lit up – a patient had just come into the ward. She set the book aside, stepped out of the cubicle, and kept herself from gawking by a strong effort of will.

“Hello, Severus,” she said.

“Madam Freeman-Black,” Snape acknowledged her curtly, his usual sneer hardly in evidence at all. “My left arm became injured during the Quidditch World Cup, and Madam Pomfrey advised me to seek more professional medical attention.”

Aletha frowned. *There’s something he’s not telling me here.* “May I see it?”

Snape used his wand to open the seam of his robes on the left side, then lifted his left arm out with a grunt of effort. Aletha stepped forward to help him, feeling the limb as she did. It was not chilled, but entirely stiff, to the point where even the shoulder resisted motion.

“Poppy couldn’t do anything with it?” she asked.

“She could not.”

Aletha shook her head. *I know what it looks like, but Poppy’s perfectly capable of releasing that – any decent witch or wizard can do it... still, it’s worth a try.*

She pointed her wand at Snape’s arm. “*Finite Petrificus,*” she said firmly.

The limb relaxed. Snape pulled away from her and began to massage his arm, flexing his fingers. “My thanks,” he said without looking at her.

“But you must have tried that yourself...”

“I did. As did Poppy, and Minerva. We were all unsuccessful.”

“What were you trying to curse?”

“I tried to curse nothing. I was in the way of a curse from another.”

In the way of a curse at the World Cup... Aletha’s eyes roamed down Snape’s exposed arm, to the

ever-so-faint marking on the inside of the forearm. Snape noticed her looking and quickly thrust his arm through the sleeve of his robes.

“I won’t tell anyone,” she said quietly. “Not even Sirius.”

“I would appreciate that.” Snape’s sneer was back, even more firmly planted than before. “Good day, Healer Freeman-Black.”

Aletha inclined her head. “Good day.”

Snape turned and started for the door.

“Severus!”

He turned back to look at her.

“You’re lucky I was on duty.” Aletha was trying her best not to smile. “I’m not sure any of the other Healers could have lifted that curse.”

“And why is that?”

The smile broke through anyway. “I’ve always been very good at the Body-Bind.”

To Aletha’s amazement, something resembling a smile flickered on Snape’s face for a brief instant. “I will keep that in mind,” he said. “Should we ever find ourselves facing one another again.”

xXxXx

Ginny brushed soot out of her hair, waiting for everyone to get into the small yard so Mum could open the archway to Diagon Alley. Her hand slid into her pocket again, to see if what was there might have magically changed.

Nine Sickles, twenty Knuts. She sighed. Mum had confiscated the ten Galleons she’d won at the World Cup “for your future,” so she was back to pocket money. She had so wanted to buy an owl of her own... but what kind of owl could she buy for nine Sickles, twenty Knuts?

“Remember, just to be sociable,” Mrs. Danger told Harry behind her. “But don’t let him get down until they have his measurements.”

“I want to get Dad a birthday present,” Neville was saying. His parents had passed their tests and were back with the Auror Office full-time, which was why he was shopping with the Pride. “Don’t let me forget.”

“What were you thinking about?” asked Luna. “There were some things advertised in Dad’s last issue that I think your dad might like. I’ll bring it over after we’re done here.”

“Move over, everyone,” said Mum, coming to the fore and tapping her wand on the proper brick. “Now stay together, or let us know where you’re going before you go. And that means you two especially,” she said to the twins, who looked at her innocently.

“Ginny, did you see this bit on the letters?” Hermione asked, coming to Ginny’s side as they walked through the archway. “Look, right here.”

“All students fourth year and above should be provided with dress robes,” Ginny read aloud. “I wonder why?”

“There must be a formal function of some kind. Maybe a dinner.”

Ginny smiled. “I bet it has something to do with whatever Percy keeps trying to get us to ask about that he’s not allowed to tell us.” Her smile faded. “But I suppose I won’t get any, since I’m not in fourth year.”

“Won’t get any what?” asked Mum, turning back to look at them.

“Dress robes. It says students fourth year and above are the only ones who need them.”

“Well, I see no reason you shouldn’t have a new set yourself.” Mum smiled at her. “I’ll find you something blue, I know you like it. Do you want to come along, or should I let you stay with your friends? I’m not even asking Ron, I know what he’ll say...”

“I’ll stay with them, please. Thanks, Mum.” Ginny kissed her mother and watched her hurry off towards the secondhand robe shop.

“I think I’d like blue robes too,” said Hermione dreamily. “Blue and floaty and frilly...” She stopped, looking ashamed. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I... never mind.”

Ginny shook her head. “Hermione, it’s all right for you to tell me what kind of robes you want,” she said. “Just because I’ll have secondhand ones doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear about yours.”

“But it’s rude...”

“It’s not rude. If you were saying, ‘Ha ha, I’ll have pretty robes and you won’t,’ that would be rude. If I have to have ugly robes, I might as well at least hear about someone else’s that are pretty.”

“Who has ugly robes?” asked Meghan, skipping up to join them.

“Well, I don’t know if they’re going to be ugly,” Ginny admitted. “But usually the secondhand shops only have a few, and they’re either stained or moldy or so out of fashion even Professor

Dumbledore doesn't remember when they looked good."

"Why do they have to stay that way?" Meghan hopped along on one foot, then the other. "We changed lots of things about our clothes when we made costumes for the plays. We could change your robes too."

Hermione and Ginny looked at each other in dawning delight. "Meghan, you're a genius," said Hermione, hugging her sister. "Whatever you get, Ginny, we'll make it look ten times as good as it ever did. I promise." She leaned in. "We can even make sure Harry likes it."

Ginny shoved her friend. "Stop it. Are you going to pick out yours based on what Ron likes?"

Hermione glanced up at the oblivious boy under discussion, who was chatting with Harry and Neville. "Of course I am," she said with a sly smile.

Meghan giggled gleefully.

xXxXx

"Come on, Ron, just do it," Harry said. "We're all up here, the least you could do is come along."

"Oh, fine." His ears crimson, Ron stripped off his robe and climbed up onto a pedestal to have a magical measuring tape take his dimensions. "I just hope the girls don't walk in here."

"The back section's off limits when people are getting measured," said Draco. "That's why they have two, one for wizards, one for witches."

"But all the people who work here are witches," Ron pointed out.

"But they knock first," said Harry. "You can't possibly be shy, not after living in your house all your life..."

"I think he is," said Draco, peering at Ron. "Yep, shy. Look at him go!"

Ron's face, neck, and part of his chest were reddening now. "Shut up."

"What are you ashamed of?" Neville asked. "You don't look bad with your shirt off."

Harry and Draco guffawed as Ron blushed even harder.

xXxXx

"Something silver, with sparkles," Luna told the saleswitch. "And maybe a puffy skirt."

"Silver, sparkly, puffy skirt," the witch repeated, and flicked her wand. "Will this do?"

A set of robes floated toward Luna, who regarded them as they turned slowly in midair. "I think

so,” she said. “Mrs. Danger?”

Danger peered at neckline and back, hemline and waist. “I think those should be fine, Luna. Put those on a separate tab from the others, please,” she said to the saleswitch.

“All right, a separate tab for silver and sparkly,” the witch said, sending the robes sailing towards the back of the store as Luna climbed off the pedestal and pulled her day robes on again. “And what about the young wizards, then? Any separate tabs for them?”

“Girls, will you wait for me outside, please?” Danger asked, and waited until the four were out of earshot before turning back to the saleswitch. “Just the young man with brown hair is separate. It’s standard dress robes for all of them?”

“Yes, that’s right. Is that the same separate tab as this young lady, or different?”

“Different. So that’s three tabs altogether.”

The saleswitch nodded. “One silver and sparkly, one standard dress robes, and all the rest together. I can get it totaled up for you right back here, if you’ll come with me...”

xXxXx

“Mum, we’re going to the Magical Menagerie,” Ginny said. “Is that all right?”

“Just wait a second, love, and look at these.” Mum set down the bag she was carrying and pulled out a length of dark blue cloth. “How do you like them?”

Ginny gulped. The robes were cut very generously, and the rows of lace across the chest had definitely seen better days. Not to mention the huge lace rosettes decorating each hip, which looked as if they would bobble with the wearer’s every step.

“I think Ginny will look just fine in those, Mrs. Weasley,” said Hermione behind her. “More cloth means we have more to work with,” she murmured to Ginny. “And we can get rid of the lace first thing.”

Ginny relaxed. Hermione was right. “Do you have some for Ron too?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, and they’re a better fit for him than yours – I’m so sorry about that, dear, but it seems not many people resell children’s robes these days. Ron’s so tall now that I could get his from the men’s section.” Mum produced a second set of robes from her bag.

“Is that Ginny’s new dress?” Ron asked, coming out of Madam Malkin’s.

“No, dear, this is for you.” Mum handed Ron the long, maroon garment. “I think you’ll look quite nice in them.”

Ron stared at the armful of fabric in horror. Behind him, Harry and Draco both appeared to be

trying not to have fits. Ginny knew the feeling.

“They’re very lacy,” said Luna, coming over to Ron and stroking the robes. “I think you and Ginny will go well together.”

“Weren’t we just going to the Menagical Magerie?” said Hermione in a high-pitched voice. “I think we should go right now.”

“Me too,” said Ginny fervently, turning away from Ron before the look on his face and the robes in his arms overcame her will not to embarrass her brother any further in public. *Fred and George will do that enough.* “Come on, Meghan, Luna, let’s go.”

The girls sought refuge down the nearest alley and laughed until they were all red-faced and panting. Even Luna was set off by the others. “Ron really shouldn’t have lace on his robes,” she said when they were all recovering. “He won’t like the way it looks. You’re planning to fix Ginny’s, aren’t you? I heard you saying that on the way in.”

“Yes, that’s what we thought we’d do,” said Hermione. “Do you think we should do Ron’s too?”

“As a surprise,” suggested Meghan. “We’ll just steal them one day when he’s not looking, and turn them into something he’ll like better, and get them back to him whenever he has to wear them.”

“I like that,” said Ginny. “And we won’t tell him, so he’ll think he has to wear the ugly ones until the last minute.”

That settled, the girls proceeded to their destination. Ginny stroked the cats and let several owls nibble her fingers, but the prices under all their cages were far too high.

“We could try Eeylops,” Hermione suggested. “Maybe their prices will be better, since all they sell is owls.”

Sure enough, the prices were lower at the Owl Emporium, but they were still too high for Ginny. She was almost ready to give up when, back in a corner, she saw a cage no bigger than her own head. She reached back cautiously and lifted it. Within was an owl about the size of a tennis ball, which drew its head out from under its wing and hooted excitedly as it saw someone looking at it.

“Hello,” Ginny said to it, sticking her fingers into the cage. The owl flapped its wings so hard that it fell off its perch.

“Look!” said Meghan in excitement, pointing to the base of the cage. “‘Make an offer’ – they don’t even have a set price for this one!”

“He’s so cute,” said Luna, slipping her fingers through the bars to pet the tiny owl. “And he looks lonely.”

“I think you might have found your owl, Ginny,” said Hermione, smiling broadly.

“I think so too.” Ginny set the cage on the counter and rang the bell. “This one says, ‘Make an offer,’” she said to the clerk who came out of the back room. “How about eight Sickles?”

“Sold,” said the clerk immediately. “We didn’t think we’d ever get rid of that one. We even tried letting him free for a while, but he showed up back here last week.”

Ginny stopped, her money still in her hand. “Is there something wrong with him?”

“No, nothing wrong, exactly... he’s just small, noisy, excitable. Most people want something with a bit more dignity for a post owl. And something that can carry more than a medium-sized postcard.”

“Well, he’s just perfect for me,” said Ginny, handing the wizard eight silver coins. “Does he have a name?”

“No, no name. That’s your job.” The clerk smiled at her. “I’m glad to see the little fellow go to a good home,” he told her quietly. “I was starting to worry about him.”

“He’ll be happy with me,” Ginny promised, looking into the cage at the owl. “Won’t you, little one?”

The owl bobbed its head up and down, twittering comically.

“What are you going to name him?” Meghan asked as she held the door open.

“I don’t know.” Ginny regarded her owl carefully. “He’s so small and sweet... but I’m not calling him anything stupid like Sugarplum.”

“Maybe he should have a big name,” said Luna. “Because he’s so little.”

“Good idea,” Hermione agreed. “Then he can feel big and important.”

“A big name for a little owl.” Suddenly it came to her. “I know – I’ll call him Pigwidgeon!”

“Pigwidgeon!” Hermione laughed. “I like that. And then he can be Pig for everyday.”

Meghan giggled. “Pig the owl!”

“It sounds like a song,” said Luna. She started singing to the tune of *Frere Jacques* .

Pig the owl, Pig the owl,

Is so small, is so small,

We can hardly see him, we can hardly see him,

There at all, there at all.

The other girls picked it up, singing it as a round (as best as they could over their giggles).

Pig the owl, Pig the owl,

Is so small, is so small,

We can hardly see him, we can hardly see him,

There at all, there at all.

Pigwidgeon hooted along with the singing proudly.

xXxXx

“I’d rather go starkers than wear those things in public,” Ron said in the orchard later. “Wasn’t there *anything* else Mum could have got me?”

“Probably all the rest were worse,” said Neville.

“*How?*” Ron demanded with some justice. He checked his watch. “I’ve got to go – I promised Dad I’d have that Muggle thing I was looking at put back together when he got home, and it’s getting late...”

“He’s worked late every night this week,” said Ginny. “I think you have time.”

“Padfoot says the Ministry’s been chaos,” said Draco. “The Auror Office has a lot of tips about the people who were under those masks, and they have to check them all out, even if it’s obvious that the person it’s about couldn’t possibly be a Death Eater.”

“Percy keeps complaining about all the work he has to do,” said Ron. “He was whining about how his quill burned up when a Howler exploded. What was he doing letting it explode in the first place? Everyone knows if you open them right away they don’t do that.”

“Unlike you, he’s probably never got one before,” said Hermione. “So he wouldn’t know.”

Ron ignored the first two words. “Well, I’d think the first one would teach him.”

“And he still hasn’t told you what this big mysterious thing is that’s happening at Hogwarts?” Harry asked.

“No. But he and Bill and Charlie all keep going on about it. Even Mum and Dad keep hinting, but they won’t tell us what it is. Just that it’s exciting, that Charlie might be part of it somehow, that Bill wishes he was back at Hogwarts...”

“It’s something to do with International Magical Cooperation,” said Ginny. “The way Percy keeps going on about it, you’d think he was in charge.”

“I know what it is,” said Luna. “Dad has a piece about it for this month’s issue. It’s an international talent search with three categories – dragon taming, horticulture, and a swimsuit contest. You should enter,” she told Draco. “I know you’d win one of them.”

Draco turned bright pink as the rest of the Pride laughed themselves nearly sick.

xXxXx

“Can I walk back with you?” Harry asked Ron later as the Pride headed off to their various homes for dinner.

“Sure, why?”

“I was hoping you’d show me this Muggle thing you were looking at.”

“Oh, that. Sure. Dad bought this one, in a Muggle shop a year or two ago. It’s got a name, but I can’t think of it. It’s this bent tube with mirrors inside it, so when you look in one end you can see what’s at the other. You can use it to look around corners or up higher than you can by yourself.”

Harry frowned. That sounded familiar. “A... periscope?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Periscope.”

“Why were you looking at it?”

“Just interested. And I remembered something George told me once. Did you know you can reflect spells off mirrors?”

“No.”

“You can – they’re not as strong when they’re reflected, but they still work. So I was thinking, what if you shot a spell through the periscope?”

“Cool.”

Ron grinned. “Thought you’d like it.”

Harry nodded, thinking it through. “Only problem is, your enemy would see this great whacking thing sticking out from wherever you were hiding and figure out what you were doing. You’d need a little periscope, maybe even little enough to fit on the end of your wand.”

“Maybe it should have a sight on it, too, so you can see what you’re aiming at.”

“But that would make it bigger again, easier to see.”

“Not if you worked it out so that you could see through the same opening the spell goes through. Maybe have another mirror on your wand where you can see it, but only the one around the

corner.”

“But that wouldn’t work. The mirror only reflects it the one way. You wouldn’t be able to see at the same time you were shooting.”

“You would if it was a magic mirror.”

Harry smacked himself on the forehead. “Duh. Magic mirror. That makes a lot of sense. But it would be shiny, if it caught the light it could give you away...”

“Maybe it could be magic to only reflect spells, not light.” Ron frowned. “But I don’t know – spells are light, aren’t they? Or energy or something like that?”

“I suppose you could probably do it,” said Harry. “But you’d have to think a lot about it.”

“It sounds like fun,” said Ron thoughtfully. “Maybe I’ll try it at school.” He snorted. “In my spare time – they’ll probably be giving us loads of homework to make up for whatever fun we could have with this special thing. And I’m regular Quidditch team now that Wood’s left.”

“That’s right, you’re our Keeper now. Just don’t panic and you’ll do fine.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re great on a broom. I’m just kind of there.”

“Maybe you’ll get better when you can fly without one.”

“I hope so. How are we going to manage doing that this year? Mr. Padfoot and Mrs. Letha have their jobs, they can’t take time off just to come help us be illegal, and Mr. Moony isn’t allowed to see us that much.”

Harry grinned. “Ron, when did being not allowed ever stop the Pack-parents from doing anything? He’ll find some way to get to the school and keep you up with your lessons. You’re close now, aren’t you?”

“I just have to be able to do the head all the time. I almost had it before school let out, but I haven’t been able to practice since. And I almost have my incantation ready...”

Harry looked sideways at his friend. “Almost?”

“Well, sort of. Kind of.” Ron sagged. “It’s terrible,” he confessed. “I can’t get the grammar right at all, and even when I do, it sounds stupid. Yours was really great – all that stuff about body of a wolf and heart of a lion – maybe could you help me?”

Harry gulped a little. “I can try,” he said. “You might want to ask Hermione too. Or Neville. He doesn’t seem to be having any trouble.”

“I think he asked his parents.” Ron opened the door of his father’s shed and turned on the lights with his wand. “Here it is. I didn’t take the mirrors off their backing, just took them out of the

tube. They should be pretty easy to put back in.”

They were, but getting the angles right took a while, and getting tired of peering around corners with the apparatus took even longer. They were still there nearly an hour later when Ginny came down to the shed to call Ron in for dinner and ask if he’d seen Harry.

xXxXx

The Saturday before term was to start again saw Harry and Draco in their bedroom, each sorting through a pile of things that had somehow not been packed yet.

“Dress robes came, looks like,” said Harry, coming to a parcel from Madam Malkin’s.

“Looks like.” Draco had a similar bundle in his hands. “Why don’t we have a look?”

Harry was already tearing open his parcel. The cloth inside was black, but had a white front to it, with something that looked suspiciously like a bow tie. Harry tugged on it, seeing if it came off, then found the shoulders of the thing and shook it out.

“They’re too big for me,” he said, frowning. “I thought they made them to your measurements.”

“They do. You must have someone else’s...” Draco pointed. “There’s another one right there, look.”

Harry tore the second parcel open and found robes that corresponded more closely to his own height. “Wonder whose these are, then?” he said, frowning at them.

“Let me see them again?”

Harry tossed them over.

“Hermione!” Draco shouted down the hall.

“What?”

“Come in here a second?”

Hermione came.

“Hold these up for me, would you?”

Hermione caught the robes and held them up. “What are you doing with Ron’s dress robes?” she asked.

“Mystery solved,” said Draco, bowing a little. “Thank you, thank you, you’re too kind.”

“Why did they send us robes for Ron?” Harry asked. “He doesn’t live here.”

Hermione tutted. “Danger probably bought them for him,” she said. “So Ron doesn’t have to wear those awful maroon things. But we’re not supposed to tell him that, because you know he won’t take charity.”

“So how are we supposed to give them to him, then?” Harry asked, taking the robes back from Hermione and folding them up again.

“I’ll manage it,” said Hermione officiously. “Just give them here.”

“Yes, O Queen of the Universe,” Harry said, throwing the robes at her.

“I’m glad to see one of you has finally figured out who I really am,” said Hermione, lifting her nose in the air and making a grand exit from the room.

Harry laughed aloud.

“How do I look?” asked Draco, holding up his dress robes against himself.

“Stupid,” said Harry.

“Thanks a lot.”

“It’s all right,” Harry allowed. In fact, he thought Draco looked quite good in the black and white, but he wasn’t about to say so out loud.

“I wonder what color Luna’s dress is,” Draco said, folding up his robes again.

“Luna’s dress?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Harry, if we have to have dress robes, there’s got to be something to wear them to. Probably some kind of formal dinner, maybe even a dance.”

“A dance? At Hogwarts?”

“Why not?”

Harry shrugged. “Don’t know. Never thought of it.”

“Who’d you take, then?”

“Huh?”

“Merlin, you’re spacy tonight. Who would you take? To the dance?”

“You have to take someone?”

Draco shook his head. “Are you sure you’re awake?” he said. “Harry, boys ask girls to dances. Boys walk up to girls and say, ‘Would you like to go to the dance with me?’ And girls say either

yes or no. That way, when you get to the dance, you have a partner to dance with.”

“Oh.” Harry folded his robes over and set them on top of his sock-filled cauldron, sitting down on his bed. “I don’t know who I’d ask.”

“Think you do.”

“Fine, I’m not telling, then.”

“Suit yourself.”

Harry closed his eyes, thinking of Cho as he had last seen her – several people back in the crowd around their performance at the World Cup, laughing. He was grateful he hadn’t seen her until they took their bows, or he would never have been able to perform for the butterflies in his stomach. She had seemed to enjoy the show, waving at them and tossing a couple of Sickles into the hat before she left.

I hope she liked it. I hope she thought I was funny...

“Earth to Harry,” called Draco. “Come in, Harry.”

“Sod off.”

“Profanity in space. How nice.”

Harry suggested something even less polite and got to his feet. “I’m hungry. I’m going to go see what’s for dinner.”

“Somehow I don’t think what you want is going to be on the menu.”

xXxXx

The rest of the Pack had a grand time laughing at Draco, perched precariously on top of a bookshelf with an irate wolf snapping at his feet. “I said I was sorry!” he shouted down. “What more do you want?”

“A pound of flesh, it looks like,” said Sirius, chuckling. “Enough, Harry. Let him down.”

Wolf whined. I don’t wanna, he was obviously saying.

“Come on, now. Behave.”

Wolf shook hard, then bounded away from the bookshelf and turned into Harry again. “Fine,” he said. “But no more cracks about what I’m thinking.”

“Don’t make it so easy, then,” said Draco, feeling for the next shelf down with his foot.

Harry flipped him off and went to help with dinner.

xXxXx

The next morning was chilly, rainy, and distinctly unpleasant. The Floo went off just as breakfast was starting. Aletha went to answer it and came back a moment or two later. “Danger, will you be all right driving everyone to London?” she asked. “Arthur’s had to go in early and you know Molly doesn’t like to drive.”

“I think I can handle that.” Danger topped up her own mug and Sirius’. “What did Arthur have to go in for?”

Aletha chuckled. “Remember Mad-Eye Moody?”

“Oh, what’s old Mad-Eye done now?” Sirius asked, blowing on his tea.

“Are you sure you want me to tell you in present company?” Aletha indicated the cubs, all of whom looked very interested.

“We’re getting rid of them for three months. Tell.”

“Exploding dustbins.”

Most of the cubs sniggered. Meghan bubbled her orange juice into froth giggling.

“Exploding dustbins,” Sirius repeated. “Don’t tell me – his security system.”

“Apparently,” said Aletha, sitting back down at the table. “Arthur’s hoping to get him off with a caution. It’d be a bit embarrassing to have one of the finest Aurors of our time arrested on improper use of magic charges, especially today.”

“Agreed.” Sirius took a cautious sip. “I suppose this means I’d better be ready for Scrimgeour to be more than usually full of himself today. He’s very proud of having a service record *almost* as good as Mad-Eye’s, but without Mad-Eye’s... idiosyncrasies.”

“Big word,” said Harry and Draco in unison.

“Little ticks,” said Sirius, waving his wand behind him to make two pieces of toast soar into the air and fall onto his plate. “Things that make a person interesting.”

“Why especially today?” Harry asked Aletha.

“What?”

“Why would it be especially bad for anything to happen today?”

“Oh... it just would,” said Aletha vaguely.

Harry looked thoughtful, but refrained from further questions.

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Danger Flooed to the Burrow when breakfast was over and drove the car around into the yard. Bill and Charlie held the rain off with their wands while Percy, managing to make a great show of graciously donating his time, loaded his brothers' and sister's school trunks into the boot.

"We'll see you in London," Mrs. Weasley told her children as they climbed into the car. "Behave on the ride, don't make trouble."

Danger shook her head. "Nice try, Molly," she said, "but that's like telling water not to be wet."

"I know, I know, but you can't blame me for trying."

The next stop was the Landing Zone, where Luna kissed her father goodbye under a large umbrella, then climbed into the back seat. Fireflower House was next, and Frank levitated Neville's trunk into the boot with the others while Alice hugged her son. "I expect a letter every week, young man," she told him mock-sternly. "At least a foot long, and no writing big to take up space."

"Yes, ma'am." Neville hugged both parents tightly. "See you at Christmas."

"Maybe," said Frank, chuckling. "Have a good term, son."

Finally, Danger pulled up outside the Den again and pressed on the horn. "Oranges and Lemons" sounded around the yard, and the rest of the Pack emerged, Draco carrying Hedwig's cage and Hermione holding tightly to Crookshanks' cat carrier. Aletha was levitating the four trunks while Sirius kept the rain off her, and Meghan was jumping up and down with excitement. "I'm a first year, I'm a first year!" she caroled as she tumbled into the back seat next to the twins. "I'm a first year!"

"You're wet," said Fred, handing her off to George.

"We're all wet," said Harry, climbing in after her. "Want me to shake?"

"No," said everyone in the car at the same time.

"Behave yourselves!" Aletha called through the window after she'd slammed the boot.

"Have fun!" was Sirius' contribution.

"How can we do both?" Ron wanted to know.

"You'll manage," said Danger, rolling up the window. "Everyone settled?"

Everyone was.

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Mrs. Weasley and the two oldest Weasley brothers were waiting for them on the platform, as, to Hermione's joy, was Moony. "I was afraid you wouldn't be allowed to come," she told him as they stood under the platform's overhang, half-listening to Mrs. Weasley giving her brood final instructions for the year through the window of their compartment.

"Technically, I'm not," said Moony. "But one hooded cloak looks much like another. And you know and I know that I'm not about to start attacking everything in sight, so I feel justified in skirting the rules this once. There might even be a way for me to come to Hogwarts and keep giving certain people their... private lessons. Not that you need them anymore, obviously, but most of the others still do."

"They'll like that," said Hermione. "Ron's been worried that he wouldn't be able to finish, since you won't be there to watch them do transformations anymore. He and Neville are both so close, too."

"Tell him not to worry. We'll work it out somehow." Moony hugged her. "Have a good term, Kitten, and enjoy yourself. This should be an exciting year."

"Everyone keeps saying that," said Hermione impatiently, "but no one will tell us *why!*"

"Because you'll find out in a few hours at the Welcoming Feast," said Moony as the whistle sounded. "Now get on the train before it leaves without you."

Hermione ran for the steps, leapt inside lightly, and waved through the smeared glass of the door until Moony and Danger were out of sight.

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It was a good thing the compartment was larger than usual, Hermione thought. Meghan might have hurt herself in a normal-sized one, with all the bouncing she was doing. She alternated between excited and worried. "But what if it doesn't put me in Gryffindor?" was her most frequent question. "What if it doesn't?"

"If it doesn't, nothing changes," Harry told her, pulling her close to him and knuckle-rubbing her scalp until she squeaked. "You're still a pest."

"It will," Hermione reassured her. "You know it only Sorts you where you want to be Sorted."

But Meghan couldn't seem to settle down. Finally, after the lunch cart had been and gone, she dug a brightly-colored cube out of her trunk and started to play with it.

"What's that?" Ron asked, leaning over to look at it.

"It's a Rubik's Cube. Aunt Amy sent it to me for my birthday."

“And you haven’t solved it yet,” said Draco.

“What are you supposed to do?”

“You have to get all the same color on the same side,” said Hermione. Meghan had really made a mess of the Cube – the side facing her had five different colors on it, and most of the ones that were the same were separated somehow. “Without taking the stickers off and putting them back on, I mean.”

“Can I see it?”

Meghan tossed it across the compartment. Ron began to twist and turn it, muttering to himself. Hermione watched him for a minute or two as the rest of the Pride began a game of Go Fish.

I’m sorry, she told him mentally. I’m going to be really mean to you this year. But I have to do it. This isn’t the kind of thing anyone can tell you. You have to figure it out on your own if you’re ever going to be happy with it.

For a moment she worried – what if she was wrong? What if the reason he didn’t show any signs of liking her was that he actually didn’t like her, except as a friend? What if she was trying to win his heart, but it had already been won by someone else?

No, that’s stupid. Who else would he like? Who else does he even know exists? Honestly, sometimes I think he walks around in a fog and doesn’t notice things until he bumps into them.

Well, if Letha’s right about there being a dance this year... Hermione blushed a little at the thought of the dress she’d chosen at Madam Malkin’s.

Why don’t we just wait and see what happens.

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 34: One Man's Meat (Year 4)

Chapter 34: One Man's Meat

Snick. Snick. Click. “There, done.”

Harry looked up. “Done?”

“Done.” Ron was holding Meghan’s Rubik’s Cube on his palm, every side a solid block of color.

Harry stared. “How’d you do that?”

“It’s very easy,” said Ron patronizingly. “You turn the little boxes until they line up like you want them to. Watch.” He turned one side of the Cube all the way around. “See?”

Harry scowled. “I *mean*, how did you get all the colors right?”

“It’s not all that hard. It’s a lot like chess, actually, except easier. You have to see it the way you want it to be, and then backtrack from there, to what it should look like one move from there, and two, and three, and so on until you find something that looks like what you have.”

“How is that easier than chess?” Neville asked.

“With chess, you have to be thinking about your opponent, too, and working out how to get them to do what you want. With this, your only opponent is the Cube. And yourself, if you don’t think you can do it.” Ron tossed the Cube to Meghan. “Thanks.”

“I just want you to know, that made absolutely no sense,” said Ginny. “What you said about backtracking. Nobody thinks like that. It’s backwards.”

“Well, maybe that’s why Fred and George always claim I’m backwards.”

Everyone had a good laugh over this.

“So that’s how you always win at chess,” said Draco. “By looking at the board and seeing where you want the pieces to go, and working backwards from there.”

“Kind of. With chess, like I said, I have to figure out what my opponent likes to do, and play to that without giving up too much. And cover for any weaknesses I might have. But basically, yeah. Within about the first fifteen moves, I get a feeling where the game is going to go.”

“Sort of like Quidditch,” said Harry. “After the first few minutes, you can tell if it’s going to be a Chasers’ game, or more on the Beaters, or all down to the Seekers.”

This effectively redirected the conversation for the rest of the train ride.

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Meghan was nearly jumping out of her skin by the time the train slowed down and stopped. She'd been in her Hogwarts robes for an hour, and her gray-striped tie was knotted around her throat. She couldn't wait until it turned red and gold, and the school crest over her heart was replaced with the rampant lion of Gryffindor.

I'm finally going to school. Really and truly going to school. I'll learn everything faster than everyone else and be the greatest Healer in the world.

Harry grabbed her in a headlock. "I think I just won't let you go down to the boats," he said. "I'll keep you with us, and that way you won't get Sorted, and you'll have to wait another year before you can go to school."

Meghan growled and clamped her hand around his, willing him to let her go *now*. Harry yelled and yanked his arm away, shaking it. "What the hell, Meghan? That *hurt!*"

"Good," said Meghan, rubbing her throat. "Serves you right."

"What'd she do, shock you?" asked Hermione, putting her book away.

"No, it was more like... pain. Just pain."

Meghan smirked. Nobody touched her whom she didn't want touching her.

"You'd better get going," said Draco, waving to the door, where the corridor was starting to fill with chattering students.

"We'd all better get going," said Harry. "Everyone got your pets? And raincoats?" he added, peering out the window. "It's wet out there."

"You can hold Trevor if you like," Neville offered in the corridor as the Pride was jostled towards an exit. "For luck."

Meghan stroked the toad's warty back. "There, now I have luck," she said.

"That's not how you transfer luck," said Luna from behind them. "You have to do it another way."

"But we don't have to get into that right now, do we?" said Draco hastily.

Neville winked at Meghan, who pressed a hand over her mouth to stop herself giggling.

Freezing cold rain was bucketing down on the platform. "All right, Hagrid?" Harry shouted over the thunder, fighting his way through the crowd with the rest of the Pride behind him.

"All righ'," Hagrid answered in a slightly subdued bellow as a group of third years cleared out of the way. "Where's Meghan, then?"

“Right here,” said Meghan, coming forward. She glanced over her shoulder once. Hermione and Luna nodded hard, Ginny and Harry gave her a thumbs up, Ron and Draco grinned, and Neville brushed a finger against the corner of his mouth. Meghan felt her face heat briefly as she did the same in reply, then joined the other first years behind Hagrid.

“See yeh at the castle, if we don’ drown first,” said Hagrid jovially to the Pride. The other first years shivered and moaned as the Pride squelched away, ignoring Hagrid’s bellows of “Firs’ years! Firs’ years over here!”

“What’s wrong?” Meghan asked the nearest girl to her, a timid-looking brown-haired thing.

“We’re gonna drown! He said so!”

More voices began to chime in. “I’m scared of the water!”

“I can’t swim!”

“My brother says there’s a giant squid!” This came from a very small, very excited, mousy-looking boy bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. “Are you Meghan Black? He told me about you! He said you’ve been to Hogwarts before, that you lived there and were a Healer’s apprentice…”

The rest of the first years, hearing this, crowded around Meghan, questions flying thick and fast.

“Do we really have to wrestle a troll?”

“Do we have to do magic right away?”

“Are they gonna feed us?”

“Are they gonna feed us *to* something?”

Meghan tried not to laugh, but it wasn’t easy. “We’ll get fed as soon as we get there,” she said. “We’re going by boat, but we won’t drown. Nobody ever drowns in Hogwarts lake. It’s very safe. And they’re not going to feed us to anything. None of the professors bite.” *Not anymore.* She looked at the mousy boy. He resembled a third year who was always following Harry around. “Is your brother Colin Creevey?” she asked.

“Yeah!” He looked ecstatic that she knew his brother’s name. “I’m Dennis! I hope I’m in Gryffindor too, just like him, and Harry Potter – he says you’re Harry Potter’s sister!”

This set off another round of questions, mostly having to do with Harry, which Meghan was spared having to answer by Hagrid’s gruff command to “foller me, now, and no stragglin’, we’d never find yeh again in this weather.”

Meghan tried not to think longingly of the warm, dry, thestral-pulled carriages that were transporting Harry and Neville and everyone else to the castle as she plodded down the slick, rain-

swept path. She was right behind Hagrid, which helped a little, but the wind kept changing direction, so there was no way to be sure from one moment to the next where the rain would come from. Everyone was thoroughly soaked by the time they got down to the lake.

Meghan got into a boat without having to be told. Dennis Creevey followed her in, as did a girl with hair that looked as if it would be strawberry blond when it was dry and a boy with black hair so neatly slicked down that even the pounding rain couldn't really change it much. "Graham Pritchard," he said, offering Meghan his hand.

"Meghan Black. Pleased to meet you."

"Thank you. Are you really Harry Potter's sister? I thought he was an only child."

"I'm his godfather's daughter. We grew up together."

"I see. And you are?" Graham addressed the strawberry-blond girl.

"Natalie McDonald." She shook hands with Graham and Meghan a bit nervously. "I'm... what do you call it... I didn't know there was any such thing as magic."

"Muggleborn," said Graham and Meghan at the same time.

"Wow, me too!" squeaked Dennis. "But I knew there was magic because of my brother – he got Petrified by a basilisk his first year and had to go to summer school to make up for it and Mum and Dad were so amazed when I got my letter too – Mum was so happy she screamed, and Dad talked to God a lot..."

"FORWARD!" shouted Hagrid, and the boats moved out. Meghan gripped the side as the first waves hit and felt her stomach suddenly churn.

Oh no. I've never really been on a boat before...

All thoughts of hunger vanished. She was now fighting merely to stay upright and breathing and not throw up in front of her new year-mates. It had never occurred to her that she might suffer from seasickness.

"Here," said a quiet voice, and something small and circular appeared in front of her face. "Chew on this. But be careful, it's spicy."

It certainly was. Meghan gasped as the tang hit her throat. But it worked – the nausea began to decrease as soon as she swallowed once or twice. "What is it?"

"Ginger pill. I have to take them when I go anywhere, so I don't get sick." Natalie gave her a timid smile. "Mum always says they work like magic."

Meghan nodded carefully, so as not to make things worse. "They do. They really do." The boats were plowing forward through the waves. Meghan found that if she fixed her eyes on a point far

ahead and kept looking at it, she felt better.

That was how she missed seeing Dennis lose his grip and fall in. She heard him, though – his scream was abruptly cut off by a splash, and Natalie and Graham both yelled. Meghan snapped her head down, staring, as Dennis surfaced, spluttering and waving his arms –

And then as he rose out of the water, a tentacle wrapped around his waist.

“Wow!” he shouted above the storm. “Look at me! I’m flying!” The tentacle let him go, and he thudded onto the bottom of the boat. “I flew! I really flew, but without a broomstick!”

“You didn’t fly,” said Graham a trifle scornfully. “It was the giant squid.”

“The *what?*” Dennis’ voice went up another half-octave with excitement. “The *giant squid?* But I thought they *ate* people!”

“This one is different,” said Meghan quickly. “The magic at Hogwarts changed it, so now it’s friendly.” Natalie looked scared enough as it was. She didn’t need to think about things in the water that ate people. “It goes swimming with the students sometimes in the summer, and splashes them.”

“Heads down!” shouted Hagrid, ending their conversation for the moment as they all ducked to pass under the ivy.

“I heard we have to get sorted out,” whispered Natalie as they climbed out of the boats. “What’s that about?”

“School Houses,” said Graham before Meghan could speak. “There are four of them, based on personality, because the Founders of the school felt their students would be most likely to make friends with other people like themselves. Dormitories, meals, and classes are based on what House you’re in.”

“My brother’s in Gryffindor!” said Dennis, squeezing water out of his hair. “That’s where all the brave kids go!”

“Yeh all right there?” said Hagrid, approaching the boy. “I saw yeh fall in...”

“I’m fine, I’m just fine...” Dennis sneezed.

“Fine,” grumbled Hagrid, taking off his overcoat and wrapping it around the boy. “Catch yer death o’ cold fine. Here, hang onta this fer a while. Get yerself warm. I’ll come back fer it later. Come on, now, up ter the castle with us.”

“What are the other Houses, then?” Natalie asked as they trooped up the tunnel.

“Ravenclaw is for smart people, and Hufflepuff for loyal and hard-working,” said Meghan. “And Slytherin...” She hesitated, not wanting to prejudice the girl but not knowing how to put it either.

“Slytherin is for ambitious people, who want to make something of themselves,” said Graham. “I think that’s where I want to be.”

“My brother says Slytherins are all Dark wizards!” piped up Dennis, and Meghan felt a strong urge to reach over and smack him. For the first time, she had an inkling of how she must sometimes appear to the older members of the Pride.

“They’re not *all*,” she said quickly, forestalling Graham’s rejoinder and wincing as they stepped out into the rain again. “Not any more than Gryffindors are *all* good. People can be brave and bad, or ambitious and good. But my mum says it’s easier to turn bad if you’re ambitious, because you can listen only to your ambition and not your conscience.”

“My father told me much the same,” said Graham in faint surprise. “He warned me not to listen to any of the older Slytherins who told me Dark magic was the way to get stronger faster.”

“Are you pureblood?” Meghan asked, hearing the slightly odd way Graham talked.

He nodded. “Six generations. But we don’t think Muggleborns are scum, if that’s what you’re after.”

Meghan smiled. “I think we can be friends, then.”

“I think I’d like that.” Graham looked at Natalie and Dennis. “All of us.”

They had reached the stone steps by now. Hagrid knocked at the door, which was quickly pulled open by Professor McGonagall. “Inside, all of you,” she said sternly, standing aside to let them in. “Quickly, quickly...”

Natalie relaxed as the little group stepped inside, out of the rain. “It’s so pretty,” she whispered, looking around the entrance hall.

Meghan giggled a little. “Wait till you see the Great Hall.”

Professor McGonagall led them into the antechamber and gave her usual pre-Sorting talk, explaining the Houses and so forth, then made for the door. Before she got there, though, she turned back. “Everyone, stand still,” she commanded, drawing her wand.

The first years went utterly rigid, a few of the Muggleborns staring at the wand in terror.

“*Aridus*,” Professor McGonagall said, waving the wand in a large circle. Meghan sighed in relief as her clothes dried. Dennis dropped Hagrid’s overcoat to the floor, patting at his robes in amazement.

“Wow! Meghan, that was real magic! Graham, Natalie, that was real magic! She did real magic! She’s the Head of Gryffindor House, isn’t she? I hope I’m in her House!”

Meghan closed her eyes as Dennis kept chattering. The few moments until Professor McGonagall

came back to lead them into the Great Hall seemed much, much longer.

“How do we get Sorted?” Natalie asked as they formed a line. “She never said.”

“It’s a secret,” said Meghan.

“But you know, if you’ve been here before,” said Graham. “Or weren’t you allowed to come to the Welcoming Feasts?”

“I was allowed, but I’m not supposed to tell. And you’ll know in a minute anyway.”

They filed into the Great Hall. Meghan found the Pride easily by dint of locating two red heads and a silver-blond one in the same general area. They were all looking at her anyway. Dennis was waving and grinning in the same direction, towards his brother Colin, Meghan had no doubt.

There was the usual wave of gasps when the Sorting Hat began to sing, but by the end of the song, Meghan was surprised herself. The Hat had once belonged to Gryffindor? She hadn’t known that. Was it his mind that did the Sorting, then? Or his magic?

“Ackerley, Stewart!” Professor McGonagall read out, and the named boy, shaking all over, came forward to sit on the stool and put on the Hat.

“RAVENCLAW!” the Hat shouted after only a moment, and Stewart ran for the cheering table like a mouse for a hole.

“Baddock, Malcolm!”

“SLYTHERIN!”

Graham watched Malcolm Baddock go to his seat, his expression considering.

“Black, Meghan!”

“Good luck,” Natalie hissed in her ear. Meghan lifted her head high and went forward.

The Hat fell onto her head, blocking out her view of the Hall, and of her nervous-looking Pride. “Well, well, finally here,” said the small voice she’d heard so much about. “So you’re the great tradition-breaker, are you.”

Meghan’s face heated a little as she recalled what she’d said two years ago at the Welcoming Feast, the year Dadfoot and Mama Letha had taught.

“No question about talent or brains, you get those from both sides of the family – your father may act silly, but he’s only a fool when he cares to be, and your mother has her own unique qualities, qualities she seems to have passed down the line. Loyalty too, without a doubt, and courage... but isn’t this interesting, you want to ‘learn everything faster than everyone else, and be the greatest Healer in the world.’ Well, only one place for a young lady like you – your talents would be best

placed in SL...”

Meghan gasped and flung a hand up, squeezing shut the rip that served the Hat for a mouth. *NO!* she thought at it furiously, as gasps and giggles filled the Great Hall. *No, no, no, no! I don't WANT to be a Slytherin!*

“Are you sure? You said you like to break with tradition, and this would do that for you... as well, if you want to be great, Slytherin’s the place to be...”

You didn't even ASK me! I thought you were supposed to find out where we wanted to be!

“I’m supposed to put you where you belong. There’s a difference.” The Hat’s tone had turned distinctly lecturing. “However, since you insist, where do you *want* to be?”

That’s more like it. I want to be a Gryffindor.

“Indeed. You’re sure you wouldn’t prefer Ravenclaw? Heir of the Founder and all?”

Will it mess up my magic if I’m in Gryffindor?

“Oh, not at all, but I simply thought I should ask.” The Hat sounded quite put-out. “Now, if I have your permission...”

Meghan scowled. *I want to be with my Pride.*

“Very well, very well. GRYFFINDOR! Though I do wonder what you’d have done if I’d said Slytherin anyway,” the voice added quickly, in the second before Professor McGonagall removed the Hat from her head.

“I’m flattered, Miss Black,” said the Head of Gryffindor House dryly, looking down at Meghan as she got off the stool. “Just bear in mind that you may not always be able to treat others as you did the Hat.”

“Yes, Professor.” Meghan ran towards the Gryffindor table and the waiting hugs of the Pride.

“Look at your pendants!” shouted Hermione over the cheering.

Meghan looked down at her chest. A red light glowed faintly through the black material of her robes. She grinned. *One of my jewels turned, just like Maura said it would.*

She settled into her seat to watch the Sorting.

Dennis Creevey was placed in Gryffindor, to Harry’s discomfiture. Meghan leaned over to him. “I’m sorry for all the times I bothered you,” she said. “I understand now.”

Natalie’s turn came, and she sought Meghan’s eyes before the Hat fell over her face. A few moments later, it had shouted “GRYFFINDOR!” and the table was applauding.

“Come sit with us!” Meghan shouted, moving down on the bench to make room. “Everyone, this is Natalie. We were in the same boat on the way here.”

“Well, we’re all in the same boat now,” said Ron, reaching his hand across the table to shake hers. “Ron Weasley, nice to meet you.”

Natalie giggled a little, shyly.

“Pritchard, Graham!” called Professor McGonagall. Meghan turned to watch.

“Can a Gryffindor have a friend in Slytherin?” she asked as the Hat ruminated over Graham.

“I suppose it depends on the Slytherin,” said Hermione. “And the Gryffindor. Why do you ask?”

“SLYTHERIN!”

“Oh-ho,” said Draco, chuckling. “You’ve got competition, Captain.”

Meghan glanced quickly at Neville, but his face showed almost no expression.

When Graham got to the Slytherin table, he turned to look towards the Gryffindors until he found Meghan and Natalie. He grinned at them a little and waved, and they waved back. Meghan saw whispering and talking among the Slytherins as Graham sat down. *I wonder what they’re saying.*

The last person was Sorted, Hat and stool were removed, and Professor Dumbledore stood up. Meghan smiled to herself to see his hands, both, to a casual look, perfectly healthy. “There is much I wish to tell you,” he said. “But none of it more important than this. Enjoy the feast.”

Natalie gasped as food materialized on the tables. Meghan slapped Ron’s hands away from a platter of chicken she was reaching for herself. Ron spluttered. “I – but – Hermione!”

“What?”

“You’ve got your *sister* nagging me now!”

“I wasn’t nagging,” said Meghan, returning the plate to its original place, minus three pieces (two for her and one for Natalie). “I was taking it for myself.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Ron helped himself to chicken as well.

Hermione had a small, secretive smile on her face as she took a serving of roast potatoes.

Nothing was really different about being a student, Meghan thought as she ate. The food didn’t taste any different – well, it would have been difficult for it to taste better, and she certainly didn’t want it to taste worse. The same people were around her, more or less – Percy Weasley was gone, and Oliver Wood and the others from his year, but the Pride was still there, the Weasley twins, and the Chasers on the Quidditch team, along with everyone else she’d come to know living in

Gryffindor Tower for two years. So what was different?

It's because now I really belong, she decided finally. No one knew what to do with me before. I was here for different reasons than everyone else. But now I'm just one student in a whole bunch of first years. Now I'm no different than any of them.

I'm here to learn and study.

She repressed a groan as she recalled what that would mean.

Homework. Reading and essays and diagrams and tests! Why did I want to do this again?

Well, because it's the only way to become a Healer. Because it's the only way to become a grownup, educated witch.

And because as much work as I may do, at the end of the day I'll still be with the Pride.

That's what matters most.

Natalie choked on her carrots as Nearly Headless Nick popped up through the table. Meghan grabbed her friend's wrist and cleared her throat with a tiny burst of magic. "What's *that*?" Natalie demanded, pointing at Sir Nicholas with a shaking hand.

"Well, what do I look like?" asked Sir Nicholas, smiling politely at her.

Natalie looked ready to dive under the table. "It talks!"

"Natalie, this is Sir Nicholas de Mimsy-Porpington," said Meghan, retaining her hold on Natalie's wrist. "He's the resident ghost of Gryffindor Tower. Sir Nicholas, this is Natalie McDonald. She's new."

"So I see. A pleasure to meet you, Miss McDonald." Sir Nicholas tipped his head to her and glided away.

Natalie nodded dumbly, still staring at Sir Nicholas. "A real ghost," she whispered, staring after Sir Nicholas. "It's a real ghost..."

"Yes, he's a real ghost," said Harry. "There are lots of them at Hogwarts. There's also Peeves, but he's a poltergeist and they're different from ghosts. If he bothers you, just threaten to tell the Bloody Baron."

"Who's that?"

"The Slytherin ghost," said Draco, pointing. Everybody turned to look. The Bloody Baron was presiding over the Slytherin table from one end. "He looks hacked off about something..."

"Peeves, as usual," said Sir Nicholas, drifting back their way. "He made an almighty fuss in the

kitchens, terrified the house-elves, nearly ruined the feast. You're lucky there's enough for everyone."

Ginny laughed. "This is Hogwarts, Sir Nicholas. They always make more than we could eat in two days. Peeves could ruin half the feast and there would still be enough for us all."

"True enough, true enough."

"Say, why does Peeves listen to the Bloody Baron anyway?" Ron asked.

"Seniority," said Sir Nicholas. "The Baron's the most senior ghost on the premises, and one of the most closely tied to the school. I'm merely here because I loved the place so in my youth, and because the Headmaster at the time granted my petition for residency. The Baron actually died here – though he's very closed-mouthed about where and how, you understand. Embarrassed, I'd think. It can't have been a pretty death, I mean, just look at him..."

"Sir Nicholas?" said Hermione delicately. "We are eating."

"Oh, terribly sorry."

The Hall quieted again after puddings had been finished. The only sounds audible as Dumbledore rose once more were those of wind and rain. The storm, visible on the enchanted ceiling, had not let up.

"As I believe our older students have come to expect, I have a few start-of-term notices for you. Mr. Filch has asked me to remind all students that the list of items banned in the hallways may be found on his office door. As quite a number of things have been added over the summer holidays, it would behoove all of you to examine the list closely."

"If anyone wants to go that close to Filch," muttered Ron.

Dumbledore continued. "The forest is forbidden to all students, as is Hogsmeade village to those below third year or without parental consent. And finally, at this time it is traditional to announce times for Quidditch tryouts. Unfortunately, there will be no Quidditch tryouts this year, as the Inter-House Quidditch Cup will not be taking place."

Meghan could have sworn she heard people's jaws dropping. Harry had just managed to gasp out "What?" before shock rendered him speechless, and Draco and Ron both seemed unable to speak at all.

"However, in its stead," said Dumbledore, raising his hands conciliatorily, "a very special event, one that has not occurred for more than a hundred years, will be hosted at Hogwarts. It will begin in October and continue through the rest of the year, affecting all, but one in particular. It is my pleasure to announce that this year, here at Hogwarts—"

The doors of the Great Hall slammed open simultaneously with a deafening thunderclap.

xXxXx

“Padfoot’s always on about how being an Auror is dangerous,” said Harry as the Gryffindors headed for their Tower. “But Merlin, you look at Moody and you can just *see*. ”

“Magic can heal so much, too,” Meghan added. “It means every time he got hurt, he was somewhere he either couldn’t get away from or where no one could help heal him.”

“Or maybe he just wants to look extra scarred and scary,” said Hermione. “Maybe he thinks it’s part of his job.”

“Scars hurt, though,” said Draco. “Why would you keep them if you didn’t have to?”

“I can’t wait to have a lesson from him,” said Ron, jumping the vanishing step. “It’ll be brilliant. Stories from the front lines. He was probably in on every big battle in the war, and since.”

The cubs exchanged small smiles. They knew one place Mad-Eye Moody had been that hadn’t been a big battle.

“Mum and Dad always talk about him,” said Neville absently. “I guess he was really important in the Auror Office.”

“I think he was the Head of it,” said Ginny. “Back during the war. But Charlie said he’s getting really paranoid now, thinking everyone he meets might be a Dark wizard in disguise.”

“Well, in a war, everyone you meet *could* be a Dark wizard in disguise,” said Luna.

“But we’re not in a war now,” said Hermione. “The war’s been over for years.”

“It might still start again,” said Harry quietly. “He’s not dead.”

“I know, Harry, but do we have to talk about that right now, and in present company?” Hermione shot a look over her shoulder at Meghan’s new friend Natalie, who was listening to the conversation wide-eyed. “Why don’t we save it for some other time and place.”

“All right, all right.” Harry, too, looked over his shoulder at Natalie, with the consequence that he walked straight into Luna and Ginny, knocking them both over. A nearby suit of armor began to laugh creakily.

“Shut it, you,” said Ron, slamming its visor down with one hand as he offered the other to help Harry up.

xXxXx

“So what d’you reckon about the Tournament, then?” said Ron as the fourth year Gryffindor boys prepared for bed.

“Nothing to do with us,” said Seamus. “You heard Dumbledore. Only students who’re of age – and I wouldn’t like to try to fool anything Dumbledore sets up. He’s old, but he’s not past it yet.”

“Besides, who wants to do something people die in?” added Dean Thomas. “Glory’s all very well, but I’d like to be alive to get it, thanks.”

“But a thousand Galleons.” Ron’s face was rapt. “That’s more than... some people... make in a year.” Absently, he bent to take something out of his trunk.

“You know, I didn’t really get a good look at those in Diagon Alley,” said Draco, coming to Ron’s side. “Good Lord, when were they fashionable, eighteen ninety or something? And maroon, too. You always seem to get maroon stuff.”

“Eat dung,” said Ron, shoving Draco away and returning his dress robes to the bottom of his trunk.

“You know, Hermione’s not bad with a needle,” said Draco, picking himself up off the floor. “Or Ginny either. Maybe, if you asked them really nicely, they’d see what they can do about those.”

Ron frowned. “Do you really think so?”

“They can’t make them worse,” said Harry. “Give it a try.” He knew Hermione would just be swapping out the horrible excuses for robes with the new ones Danger had bought at Diagon Alley, but Ron couldn’t know that.

“Maybe I will. But tomorrow.” Ron found his pajamas and shut his trunk. “What’s wrong with you, Cap’n?” he asked, looking in Neville’s direction. “You’re awfully quiet.”

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m just thinking.” Neville was sitting cross-legged on his bed, looking at something small in his hand. “You might not know much about that.”

“Ouch,” said Draco, grinning. “Direct hit.”

“Near miss,” said Ron airily. “I dodged.”

“No, you didn’t have to,” said Harry. “It was aimed at your head, and there’s nothing there to hit.”

He barely blocked Ron’s Jelly Legs Jinx in time.

xXxXx

Remus fell onto his bed with a sigh. His own bed, not the one at the hastily rented flat that had always smelled a bit musty no matter what he did to it.

Having the cubs off at Hogwarts means I can live at home again. If they come home unexpectedly, I’ll have to leave, but short of that, I’m fine.

He was already beginning to reacclimatize himself to the sounds and smells of the Den, the soft

but unrelenting pulse of Pack-life. It might have overwhelmed some, but to him, it was invigorating and comforting.

Even if I have other news that is certainly not comforting. It's not necessarily bad news either, but it's not the sort of thing to inspire long and undisturbed sleep.

His petition to have Hermione's guardianship assigned to him in the magical world as it was in the Muggle had run up against the predictable legal snag that werewolves were not allowed to adopt children, even children to whom they had acted as parents. Charles Scribner, acting on Remus' behalf, had filed a second petition, asking for the overturning of the law, or at least its revision.

"This automatic assumption that no werewolf is fit to be the guardian of a child is outdated," Scribner had said in the preliminary hearing. "Barring an entire class of people from certain basic rights smacks of medievalism. Applications for parental rights should be considered solely on the merits of the person and home involved. If a werewolf is conscientious in guarding his or her transformations, no undue peril is present for a child, or for any person."

It sounds pretty. But will it fly?

He was going to find out. The custody hearing was set to begin near the end of November, and Scribner had warned him that one thing was probably inevitable – Hermione would be asked to testify.

"It's her guardianship you want, so they'll want her in court," the lawyer had said. "And when she is, you'll have to be doubly careful not to seem to communicate with her at all. Any communication, even a smile, might be seen as you somehow intimidating her."

Remus smiled now. *I wonder how intimidated she'd look if the first thing she did when she entered the courtroom was ran over and hugged me. But I could always have delivered a threat to her by proxy, promised unspeakable punishments if she didn't show proper affection...*

For God's sake, why can't they just all believe their eyes and ears? We are a happy family, we've done nothing wrong, and we'd be much better if everyone would stop obsessing over what I am and let us get on with our lives. And this has the potential to do good in other ways – I can think of several werewolves I met back during the war who could have turned their lives around if they'd just had incentive to do so – one even had a niece, who wanted to be with her Auntie Cassie, but couldn't...

He let his eyes close and daydreamed. Summer again, and the Pack was all together, celebrating something, or maybe just being Pack. Aletha was spraying dog-Sirius and wolf-Danger with the hosepipe while the two snapped and bit at the stream of water. Harry and Draco were having a water bomb war in another part of the yard, and Hermione and Meghan were sunbathing in yet another. Remus could almost feel the warmth of the sun on his face...

He opened his eyes. It wasn't the sun leaning over him, but it was close enough for his purposes.

We've missed you, Danger told him, coming down the last few inches for her kiss. Dinner's almost ready. Come on downstairs.

Gladly. Remus finished the kiss and stood up. **I'll be sad not to see the cubs more often, but at least now we're allowed to write.**

Very true. And you'll be seeing them often enough. Have you and Albus set a time for that first lesson?

Not yet. I'll have to write him about that. Maybe we can meet in the Hog's Head... I know he has connections there...

xXxXx

"Blast-Ended what?" said Aletha.

"I can't quite make it out. It looks like 'Skrewts.'" Sirius held the letter up to the light. "Yep. Skrewts."

"Never heard of them," said Remus. "What are they like?"

"Apparently, they can sting you, suck your blood, and burn you all at once," said Sirius, still reading. "No, wait, my mistake, they can all burn you, but only the males can sting, and only the females suck blood."

Danger shook her head. "I get the feeling Hagrid's floundering a little with his classes," she said. "Just because he likes a certain animal, he thinks everyone else will too. Anything else interesting?"

"Let's see." Sirius kept reading Hermione's letter. "Snickering in Slytherin quarters over that article in the *Prophet* by Rita Skeeter."

"You mean the one where they got Arthur's name wrong?" asked Aletha.

"That's the one. Attempted murder by Ron foiled by Harry and Draco, all quiet on the northern front."

"No surprises there," said Remus.

"First class with Mad-Eye was... I can't read this word, there's too much underlining." Sirius handed the parchment to Aletha.

"Amazing," Aletha supplied, then went on reading, her eyebrows lifting a bit. "He chose the first class to introduce them to the Unforgivable Curses..."

"What?"

“He never!”

“Which he demonstrated for them on spiders,” Aletha finished, frowning. “Ron didn’t care for it on general principles, Draco looked scared when Moody showed them the Imperius, Neville went over funny with the Cruciatus, and Harry didn’t say anything all class after Moody pointed him out as the only person ever to survive the *Avada Kedavra* .”

Sirius let his hand fall to the table. “He’s lost his mind,” he said. “He used to do that spider trick with the incoming class of Auror apprentices, but they’re adults, and they know what they want to do with life, or at least they think they do. These are kids! Fourteen-year-old kids! And some of them have had very bad experiences with those curses, or things very like them!”

“And he can’t hear you, so would you please stop shouting at the letter?” Aletha said, chuckling.

“Oh. Sorry.” Sirius subsided. “I just got carried away.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Remus. “Does she say anything else about how they are, how they recovered at all?”

Aletha skimmed the letter quickly. “They got better fairly fast,” she said. “Moody took Neville off to his office for a chat and lent him a book on magical water plants. She doesn’t say it straight out, but I get the feeling she helped Draco get over whatever it was bothering him. And Harry...” She grinned. “You’ll be proud, Danger. Harry disappeared after dinner and returned a couple of hours later with enough biscuits for all of Gryffindor House.”

“That’s my boy,” said Danger, pumping her fist into the air. “Cream that butter! Whip those eggs! Be a cruel cook, your ingredients will thank you!”

Aletha joined in the general laughter. “He had some interesting news as well,” she said when it had died down. “Apparently Barty Crouch’s former house-elf now works at Hogwarts.”

“Is that so.” Sirius shook his head. “Poor little thing. What did it do, I wonder, to get him so worked up? It can’t have been just running off when he told it to stay put...”

“It could have been,” Remus countered. “Crouch is a rule-follower through and through. He’d never keep on a house-elf that wasn’t as well.”

“But where’s he going to find another one? Unless his already had a litter...”

Danger was staring at him open-mouthed.

“Sorry,” said Sirius, having the grace to look a little ashamed. “But that is how a lot of the older pureblood families do things with house-elves. They have them bred, like animals.”

“Ugh!” Danger shook her head. The motion continued down through the rest of her body. “Nasty.”

“I know, I know. House-elves almost always have multiple births, though, so the two families are

both assured another one. Mum kept breeding records almost as obsessively as she kept that damned tapestry. Didn't want inbred house-elves – they'd lose what sense they had."

"And how do the less rude types of families *manage* their house-elves?" Aletha asked with a wry twist in her smile.

"A lot of them don't have house-elves at all. They do their chores themselves, or hire them done. But James' mum and dad had one, and she was married to someone else's elf, because James' mum would scold her about making sure she was back on time from her visits to her husband, and the elf would nod really hard until her ears flapped." Sirius tried to duplicate this feat, but was forestalled by not having the sort of ears that generally flapped. "They were both playing, of course, it's how the civilized purebloods handle that little thing about elves needing to be lorded over."

"Well, thank God there are some decent people out there," said Danger fervently.

"Are those marriages arranged, or self-chosen?" Remus asked curiously.

"Self-chosen, I'd assume, or what's the point? Otherwise all you've got is breeding them by another name, and that's no good." Sirius leaned back in his chair. "I think I even remember James' mum making arrangements to buy a house-elf from one of the... *other* pureblood families, because one of her house-elf's sons had seen this one and fallen madly in love with her."

"And who's to say that just because they're small, they can't love?" asked Aletha. "That sounds like prime fodder for a Valentina Jett tale. Romeo and Juliet, house-elf style."

"Say, that's not a bad idea." Sirius sat up. "They're bound to two families who detest each other, but they start to meet on the sly, punishing themselves afterwards, of course..."

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Remus had his meeting with Dumbledore, and alternate Thursdays were set up for those members of the Pride who had not yet achieved their full Animagus transformation to continue their work under his eye. Their first session was held in an empty classroom, but they knew it would be moved often, to keep anyone from finding out what was going on.

Ron gave up in the second week of classes and asked Hermione for help with his incantation.

"Let me think," said Hermione, tapping her quill on her parchment. "How about... 'When I fly high, I see patterns and sights that other people miss. I fly between others and danger if I must, but I never stop looking for prey.'"

"I like that," said Ron. "Only, what's that last bit mean?"

Hermione grinned. "It means you're always hungry."

Ron splattered her with ink from his quill.

xXxXx

Near the start of October, Professor Moody held an intensive class on the Imperius Curse, which involved putting members of the class under it. “Anyone who wants to leave, leave now,” he said, stumping around the room examining each of them in turn with his mismatched eyes. “I’m not doing this to anyone who’s not ready for it.”

Draco was very pale, Harry noticed, but he didn’t move.

“All right, here we go then.”

Hermione was first. Under the Imperius, she took a scroll of parchment from her bag and tore it to shreds. When Moody took the curse off her, she looked horrified, until a flick of his wand restored it to normal. Seamus Finnegan performed a step-dance for everyone, and only seemed sorry he couldn’t have seen it himself. Parvati Patil thought she was a rabbit, and hopped about the room until Harry yelled “Boo,” at her, at which point she ran for cover under one of the desks.

“All right, Potter, you’ve just volunteered to be next,” said Moody with a small, grim smile. “Up you come.”

Harry walked into the middle of the classroom and watched Moody Summon a desk. Then the gnarled wizard pointed his wand at Harry. “*Imperio !*”

Harry’s muscles all relaxed a little as an immense, dreamy happiness fell upon him. He didn’t have to think... he didn’t have to worry or wonder about anything... it was a glorious way to be... if only that pesky heat against his chest would go away.

This isn’t right, said a small, annoying voice in the back of his mind. *This isn’t the way things are supposed to be...*

Jump onto the desk, Moody’s voice commanded, overriding the smaller voice. Harry nodded slightly and bent his legs. He would obey – that was right...

He’s not your alpha. He’s not even Pack. Why obey him?

Jump onto the desk.

Wolves don’t do tricks unless they want to. Especially not stupid ones like that...

Jump! NOW!

Harry gasped in pain as he collapsed to the floor. He had apparently tried to obey both commands, with the end result of smashing into the desk head-on, or rather knees-on.

“Well done, Potter!” growled Moody, bending over him and tapping each knee with his wand. Harry let out a breath of relief as the pain vanished. “Did you see that, you lot? Potter fought it! Damn near had it beat, too! Watch his eyes – you’ll be able to see it there – let’s do it again,

Potter, up you get...”

This time, Harry was prepared, and managed to throw off the Imperius a little more quickly and completely. The third time, he was out almost before Moody was in, and the ex-Auror let him go. “Black, what about you?” he said, beckoning Draco forward.

Draco walked into the middle of the room and fixed his eyes on Moody’s face. “Ready, sir,” he said quietly.

“*Imperio !*”

Hermione’s hands were working in her robe, her lips were white where she was biting them. Ron and Neville were staring at Draco, just as everyone was. Neither he nor Moody had moved since the spell was cast.

Draco stiffened. His mouth opened, then shut, then opened again. “No, sir,” he said in a very tense, almost strangled voice. “I won’t.”

Moody lifted his wand, and Draco sagged, catching himself on the corner of the desk Harry hadn’t jumped onto. “Nicely done,” Moody said in quiet approval. “You’re a natural, boy. Or maybe it was just that suggestion... afraid I couldn’t resist. Want to have another go?”

“No, sir.”

“All right, back in line. Weasley, you’re up.”

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Hermione slid two fingers onto Draco’s wrist. **What in the world...**

None of your business. The wrist pulled away sharply.

“Well, I’m sorry for trying to help,” Hermione whispered huffily.

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“What did he want you to do?” Harry asked Draco as they walked out of the classroom.

“Is that all anyone cares about today? What he wanted me to do? I didn’t want to do it, so I told him I wouldn’t. What’s so wrong about that?”

“It’s not that it’s wrong, it’s that it’s impressive,” said Neville. “No one else did that. Not even Harry could throw it off all the way first time.”

Draco shook his head. “It’s still none of your business.” He stalked off.

“Touchy,” said Ron, skipping in place.

“I think he’s scared,” said Hermione. “Scared of how close he came to obeying.”

“The Imperius Curse is meant to make you obey,” said Harry. “You’re not supposed to be able to fight it.”

“But you could,” said Neville. “You and Draco both.”

“So we’re just too stubborn for our own good. You knew that already.”

“Scuse me,” said Ron, heading off the same way Draco had gone. “I’ll catch you up.”

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“What do you want, Weasley?” Draco snapped, not turning around from where he was staring out the window of the empty classroom.

Ron shrugged in the doorway. “Just to say I thought that was pretty damn impressive. I couldn’t even think about disobeying – hell, I couldn’t think at all – and next thing I knew, I’d made a fool of myself in front of the entire class.”

“How’s that different from what you normally do?”

“You are in a bad mood.” Ron skipped a few times, moodily. “I’m still doing it, even. But you just threw it off. Was it a lot of work?”

“Yes. ”

“All right, no need to shout at me. I just wanted to let you know it looked really easy. But I guess that’s like that cube thing of Meghan’s, or chess, for me.”

Draco didn’t move, but his posture altered a little. “Yeah. Kind of like that. It was actually one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. And I don’t think I could have done it if I hadn’t been mad.”

Ron nodded. “Understood. I’m off to dinner now. We’ll save a seat for you if you want to come.”

“Thanks, but I’m not hungry.”

Ron looked around quickly to make sure no one was coming. “Animagus tonight,” he said. “You have to eat something, or Mr. Moony won’t let you practice.”

“Bugger,” said Draco tiredly, turning around at last. “You’re right. Fine, I’m coming.”

They left the classroom together.

xXxXx

“Something wrong with him?” Remus repeated, sitting at the front of the classroom with Draco.

Their lesson site this time was on the fourth floor, near the library. “Why do you ask?”

“When he had me under Imperius, he wanted me to grab my left arm and yell.”

Remus frowned. “Your left arm.”

“Like this.” Draco clasped his left forearm loosely. “Like...”

“I see.” Remus’ frown deepened. “Draco, I don’t think that’s anything particularly to worry about. Moody arrested Lucius, did you know that?”

Draco shook his head.

“And there was bad blood between them all through the war. Murder attempts will do that.”

Draco had to crack a smile at this.

“So he may be projecting your father onto you, or conflating the two of you – it’s even possible that was his idea of a joke. Mad-Eye’s sense of humor always was a bit rough. So no, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with him. Now, why don’t you not bother about grabbing your arm anymore and show me you can transfigure it?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “I can try.”

“What am I going to say?”

“Yeah, yeah, do or do not, whatever, Yoda. What happens when you go out to do, but you do not?”

Remus whistled a repeated note, which segued into a musical sequence. Draco smiled. “Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again,” he chanted with the music.

“Very good. Now let’s see it.”

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 35: Another Man's Poison (Year 4)

Chapter 35: Another Man's Poison

“You’d better go up to the hospital wing,” said Hermione worriedly, looking at the burn on Harry’s hand as they crossed the lawns. “Honestly, I don’t know what Hagrid sees in those things... where did he even get them?”

“Don’t know,” said Harry, putting his hand carefully into his pocket to keep it warm. “I’ve never heard of them before, and neither has Moony, or Luna’s dad, she wrote and asked him.”

“What’s everyone looking at?” said Draco as the Gryffindors came into the entrance hall, seeing a crowd gathered around a notice board.

“Hang on.” Ron stood on his toes and peered over people’s heads. “New notice,” he said.

“We knew that,” said Harry. “What’s it about? First Hogsmeade weekend?”

“That wouldn’t get everyone so worked up,” said Neville. “Maybe it’s something about the Triwizard Tournament.”

“Uh-huh,” said Ron absently, squirming around to try to get a bit more height. “There, I can see it now. ‘The delegations from Bee-ox-battons...’”

“Beauxbatons,” said Hermione.

“Yeah, that. ‘...and Durmstrang will be arriving at 6 o’clock on Friday the 30th of October. Lessons will end half an hour early. Students will return their bags and books to their dormitories and assemble in front of the castle to greet our guests before the Welcoming Feast.’”

“Lessons end half an hour early?” Neville repeated. “I like that. Less Snape is always good.”

“Less time for Snape to poison us is definitely good,” said Ron.

“Oh, come on, he’s not actually going to let anything happen to us,” said Draco.

“Fine, you can take my turn getting poisoned,” said Harry, starting towards the stairs. “Oops – sorry, Ernie.”

“Quite all right, Harry. You’ve seen, then? Only a week until they arrive... who’s planning on entering from Gryffindor?”

“Don’t know,” said Harry, shrugging. “Fred and George aren’t old enough yet. They’re trying to think up ways to beat whatever Dumbledore’s going to do to keep underage wizards out, but I don’t think they’ll be able to manage it.”

“Cedric Diggory’s entering for us,” said Ernie. “I’m on my way to tell him about this now, I don’t think he’ll have seen it yet...”

“Diggory?” Ron repeated in tones of disgust as Ernie disappeared through the door leading to the kitchens. “Diggory, Hogwarts champion?”

“He’d be all right,” said Harry, hoisting his bag a little higher and heading up the stairs.

“He’s an idiot!”

Draco snorted. “You should talk.”

“Not on the stairs,” said Hermione wearily, dropping back a step or two to keep Ron from throttling Draco. “Wait until we get to the hospital wing.”

Neville chuckled. “Then Madam Pomfrey can give you Anti-Aggression Potions.”

“Anti-what?” said Ron, distracted from his quest to get around Hermione at Draco.

“Meghan told me about them the other day. They’re like modified love potions that make you love the entire world. That way you don’t want to fight with anyone. You want to hug them instead.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder and grinned to see identical looks of disgust on Ron’s and Draco’s faces. He stopped, letting them go past him. “You made that up,” he said quietly to Neville.

Neville shrugged. “So?”

“Anything that stops them from fighting is worth it,” said Hermione, watching the two retreating backs in front of them. “There are days I’m tempted to Imperius Ron into behaving like a human being.”

Harry snickered a bit at the thought of Ron under Hermione’s Imperius. “Be fair, Hermione, Draco started this one.”

“I know, but he’s harder to Imperius. Come on, just standing here won’t get your hand seen to.”

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Neville stood outside the door of the Charms classroom, listening. The bell had rung not too long before, and there was the usual chatter of a class newly freed from drudgery. The words “Tournament,” “Beauxbatons,” and “Durmstrang” were much in evidence, as they should be, since the other schools’ delegations arrived tonight. But Neville was listening for one voice in particular...

A silvery laugh chimed out clearly over the noise of the voices, and Neville gritted his teeth. His chest felt heavy, as though there were leaden weights inside it.

This is ridiculous, he told himself sternly. She's allowed to have friends...

Even boy friends? asked a malicious part of him. *Slytherin boy friends?*

It's really for the better, said a second part of his mind, a very dejected-sounding part. She doesn't belong with me anyway. We're too far apart in age, we don't have enough common interests, she wouldn't be happy with me.

Shut up, both of you, he told them harshly. I'll handle this myself.

The door opened, and first years popped out in twos and threes, first a pair of Gryffindors, then a trio of Slytherins, and so on by House, until the final trio. Meghan left the room flanked by Natalie McDonald, from whom she was seldom far these days, and the Slytherin boy she'd waved to at the Welcoming Feast.

“So when he sat down, it went off,” the boy was saying. He stuck out his lips and blew, imitating the noise he was describing and making both girls laugh. “He jumped right up and looked under his chair, but there wasn't anything there. And all this time, it's stuck to his arse, and we're all laughing our heads off, because he's looking all over the chair for it. So finally he decides it was a fluke and sits down again, and guess what happens...”

All three of them stuck out their lips and blew, until they were interrupted by their own laughter. Professor Flitwick popped his head out the door, but seeing only a trio of giggling first years, frowned and disappeared back into the classroom again.

“Meghan,” said Neville.

Meghan turned, still giggling. “Oh, Neville! Do you know Graham? I know you know Natalie, but I don't think you've met Graham.” She turned to the boy before Neville could answer. “Graham, this is Neville Longbottom, he's a fourth year, we've been friends, oh, forever. Neville, this is Graham, he's a Slytherin, my year.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Neville as coldly as he dared, shaking the boy's hand.

“And you.” Graham's tone was equally chill, if very faintly puzzled.

Neville ignored the younger boy's apparent confusion. “Madam Pomfrey's looking for you,” he told Meghan. “She knew you had class, but she wanted me to come get you right away when you were done.”

“All right, I'm coming. See you later, Graham, see you back in the common room, Natalie.”

“Bye,” said Natalie, waving and heading off.

Graham bowed slightly in Meghan's direction. Meghan smiled and dipped a curtsy. The weight in Neville's chest increased. “Come on,” he said roughly, tugging at Meghan's arm.

“Ow – all right, I’m coming, I said I was coming.” Meghan frowned at him as they started for the stairs. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Why do you like him?”

“Why don’t you?”

“He’s a Slytherin.”

“So what?”

Neville took a deep breath before he’d trust himself to continue. “Slytherins are ambitious, Meghan. They use anything to get what they want. Anything and everything. Including people who think they’re their friends. If you make friends with him, someday he’s going to use you to get something he wants, and then leave you behind when he’s done.”

Meghan frowned at him. “You don’t even know him. Why are you being so mean?”

“Because I don’t want to see you get hurt. I think you should stay away from him.”

“Who made you the boss of my life?”

“No one. I’m not telling you you have to. I just think you should.”

“And what are you going to do if I don’t? Write home and tell my mum I’m friends with a Slytherin?” Meghan’s voice was rising even higher than its usual high-pitched level. “You know what she’ll say? She’ll say, ‘Good for you, Meghan, keep it up!’ Because she’s not prejudiced and bigoted like *some* people I know!”

“I am not prejudiced!”

“So why are you telling me to stay away from my *friend* just because he’s a Slytherin? You’ve barely said ten words to him, and you know enough to tell me he’s going to use me someday and leave me behind? I thought Luna was the Seer, not you!”

“That’s just what Slytherins do!”

“That’s what some Slytherins do. Not all Slytherins are alike. Just like not all Gryffindors are alike. There are smart ones and dumb ones. And I know which one you are right now!” Meghan glared at him furiously. “I’ll be friends with whoever I want, and I don’t *care* what you think! You can go to Australia, chew billywig stings, and float away for all I care!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

And Meghan stomped away down the corridor, leaving Neville to glare after her, fists clenched,

then turn and march the other direction to go find some weeds to rip up.

xXxXx

“Have Neville and Meghan had a row?” Ginny asked Harry and Ron as they joined the crowd around the Goblet of Fire, sitting on its pedestal inside Dumbledore’s Age Line. “They didn’t sit together at the feast last night.”

Harry shrugged. “Don’t know what they’d find to row about,” he said. “Neville’s not the sort to want to enter the Tournament.”

“They could have rowed about other things, you know,” said Hermione dryly. “The Tournament’s not all there is to life.”

“That was pretty amazing, what they put on last night,” said Ginny. “The Beauxbatons students conjuring those butterflies.”

“The bats ate them all, though,” said Ron, grinning.

“It’s the thought that counts,” said Ginny. “And those staffs the Durmstrang students used were amazing.”

“Those were impressive,” Hermione admitted. “They’re a lot heavier than the ones we work with, and I wish I knew how they made them spark like that. I wonder if they give you a shock if you get hit with them?”

“You were here before us, Gin,” said Ron, looking at the Goblet. “Anyone put their name in yet?”

“Durmstrang’s lot were just here.”

“Krum too?”

“No, he stayed on the ship,” said Ginny scornfully. “Yes, Krum too. The flames go red when a name goes in, and sparks go everywhere. But I haven’t seen anyone from Beauxbatons.”

“How about for Hogwarts?” asked Draco, joining them with Luna.

“Don’t think so. Not unless they came in last night, after we’d gone to bed.”

“Might not be a bad idea,” said Harry. “Especially if you’re trying to sneak in. Who’d want to get rejected in front of all these people?”

“They would,” said Luna, nodding to Fred, George, and Lee Jordan, who had just come in, looking very excited. “They’ve taken an Aging Potion. But I think Professor Dumbledore will have guarded against that, don’t you?”

“He ought’ve,” said Ron. “He has to have known someone would try it.”

“Put that away, Neenie, you have to watch this,” Draco said, flicking the essay Hermione was reading.

“Watch what? The twins making fools of themselves? I can see that any time I want.”

“Not like this,” said Harry, leaning forward as Fred nerved himself up and stepped over the line. “Come on, come on...”

“What are you cheering for?” Luna asked as George yelled in triumph and joined his twin in the circle.

With a sound like a glass of water spilled onto a hot stove, both twins were catapulted out of the circle. Their crash-landings ten feet away coincided with a pair of loud pops, and identical silver beards, very like Professor Dumbledore’s, sprouted on both their faces.

“That,” said Ron, laughing and applauding.

“You were warned,” said the Headmaster himself, coming out of the Great Hall and chuckling as the twins stared at each other, torn between disgust and laughter. “I suggest you visit Madam Pomfrey; her magical razors have had quite a bit of use already this morning.”

Cho came down the stairs and saw the twins, and Harry’s insides did their usual flip as he watched her laugh. She had the wrong coloration to be a veela, but she made him feel very much the same – as if he wanted to do something impressive, right now... “Let me see that?” he said to Hermione, snatching the essay out of her hands.

“Hey!”

“It’s just a corner, you don’t need it.” Harry stepped forward, the slip of parchment he’d torn from Hermione’s essay in his hands. “Wasted their time,” he said loudly, indicating the twins. “There’s an easier way.”

“Going to show us, Potter?” sneered a Slytherin fifth year.

“Of course.” Harry held up the slip of parchment. “Blank,” he said, flipping it to both sides, then changing his grip to show there was no writing hidden on it anywhere. “I don’t want to get into a tournament where people die. But if I did, this is how I’d do it.”

He switched the parchment to his left hand and pulled his wand with his right. “*Wingardium Leviosa!*”

Long, slow, deliberate movements of his arm wafted the slip of parchment towards the Goblet, until finally it hovered directly above. Everyone held their breaths.

“And there!” Harry snapped his wrist, and the parchment fell into the blue flames.

Wild cheering broke out as the fire in the goblet turned red and sparked for a moment, indicating

that Harry's blank slip had been accepted. Harry bowed, seeing with satisfaction Cho applauding him and looking quite impressed. Hermione was staring at him angrily, but Ron, Draco, and Luna were clapping along with everyone else. Ginny was looking at him with an odd intensity he couldn't quite make out...

"Thank you for pointing out a flaw in my defenses against underage champions entering, Mr. Potter," said Dumbledore from behind them, plunging the hall into silence immediately. Harry gulped, but the Headmaster was smiling. "A blank slip will do no harm, but if you would all move aside, I will place charms around the Goblet to ensure that any slip which enters it from now on will be inserted by a human hand..."

"You had to do it in front of him, didn't you?" said Ron as they went in to breakfast. "Couldn't you at least have put all our names in first?"

"I'm not about to help you kill yourself. Find your own way to commit suicide."

"I'll help you," said Draco, grinning. "Commit suicide, that is."

"Fine, let's figure out a way to get our names in that Goblet."

"Easy. Bribe an older student to put them in for us."

"But they'd tell."

"Not if we pay them to keep their mouths shut too."

"Did you have to use a corner of my essay?" Hermione asked huffily over this. "Professor Snape's going to dock me for untidiness now."

"I needed a piece of parchment and yours was right there. Sorry."

"Was that parchment really blank?" Luna inquired. "It would be bad if Hermione's name was accidentally on it and she got chosen as a champion."

"It was blank," Harry said. "There wasn't any ink on it at all. Not unless you've taken to writing your essays in invisible ink," he said to Hermione.

"You haven't, have you?" Ginny said. "Because my calligraphy things were all mucked up this morning, and I thought the invisible ink sounded lower than it had been."

"If I was going to do something as stupid as write essays in invisible ink, which I wouldn't, I certainly wouldn't steal invisible ink from someone else," Hermione began in high dudgeon. "And I would never write an essay in invisible ink, because the professor wouldn't be able to see it, and I'd get the same grade as if I turned in no essay at all, which is a *zero*, and I don't like getting zeros even if some people I know do..."

"How do you hear ink?" Harry asked Ginny as Hermione continued her rant.

“Shake the bottle. It swished more than it did the last time I used it. At least I think it did. It’s hard to tell when you can’t see it.”

“Is there any way to make it show up?”

Ginny nodded. “You just heat up the parchment you wrote on. Hold it over a candle or a fire, or do a Heating Spell on it, and the letters appear. The writing can be really messy sometimes, because you couldn’t see what you were writing when you wrote it, but it usually doesn’t matter too much.”

“Will you show me sometime?”

“Sure.” Ginny ducked as a flock of bats flew by overhead, and kept her head down a bit too long, judging by the warmth in her cheeks when she sat back up again.

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“I still say she’s a veela,” Ron muttered, staring at the girl from Beauxbatons who had so entranced him the night before as she dropped her slip of parchment into the Goblet of Fire.

“Maybe she’s part veela,” Draco suggested. “I think they can interbreed with humans.”

“You would know,” said Ginny, giggling. “You’re living proof.”

Draco sighed. “For the last time, I do not have veela blood.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, but I don’t think my family – my birth family – would have gone in for intermarriage with magical creatures, since they were so very interested in keeping the bloodline pure.”

“So maybe a veela sneaked in somewhere up the line,” suggested Ron. “Like a great-great-grandmother or something. Are there any boy veela, or are they all girls?”

“I don’t know,” said Hermione. “I’ll have to look that up.”

“What are you looking up?” inquired a tall black boy with slanting eyes, coming to stand beside the Pride. “Good morning, Hermione.”

“Oh, hello, Blaise. Everyone, do you know Blaise Zabini? He’s our year, Slytherin. Harry Potter, Draco Black, Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood.”

“Charmed,” said Zabini politely, nodding to them. “Do you know if anyone from Gryffindor is entering?”

“Angelina Johnson put her name in earlier,” said Harry, forestalling the indignant reply he could hear Ron getting ready to make. “And I think a few others of the sixth and seventh years are going

to try. How about Slytherin?"

"Warrington's put his name in already."

"What, you mean that big bloke who plays Quidditch?" said Draco. "The one who looks sort of like a sloth?"

Zabini cracked a smile. "Yes, he does rather. I don't think he'll be chosen, and I'm rather glad. House pride is all very well, but not if it makes Hogwarts look stupid in the Tournament."

"Look!" said Ginny suddenly, pointing. A tall Ravenclaw girl with long brown hair was just stepping into the circle.

"Who is that?" said Hermione, frowning. "I feel like I should know her."

"I'd imagine she's Margaret Lamb," said Zabini.

"Oh, of course, Colleen's sister. Thank you, Blaise."

"You're welcome. Excuse me, I haven't eaten yet."

"Colleen... isn't she that shy girl in your dorm?" said Ron, watching Zabini as he entered the Great Hall.

"Yes, of course."

"How did he know that girl was her sister, then? If Colleen's Gryffindor and her sister's Ravenclaw?"

"I introduced them at the World Cup," said Hermione. "I'd guess he remembers Colleen from there."

"But that doesn't explain how he knows her sister's name," said Harry.

Hermione sighed. "Maybe she got him in trouble some time – how should I know? Why don't you go ask him yourself?"

"All right, no need to get snippy. Are we waiting for Neville and Meghan, or are we just going down to Hagrid's?"

"I don't think they're going anywhere today," said Luna. "Meghan said last night that Madam Pomfrey wants her to spend the day in the hospital wing."

"And Neville said he had to get caught up in Charms," said Draco. "He isn't done with all the reading yet."

"So it's just us, then," said Harry, turning to start for the doors. "Shall we?"

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The Pride made their way out onto the grounds, Ron peering hopefully toward the lake where the Durmstrang ship was moored, obviously hoping for a sight of Viktor Krum. They hadn't gone very far, though, when a voice growled, "Potter, I'd like a word with you."

Professor Moody was stumping across the lawn toward them. Harry sighed under his breath. "I'll catch up," he told the Pride. "Go on without me."

"Heard about what you did in the entrance hall this morning," said Moody without preamble as he drew level with Harry. "You've got guts, haven't you?"

"I wasn't actually entering, sir."

"Why not? Scared?"

Harry bit back an automatic denial. "Not scared, really," he said slowly. "But I'd like to think I'm old enough to know when something's too big for me. Besides, I have to grow up and be a warrior and fight evil." He grinned a little, self-consciously. "I can't do that if I get killed in some stupid tournament."

"Be a warrior and fight evil..." Moody chuckled in his gravelly voice. "No need to ask where you learned that phrase. Black always was a closet romantic."

Harry reminded himself to tell Padfoot that in his next letter. "Sir, may I ask you something?"

"You can ask. I might not answer."

"I know. Sir, what is there, was there, between you and Professor Karkaroff?" Harry hadn't been able to get the encounter at the entrance of the Great Hall out of his mind. Karkaroff had looked afraid when he'd seen Moody...

Moody spat on the ground. "Karkaroff," he said in disgust. "Don't let the name fool you, boy, he lived in England most of his life. And he was the same filth then he is now. Took me six months to track him down after the war ended."

Harry stared. "Track him down? Sir – was Karkaroff..."

"A Death Eater?"

Harry nodded.

Moody gave a twisted smile. "I don't chase men for nothing, Potter. Yeah, he was a Death Eater. But he named names and they let him go." Moody's magical eye roamed into the side of his head, pointing towards the ship on the lake. "Death Eaters, walking free," he muttered. "Nothing I hate more. And he's not the only one here... but you know that, don't you?"

“Yes, sir.”

Moody chuckled again. “I’m sure you do. You stay away from Karkaroff, you hear? He got off by playing his little political games, but we had good evidence tying him to at least five Muggle killings, circumstantial for dozens of others. Keep well clear of him if you can.”

“I will, sir.”

“Now, about the tournament... I’m not so sure it’d be too big for you, Potter. You’ve done big things in the past, haven’t you?”

“Only when I had to, sir. And I always had a lot of help.”

Moody snorted. “Modest, too. You ever think of training for an Auror?”

Harry tried not to show the sudden swelling of hope in his chest. “I think that’s what I want to be,” he said. “I know it’s hard and dangerous, but someone has to do it. And I think I’d be good at it.”

“I think you’d be good at it too. Aurors need to think outside the box, or outside the Age Line, as the case may be.”

Harry smiled sheepishly. “Thank you, sir.”

“Not only that, but you’re fast, you’re powerful, you can throw off Imperius on your third try... I’d say you’d do very well as an apprentice. Come talk to me sometime about it.”

“Yes, sir,” said Harry, recognizing a dismissal when he heard one and falling back as Moody picked up his pace. He waited until the Auror had climbed the steps into the castle before he jumped into the air and spun in a circle, laughing.

He thinks I’d make a good Auror apprentice... the man Padfoot called the best Auror in the department thinks I’d make a good apprentice...

Still grinning, he started unsteadily for Hagrid’s hut.

So I impressed Cho, the whole Pride, and Professor Moody. How much better can this day get?

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“Why’s he wearing a suit?” Harry asked the Pride in an undertone as Hagrid brought the kettle back to the boil to make Harry tea.

“He says it’s for the feast tonight,” said Hermione. “Because the champions will be chosen and he wants to look his best. But he always wears his regular clothes to the other feasts.”

“He looks better in his regular clothes,” said Ginny. “His suit’s... well...”

“Hairy,” said Ron.

“Yes?”

Ron shoved him. Harry shoved back. Hermione lifted her feet onto her chair as the two of them wrestled each other to the floor. “*Honestly*,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Just because you don’t like to have fun is no reason to stop other people,” said Draco.

“You call that fun? Pushing and shoving at each other until you get hurt?”

“You don’t seem to mind our hand-to-hand practices. Or the staff work. Hoy, Hagrid, can Hermione use your broom for a second?”

“Sure, she kin use it, but why? Floor’s not that dirty, an’ Harry’n’Ron are cleanin’ it up fer me with their robes...”

“But I don’t want to,” Hermione protested.

“Yes, you do,” said Luna. “You just don’t want people to think you’re bragging. And you’re not. Draco’s doing it for you.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “All right, all right. Thank you,” she said to Hagrid, who was holding out the broom to her. “Stop that,” she added, swatting at Harry and Ron with it. “Sit down, you’re in the way.”

Harry and Ron scrambled up, dusting themselves off, and sat down as Hermione took her position in the middle of the room, her hands planted on the broom and her eyes contemplative. Slowly, she raised it, then lowered it again. “I can’t do it in here,” she said. “It’s too crowded, I’d break things.”

“Let’s go outside, then,” suggested Ron. “You don’t have to worry about breaking anything there.”

Hermione glared at him for a moment, then nodded sullenly.

“I kin get yeh a better stick than this, too,” Hagrid added, putting the broom back in its corner. “This’s too thick fer yeh, an’ too long – sized fer me, an’ I’m no pixie.”

“Understatement, much?” Draco muttered as they followed Hagrid outside.

Hagrid was in the Forest only a moment or two before he returned with a five-foot length of hard, straight wood. “Careful with it, now,” he warned Hermione as he handed it to her. “Don’t want yeh ter get a splinter.”

“I can live with a splinter.” Hermione grounded the end of her staff and planted her feet, closed her eyes and breathed twice, deeply. Looking straight ahead, she lifted the staff slowly from the ground, changing it from vertical to horizontal and back to vertical. Without warning, she began to

spin it in her hands, clockwise, then counterclockwise. She struck at an imaginary foe, blocked his blows in return, used one end of the staff to vault short ways back and forward, always in silence, until she returned slowly to her starting position, the end of the staff on the earth before her, eyes alert and bright.

The Pride and Hagrid applauded her.

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Some distance away, another applauded as well, though so softly that none could have heard the applause even if they were next to him.

A staff-maiden, but book-loving as well if the stories are true. And hardly uncomely, either.

Perhaps this year will be little hardship even if I am not chosen.

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The Pride spent the day investigating Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts (at a safe distance, since the skrewts had to be kept in separate boxes now that they were three feet long and showing cannibalistic tendencies), trying to get Hagrid to tell them more about the tournament (he flatly refused, but they caught a certain aura of excitement around him when the first task was brought up), and speculating on how long it would take Madam Pomfrey and Meghan to get rid of Fred and George's beards. Hagrid was greatly amused to hear that Harry had got past Dumbledore's precautions once Harry had assured him that the slip of parchment had been blank.

"Why does everyone think I'd want to be in the Tournament so much?" Harry asked around half past five. "Do I really look like I want to die?"

"Who was it stole Padfoot's stash of dark chocolate from Honeydukes?" Draco inquired blandly.

Harry glared at his brother and didn't answer.

"Getting dark," said Ron, looking out the window. "And the feast starts at six, we should probably get back."

"Hang on a tic, I'll go with yeh," said Hagrid, putting away the darning he'd been working on for about an hour. He got up and started to rummage in his dresser.

Luna coughed. "Hagrid, are you doing a lesson on Strunks?" she asked.

"Strunks?" Hagrid asked without turning around.

"They're really animals with green and black striped fur, but they camouflage themselves as trees and eat insects that are attracted to the horrible smell they put out."

"Nope, sorry, never heard of 'em... why d'yeh ask?"

“Because I think I smell one now.”

“What is that?” asked Draco, staring at the bottle in Hagrid’s hand as he turned around in surprise.

“It’s eau de cologne...” Hagrid frowned, looking at the bottle, then at the coughing Pride. “A bit much, maybe,” he said, his cheeks flushing. “I’ll go have it off...”

Ginny flung the windows wide as Hagrid left by the back door. “Eau de cologne?” she said, shaking her head.

“I know, it doesn’t seem like Hagrid... look!” Hermione was staring out the window.

Madame Maxime and her students had just emerged from the enormous powder-blue carriage, and Hagrid was talking to the Headmistress, wearing a rather misty-eyed look that he only got when he was regarding some new and particularly astounding pet. As they watched, he offered her his arm, and she laughed and accepted.

Ron gaped. “He fancies her! Merlin, just think what size their kids would be...”

“It’s nice that Hagrid has someone he likes,” said Luna, watching Hagrid and Madame Maxime striding across the lawns, the Beauxbatons students nearly running to keep up. “But shouldn’t we get up to the school, since he’s not waiting for us?”

“Sounds like a good idea,” said Harry, drawing his wand and banking Hagrid’s fire with it. Ron and Hermione closed the windows again, and the Pride set off up towards the castle, pulling their cloaks around them against the gathering chill.

“I wonder if Percy will come to any of the events,” said Ginny thoughtfully. “His boss is here, judging the tournament...”

“He’s probably left Percy in charge at the office, then,” said Ron. “Or as in charge as he can be if he doesn’t know his name yet.”

“Did you notice Fred and George giving Bagman the evil eye?” asked Draco when the snickering had subsided. “Wonder what that’s about?”

“They probably just don’t like him,” said Hermione.

“But they ought to like him,” said Luna. “They made that bet with him at the Quidditch World Cup, and that got them lots of money, didn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” said Ron slowly. “I know Ginny and I were dumb enough to show Mum what we won off Mr. Padfoot, and she got all mad and confiscated it.” He forced his voice into a falsetto, imitating his mother’s shrill scolding tones. “‘You can have it back when you’ve proved to me that you can handle money responsibly!’ Maybe she got hold of theirs too.”

“Maybe,” said Ginny.

In your dreams, Ron, Harry translated. The twins let Mum get her hands on their money? Not a chance. He smiled. He was getting quite proficient at Ginny-speak.

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Neville, when the rest of the Pride met him in the Great Hall, was sullen, and Meghan looked petulant. They chose seats across the table from one another and on opposite ends of the other members of the Pride, and spent the meal sneaking nasty glances at each other. It looked as if they'd had that row after all.

Maybe it was Neville and Meghan's animosity, maybe it was the fact that this was the second lavish feast in two days, or maybe it was the presence of the blue-burning Goblet of Fire, now on a pedestal in front of the High Table, but no one seemed to have much of an appetite, and the disappearance of dessert was greeted with relief and excitement even by Ron.

"Look at Crouch," Ginny said, peering up at the High Table. "I guess he thinks it's not dignified to be excited."

Indeed, Mr. Crouch seemed quite bored by his surroundings, a feeling not shared by anyone around him. Ludo Bagman, on the other side of Dumbledore, was beaming around the hall genially, and Madame Maxime and Professor Karkaroff looked nearly as excited as all the students. Professor Dumbledore got to his feet and lifted his hands for silence.

"The Goblet is coming to its decision now," he said. "I believe that approximately thirty more seconds will be required. Now, when I read the champions' names, I would ask them to stand and acknowledge the applause, then come to the top of the Hall and go into the next room." He nodded towards a door behind the High Table. "They will receive their initial instructions there."

A wave of his wand extinguished all the floating candles, leaving the Hall lit only by the carved pumpkins and the Goblet itself, which shone more brightly than ever in the semidarkness.

"Any second," whispered Hermione, checking her watch.

The flames in the Goblet turned blood red again, and sparks flew from it. A tongue of fire whooshed upwards, and a charred slip of parchment flew from it – everyone held their breaths –

Dumbledore caught the parchment with his left hand and held it close to the flames, now blue-white again. "Durmstrang's champion," he read aloud, "will be Viktor Krum."

The Hall erupted in cheers as Krum stood from his place at the Slytherin table, his fellow Durmstrang students clapping him on the back. "Well done, Viktor!" roared Karkaroff. "That's my boy!"

Krum disappeared through the door Dumbledore had indicated just as the flames turned red again. Dumbledore caught the second piece of parchment. "Beauxbatons' participant is Miss Fleur Delacour," he read.

“Look, Ron, it’s her!” shouted Harry as the girl who looked like a veela got gracefully to her feet. She stopped to say something soothing to two of her compatriots, who had begun to cry when her name was called, then wafted herself up the aisle and out the door.

“This is it,” Draco whispered, watching the Goblet. “Hogwarts champion...”

Dumbledore caught the slip of parchment. “Cedric Diggory!”

The Hufflepuff table exploded. “Ow,” said Meghan, rubbing her ears in between clapping.

“What’re you clapping for *him* for?” asked Ron grouchily.

“We’re all Hogwarts students, aren’t we?”

Ron rolled his eyes, but joined in the applause anyway. He had plenty of time to do so, as it showed no sign of dying for nearly two full minutes.

“Well, now that our champions are selected, the tournament can begin in earnest,” Dumbledore said, beaming, as the last of the cheers for Cedric finally died away. “I would like to remind you to support your champion by cheering on him or her...”

Harry jerked, as did the rest of the Pride. “What’s wrong?” said Fred, looking over at them.

Harry didn’t bother to answer, instead fishing out his pendants, glad to get the chilled metal away from his skin. He frowned as he looked at them. “This isn’t right,” he said. “They’re just glowing all over... why isn’t it just one carving?”

Wordlessly, Hermione held hers where Harry could see them.

The shining figure was that of the wolf cub.

A flash of red light drew everyone’s eyes.

“But there were only supposed to be three!” whispered Ginny in a frightened voice as Dumbledore’s hand closed around the slip of parchment.

Harry gripped the edge of the table. *I didn’t put my name on that slip*, he thought frantically. *I know I didn’t put my name on that slip...*

But the knowledge did him no good. In a clear, cold voice, Dumbledore read the name on the parchment in his hand.

“Harry Potter.”

The chill of Harry’s pendants struck inwards and froze his heart.

Stupid. Stupid, stupid, idiot. You had to show off for Cho. You had to make yourself look good. The

Goblet figured out who put in that blank slip, your name showed up on it all by itself, you're entered in the Tournament and there's no backing out, it's a binding contract, you have to go through with it, you can't get out...

“Harry!” called Dumbledore sharply over the whispers. “Harry Potter! Up front, if you please!”

And what if I don't please? Harry thought dizzily. Everyone was staring at him, but he could hardly see them through the sparks that were clouding his vision.

“You'd better go,” Hermione whispered, nudging him a little.

Harry got clumsily to his feet, nearly falling as he stepped on the hem of his robes. The aisle between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables seemed to stretch for miles, and every eye in the Hall was fixed on him like a beam of light. The Hufflepuffs, in particular, were hissing to each other as he passed. And Dumbledore was regarding him with an unreadable expression, which grew only more stern as he got closer.

“Through the door, Harry,” said the Headmaster when Harry reached him. There was no smile on his face, no twinkle in his eyes. Harry nodded once before he dropped his eyes and hurried along the High Table, around the end where Hagrid sat, looking just as stunned as everyone else, and through the door the champions had disappeared through.

This room was small and warm, heated by a roaring fire, and lined with portraits, all of which turned to look at him, as did the three champions standing by the fireplace.

“Is somezing wrong?” asked Fleur Delacour, shaking her long hair back from her face. “Is zere a message?”

“Hello, Potter,” said Cedric, looking pleased for a moment, then frowning. “You don't look so well – are you feeling all right?”

“Potter?” repeated Krum, looking around and fixing his eyes on Harry as well. “Harry Potter?”

Harry nodded, hoping they didn't expect him to say anything, since he had a very strong suspicion that if he opened his mouth he was going to be sick. Fortunately, at that moment the door opened again and Ludo Bagman entered. “Amazing, Harry,” he said, shaking his head. “Just amazing...” He took Harry's arm and pulled him farther into the room. “Gentlemen, and Miss Delacour, of course, may I present to you Mr. Harry Potter – the *fourth* Triwizard champion!”

“Fourth champion?” said Cedric in confusion.

Fleur laughed in a silvery voice. “What a funny joke you make, Meester Bagman,” she said.

“No, no, no joke, my dear,” said Bagman, smiling at her. “Harry's had his name come out of the Goblet – he'll be competing with you, right alongside!”

“But zis cannot be,” said Fleur, frowning contemptuously at Harry. “'E cannot be old enough...”

Krum hadn't said anything. His eyes were fixed on Harry as though he'd been playing for a week and Harry was the Snitch which had just fluttered into sight. His regard was adding to Harry's feeling of illness, to the point where Harry was quite sure that he'd need a basin any second now...

No. I won't. He drew a deep, deliberate breath and laid a hand over his chest, over the pendants, which were glowing all over with a soft light. "*Cesso Nuntius,*" he whispered, and felt their temperature return to normal.

I didn't want this, but I didn't want to be The Boy Who Lived either. It's just another thing I'm stuck with. I'll do my best and live through it, like I lived through everything else.

But is anyone going to believe I didn't put my name in the Goblet, after that idiotic show I put on this morning?

His first panicked idea, that the Goblet had somehow supplied his name to the blank slip of parchment, was laughable. *I can ask if that could happen, but I don't think it could. And maybe no one else will believe me, but I think – I hope – Dumbledore will. And the Pack-parents, and the Pride...*

"Harry," said Dumbledore, bringing Harry out of his reverie. The Headmaster stood directly in front of him, looking down sternly. Madame Maxime and Karkaroff were standing next to their champions, Professors McGonagall and Moody stood by the fire, and Professor Snape and Mr. Crouch were half-hidden in the shadows. "Did you put your name in the Goblet of Fire?"

"No, sir," said Harry.

Snape snorted. "A rather implausible lie, Potter, when half the school saw you do it, and when you bragged loudly about your accomplishment in front of the Headmaster."

"That was really dumb of me," Harry admitted. "But that slip was blank, I showed everyone it was blank, I ripped it off Hermione's essay..."

"It would have been easy enough to write a name in invisible ink," said Snape curtly. "The heat of the Goblet's flames would render it visible again. I believe another of your acquaintances possesses such inks. Miss Weasley, is it not?"

Harry looked back at Dumbledore. "Is there any way the Goblet could have figured out that it was mine, and put my name on it somehow?" he asked. "Can it tell who touched something?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "The Goblet does not have that ability," he said. "It would react only to a written name. And I am yet at a loss to explain why it produced two champions for Hogwarts and only one for Beauxbatons or Durmstrang."

"There's Confundus traces on that Goblet," said Moody from his place by the fire. He uncorked his hip flask and took a swig. "Does that slip of Potter's have a school on it, Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore held up the slip of parchment. "It does not," he said blandly.

“Well, there you are. Someone Confunded the Goblet into thinking Potter was the only representative from a fourth school. Ensured he’d be chosen. No fourteen-year-old could do that kind of magic. Potter’s in the clear.”

“Sir, can I see that?” said Harry suddenly, pointing at the slip with his name on it. Wordlessly, Dumbledore handed it to him.

Harry stared down at his name, black and bold. *It’s my handwriting, but I’d better not say that...*

“This isn’t the piece I put in the Goblet,” he said, looking up. “I tore that piece off, and it was a corner. This was cut with scissors, or with a wand. It looks like it’s off an essay.”

“So we can agree, then, that Potter did not put his own name in the Goblet,” said McGonagall. “Can we also agree that he cannot possibly compete, remove him from the Tournament, and continue without this foolishness?”

Harry felt a moment of hope, but Dumbledore shook his head. “I am afraid, Minerva, that we cannot. Not without canceling the Tournament altogether. And if you wouldn’t mind stepping out into the Hall, I’m sure there will be arrivals at any moment who will need to be handled...”

McGonagall nodded and slipped out the door. Bagman, meanwhile, was reacting to Dumbledore’s first statements. “Cancel the Tournament? Preposterous! Absurd! Harry’s a fine wizard, he won’t have a problem with these tasks, will you, Harry?”

Harry stared at the man, but apparently no answer was required of him, for Bagman ploughed straight ahead. “Madame Maxime, Professor Karkaroff, I’m sure you won’t be angry at this little irregularity...”

“Leetle?” said Madame Maxime, drawing herself up to her full, and very considerable, height. “No, zis is not leetle. One of my ‘orses suffers a wing cramp, one of my students becomes ill, zat is a leetle irregularity. Zis... zis is an outrage!”

“I agree entirely!” Karkaroff glared at Harry. “Who’s to say you didn’t play your little trick last night, boy, and then show off how you did it this morning just so you could say you never did? How do we know you didn’t get this mythical wizard to cast the Confundus for your special benefit, and then slip your name into the Goblet himself? Or maybe you just reasoned that if you didn’t put a school on there, the Goblet might choose you as a fourth player, eh? I’m of a mind to take my students and head straight home...”

“What about Krum?” said Moody sharply. “He’s bound to the Tournament now, just like all of them. Going to make him suffer the penalties for breaking magical contract, just because of your fool sense of honor – as if you knew what that word meant...”

“Alastor!” said Dumbledore.

Moody subsided, but his magical eye was fixed unflinchingly on Karkaroff.

“As Alastor has pointed out, all of our champions – all four of our champions – are now bound to the Tournament,” said Dumbledore heavily. “Ludo has advised against canceling it... Bartemius, what about you?”

Mr. Crouch stepped out of the shadows. Harry blinked. Had the wizard caught some kind of disease between the Quidditch World Cup and now? His skin looked like parchment, and dark shadows haunted his eyes. “The rules clearly state that those whose names the Goblet produces must compete,” he said slowly. “I believe that not even canceling the Tournament would release them from that contract. It must go forward, or all four of these young people will suffer the penalty.”

Harry felt his hope crumble. That was it, then. He was stuck in this for good or for bad.

More likely for bad.

“Very well,” said Dumbledore quietly, and Harry suddenly saw shadows and lines on his Headmaster’s face to surpass those on Mr. Crouch’s. “If you would instruct them, then, Bartemius.” He walked over to the fire, rubbing his right hand.

Mr. Crouch faced Harry, Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor. “The first task tests your daring and courage,” he said, “especially important when you are faced with an unknown quantity. Therefore, you will not know what your task is until the day you undertake it, which is the twenty-fourth of November. You will be armed with your wands and nothing else, and you are not permitted to request help from your teachers, or to accept that help should it be offered you. Instructions for the second task will be forthcoming when you have completed the first task.”

Harry’s feeling that he might very soon be sick returned.

We have to face something that will test our courage, but we don’t know what it is. All we have is a wand, and we don’t even know what spells we might need. And we can’t ask the teachers for help.

You could ask Hermione, said a reasonable-sounding voice.

Like she’ll believe you, another part of him laughed bitterly. *You showed off how easy it would be for you to put your name in the Goblet. And now everyone’s going to think that’s what you did. You made your broomstick, now fly on it, Potter. No one is going to believe you didn’t do this.*

Mr. Crouch was refusing Dumbledore’s offer of a bed for the night, or a drink before he left, although Bagman was accepting... Madame Maxime and Karkaroff were leaving, each with a champion in tow... Snape was slipping out a side door, turning back at the last instant with a nasty, triumphant smile on his face, and for one instant Harry wondered if *Snape* might have put his name in the Goblet... but no.

Snape hates me, but he doesn’t want me dead. The Pack-parents had told him straight out that Snape was mean and nasty but not Dark...

The Pack-parents. They're here, they have to be here by now, that was what Dumbledore meant when he told McGonagall to go handle arrivals...

Dumbledore was by the fireplace, talking quietly with Moody, as Harry became fully aware of his surroundings again.

“...did you know they'd be coming?” Moody was asking.

“They have created magical amulets, Alastor, tailored to tell them when one or another of their family has got into a situation which might threaten life or limb. Considering whom the family includes, a wise precaution.”

“Told them right away when Malfoy snatched the kids, didn't it? I always wondered how you knew so soon... only three of them here, though. I thought there were four.”

“There are, but the fourth deems it unwise at the moment to be seen here.”

Moody grunted. “I see his point. He's got enough on his plate as it is – you suggested that custody request, didn't you? It's the most likely angle to succeed...”

Suddenly, Harry could no longer stand one more person looking at him. Even Cedric's mild and polite gaze from across the room seemed an imposition. He wanted to be alone, completely alone, somewhere no one else would come...

He tore across the room and flung open the door Snape had used, Dumbledore's and Moody's startled exclamations following him. The corridor outside the door was unfamiliar to him, but he picked a direction and kept running, and a very few turns brought him to the corridor that housed the kitchens.

Perfect. He was tickling the pear before he realized that no, it wasn't perfect – he'd have to live with all the house-elves watching him –

Better than nothing, though. He could hear voices behind him, he had to get in fast – he yanked the painting open, jumped quickly through, and pulled it shut.

“Harry Potter, sir!” chorused several squeaky voices, and Harry spun around.

“I'm not here,” he said firmly, looking down at huge bulging eyes of green, brown, and blue. “If anyone asks you, you haven't seen me since the last time I was here, when I made all the biscuits. All right?”

The house-elves nodded. “As long as Professor Dumbledore is not asking us, we is hiding you, Harry Potter, sir,” said Dobby. “But Professor Dumbledore is our master, and if he is asking us, we is having to tell the truth...”

Harry leaned against the wall. “If Dumbledore asks you, could you tell him I really don't want to be found right now?” he said quietly. “I know you can't lie to him, but can you tell him that? If he

asks you again, go on and tell the truth, but can you tell him that first?"

A flurry of eager nods answered him.

"Great."

xXxXx

For one of the first times in his life, Sirius was very close to shouting at Dumbledore. "He ran out the door, and now you don't know where he is?"

"He is a remarkably swift runner, as I am sure you know."

"Yes, I know he's fast, but don't you have paintings and things that can tell you where he is? For that matter, what about the house-elves? They see everything that goes on in this castle."

"Why do you consider it so imperative to find Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

The dam burst. "Because I want to *help* him, damn it! Because he's just been roped into a tournament designed for adults, for people with twice his magical training, a tournament in which people *die*, and because he's not even allowed to know what the first goddamned task *is* – with all that, do you think, maybe, that I have a reason for finding him?"

"You may well," said Dumbledore with the calm that made Sirius want to hit him. "However..." He made a small motion, and a house-elf appeared by his side. "Kady, what can you tell me about Harry Potter?"

Kady gulped. "Harry Potter is asking us to say, sir," she said, looking anxiously from Dumbledore to Sirius and the two women behind him, "that Harry Potter is not wanting to be found right now."

"Thank you, Kady. So there you have it, Sirius," said Dumbledore as the house-elf vanished. "I have not attempted to find Harry because he does not want to be found. And things that do not want to be found tend to be hard to find at Hogwarts."

"Whereas things that want to be found tend to come running," said Moody from where he was standing behind Dumbledore. "Like that girl out there." He nodded towards the closed door of the room they stood in. "Looks like she might need some of that attention Potter doesn't want."

Aletha was out the door in an instant, Danger on her heels. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

"Everything!" came the answer in a wail.

"The house-elves assure me that Harry has not left the school, Sirius," said Dumbledore quietly. "He is merely hiding for the moment. I would assume it is because he wants privacy."

"Yeah, well, you ought to know by now," said Sirius roughly. "Kids don't always want what's best for them. But it's your school. I won't go looking for him if you don't want me to. So if you'll

excuse me? I might be able to help with the one who does still seem to want me around. Until she decides she doesn't want me anymore either."

He spun and stalked out of the office, purposely not giving Dumbledore a chance to answer. He was in no mood to listen to reason.

"Ron thinks Harry did it on purpose," Hermione was sobbing into Aletha's shoulder. "Draco thinks it's *his* fault somehow. Ginny hasn't said a word since we found out, Luna keeps biting her nails and looking at her pendants, Neville's jealous of Meghan's new friends and Meghan's mad at him for it, except now they're both scared for Harry because the pendants are cold and that means he's going to die but they *still* won't make up..."

Aletha stroked Hermione's hair and murmured comforting nonsense to her. "Divide and conquer, I think," she said over Hermione's shoulder. "I'll stay here, or possibly move, but..."

"Understood," said Danger. "I'll go find Draco."

"Guess that leaves me with Meghan," said Sirius, shooting a poisonous glance over his shoulder.

Danger's smile flickered on. "Technically," she said, "Albus only asked the three of us not to go find Harry. He never said anything to a certain other party who should be arriving very soon via the kitchens..."

xXxXx

Harry closed his eyes as a brief burst of shivering hit him. *I used up a lot of energy being tense. I'm going to need rest. And I should get warm.*

Nice fire over there...

He suited action to thought, and was soon sitting beside Winky, who was swaying on her stool, hiccupping gently. "Does it help?" he asked her.

Winky jumped and looked at him. "What, sir?" she asked shakily.

"Does that stuff help you?" Harry pointed at the butterbeer bottle in Winky's hand. "Does it make it any easier?"

Winky sniffled. "Nothing is making Winky's life easier now," she said. "Winky's life is never being easy again. Winky's life was only being easy when Winky was making her master's life easy... and now Winky is never doing that again..." She burst into tears.

Great. "I'm sorry," Harry said, reaching out and gingerly patting her on the back. "I'm sorry, please don't cry, I didn't want to make you cry..."

Winky only sobbed harder. Harry gritted his teeth – the noise had quickly gone from pitiful to irritating, and was rapidly escalating into painful.

I have to get out of here. I need some place I can get to quickly, where I can be alone, where no one will bother me... some place no one else even knows about...

He stared into the fire, and found his eyes drawn to one side. To the carved sidepieces of the fireplace.

I wonder...

He stood up and went to the wall beside the fireplace. "Thank you, Godric," he said quietly, and smiled as a section of the wall slid away, revealing a familiar stone slide.

Kitchen leads to kitchen, I'd bet.

The fire turned green. Harry jumped, and quickly hoisted himself into the slide, muttering the password again to close the wall behind him as he pushed off.

That was close.

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Remus looked around the kitchen. The house-elves were all very busy. Very busy indeed. If they'd been human, they would all have been whistling cheerful, discordant melodies.

"Excuse me," he said, and two or three house-elves quickly detached themselves from the main mass to come running to him. "Was Harry Potter here a moment ago?"

"Yes, sir," chorused the house-elves quickly. "Yes, sir, Harry Potter was here."

"But he's not here now."

"No, sir, Harry Potter is not here now."

"Do you know where he's gone?"

More nods. "Yes, sir."

"Are you going to tell me where he's gone?"

"Is Master Remus asking us to tell him where Harry Potter is gone?" volunteered one brave elf.

"Yes, I'm asking you to tell me where Harry Potter is gone..." Remus caught himself and chuckled. "I mean, where he *has* gone."

The elf looked at his feet. "Harry Potter is asking us not to tell anyone where he is gone, Master Remus, sir," he said.

"But I'm asking you to tell me, Grabe."

The house-elf looked up in amazement. “Master Remus is remembering Grabe’s name!”

“Yes. Will you please tell me where Harry has gone, Grabe? I think he may need me.”

Grabe looked torn for a moment. “Harry Potter is gone into the wall, sir,” he said finally, pointing at a spot beside the fireplace. “He was saying, ‘Thank you, Godric,’ and going into the wall just before Master Remus was coming out of the fire.”

“Thank you, Grabe,” said Remus. “I think you may have done Harry a greater favor telling me this than keeping it from me.”

At least I certainly hope so.

xXxXx

A wolf ran around and around the indoor Quidditch pitch, feeling the thoughts of his human mind scurrying in just the same way, around and around, never to be released from their trap... he’d been trapped by this Tournament, by the rules that meant he had to play, it was a cage closing in around him, meant to make him look like a fool, maybe even to kill him... people had died in this Tournament, after all, what better way to kill him than to force him to play these stupid games?

He picked up his pace, but he couldn’t outrun his thoughts. *Voldemort’s back. I dreamed of him. Wormtail’s with him. They killed someone already. They want to kill me. What if Voldemort worked this out somehow? What if someone here is working for him? Karkaroff, maybe? He was a Death Eater... or maybe Snape changed sides again, maybe he’s back with them now...*

A new scent reached him. He pulled up and turned.

A human shape darkened the door to the main room of the Hogwarts Den. He had no need to look any closer, his nose had already told him who it was. He snarled angrily – *I didn’t want to see anyone, I don’t want to have to explain any more, just leave me alone!* – and leapt at the figure.

But the human dropped to all fours, grew larger, changed shape, and Wolf found himself face to face with the same lion who had already proved his dominance. Automatically, he dropped to the ground and whined. Sorry.

The lion placed a massive paw very gently on the back of his neck, then lifted it away. Apology accepted. His form rippled again, and he was the human Moony. “Change back, cub?” he asked quietly. “Please?”

A moment’s thought, and Harry lay face-down on the grass of the Quidditch pitch, his glasses pressing into his face. He’d tired himself out running, and apart from shifting his head a little to find a more comfortable angle for it, he didn’t want to move at all any more tonight.

He heard Moony sit down next to him. “Did you?” his Pack-father asked.

“No.”

“All right.” A hand rested on his back, began to rub it gently. “I wish there was some way to get you out of this, Harry. Since it seems there isn’t, we will help you as much as we can.”

“I’m not allowed to have help,” Harry protested.

“From your teachers. Which we are no longer.” Moony added his other hand to the back rub. “Danger dreamed last night. This is the beginning of something, Harry, something big. I have no doubt you will make us proud.” A moment’s silence. “Has it ever struck you that you and I have something in common?”

“Like what?”

“Neither of us had any choice in becoming *what* we are. I was four years old when I became a werewolf, you just over a year when you became The Boy Who Lived. And the world persists in seeing us primarily as *what* we are. We cannot escape those labels, as much as we would like to. But neither is that all we are.”

“We’re not just *what* s,” said Harry. “We’re *who* s.”

Moony hummed a few notes of a song, and Harry smacked his leg. “You *know* what I mean.”

“Yes, I do, and you’ve picked it up exactly. You can’t let this grind you down, Harry. You can’t let *them* define *who* you are, and *who* you will be. Unless you like their image – Harry Potter, daredevil boy hero, faster than a speeding spell, stronger than the Hogwarts Express, able to leap over the castle in a single bound...”

Harry laughed. “Look, up in the sky – it’s a winged horse! It’s a broomstick! It’s... Super Harry!”

Moony laughed with him. “Unless you have somehow acquired those abilities when I wasn’t looking, though, I don’t recommend trying to live up to your press,” he said lightly.

“I don’t want to,” said Harry, sitting up. “I just want to live through this. But I might like it if people didn’t think I was a liar and a cheat who sneaked into the Tournament.”

Moony sighed. “That will have to wait until we find out who did put your name in the Goblet,” he said. “In the meantime, I’m afraid I have no useful advice, or at least none that you’d be willing to hear.”

“Don’t let them get to me, and don’t let them turn me into either a hero or a villain,” Harry recited dryly. “Right?”

“Right. But I do have one thing to offer that I think you may like.”

“What?”

“Albus is honoring your wish not to be found. You still have classes on Monday, obviously, and you’re responsible for your homework and such, but I think you can spare a few hours right now

for a little emotion purging. And it strikes me that you've never yet had the opportunity to learn how to hunt."

"Hunt? You mean, *really* hunt?" Harry let his jaw hang loose in the best approximation his human form could give of a toothy wolf-grin. Chasing down and killing something sounded awfully good to both his forms at the moment.

"No need to ask if you'd like to go," said Moony, chuckling. "Stay human until we get outside is all I ask."

Harry nodded eagerly and followed Moony out the door. His problems might not be gone, but he had a feeling they'd look a little easier to handle after he'd vented a little emotion on some rabbits or deer.

Look out, Forest. Here comes Wolf.

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 36: Monsters, Green-Eyed and Other (Year 4)

Chapter 36: Monsters, Green-Eyed and Other

Remus lay in the underbrush, listening to the faint but noticeable sounds of Wolf-Harry trying to stalk prey.

He'll get the hang of it eventually. But right now he's still clumsy as a human.

His mind drifted to the twenty-four lines which were all the warning they'd have of things which would go wrong this year.

*When cup is touched, the respite ends,
And lies make enemies of friends.
The one who strikes without the moon
Will try to change your purpose soon,
And alphas tests must undergo,
All whether willingly or no;
While one his brother's namesake wars,
The other schemes to open doors,
And finds the speaking treasure hid
Beneath the deepest sheltering lid.
But traitor fled and mystery solved,
You must not think it all resolved;
Two more there are, who speak you fair
But gladly'd harm you if they dare.
The one strikes while his rival sleeps,
With magic foul within the deeps;
The other fills the traitor's plan,
And schemes his way to end the clan
Whose dame he killed so long ago
(Her husband died by one you know).
So save and heed the fiery knight,
And all you do, do for the right;
Though hero's plight you'll not forfend,
You'll still go with him to the end.*

A thud and a whimper. Wolf had pounced, missed, and hit his jaw on the ground instead. Remus rumbled a sound of encouragement to him and kept thinking.

Cup is touched... the Goblet, obviously. Respite ends, well, we were having a fairly normal time of it, except the problems with me, and that wasn't so bad any more. Lies make enemies of friends... I'm sure we'll get to that soon enough...

A very loud rustle made him look up in alarm. *That was not Harry.*

A new scent reached his nose. Reptile—very large reptile—very large snake—

An enormous, bright green serpentine head came around a tree and landed nearly on top of Remus. He cuffed it sharply with a paw, and it drew back with an angry hiss, but not before he had seen that its eye sockets were empty, grown over with thin green skin.

But it can obviously still smell. And I'd bet it's poisonous... what is it, anyway? I didn't think any snakes that big lived around here...

Wolf bounded up next to him and took a breath as if to growl challenge. What emerged, though, was no natural wolf's noise, but rather a spitting hiss that sounded like a cross between a cat and what the snake had emitted itself.

The snake's head came through the brush again, its mouth gaping wide to reveal tremendous fangs, Remus prepared a blast of fire that would send the snake fleeing for its life if it didn't die in that instant—

But wait. Harry's not afraid of it. And he said something to it. It's as if he knows it...

The snake's tongue flicked out, coiled gently around Wolf's front legs, and retracted. Wolf emitted the strange hiss again, and trotted forward to nuzzle at the huge head.

If Remus had had hands, he would have hit himself on the forehead. *I'm so stupid. It's the basilisk, the one from the Chamber. Harry turned her and set her on Riddle, she bought him the time he needed to get the diary and destroy it, and Albus agreed she could live in the forest as long as she didn't prey on humans...*

Harry had turned human again, and was sitting astride the snake's large head. "Moony, this is Sangre," he said. "She says she's pleased to meet you, but please don't hit her on the nose again when she's not expecting it."

"My apologies, Madam Sangre," said Remus, reverting to his natural form. "I won't make the same mistake again."

Harry translated, then cocked his head in a listening pose for a moment. "Can she smell you?" he asked. "She wants to get to know my family, so she can watch out for us when we're in the Forest. Not that she doesn't think we can take care of ourselves, but she says having more help never hurts."

"She's quite right." Remus held out his wrist and let the forked tongue flick over it, and again as a lion. *An intelligent snake... will wonders never cease?*

Danger's voice spoke up inside his head. **Are you free?**

To you, always. What's the matter?

Are you near Harry?

Yes, why?

I'd rather you move away. I don't want you worrying him —he has enough on his mind.

As if I can't control my own emotions. But Remus understood Danger's concern. **All right. Give me a moment.**

"Harry, would you mind if I left you and Sangre alone for a little while? Danger needs to ask me something."

"We should be fine." Harry was lying on his stomach now, caressing Sangre's "eyelids." "I really don't think anything's going to attack us."

"All right. I'll be back in a minute."

He has a point. No predator in its right mind would attack a poisonous snake that size, even if it can't see.

Her sense of smell would seem to make up for that. So what's wrong?

Well, let's just say that certain of the Pride have mixed feelings about Harry being entered into the tournament, and they have chosen to vent those feelings on each other...

"So you must now strive against others who are older and stronger than you are yourself, in quest for a prize you do not wish." Sangre's body rippled in the snake equivalent of a shrug. *"You say there is no way to be removed from this contest?"*

"No, no way out." Harry lay back on the smooth scales of the basilisk's head and stared up at the stars. *"I sometimes wish I was a snake too. Or a wolf all the time. Your lives seem so much easier."*

"All lives seem easy to the one who does not have to live them, Harry. The prey which scampers out of reach is always fatter than the one you catch."

Harry chuckled. *"We have a saying just like that."*

"All thinking creatures likely do. It is just as true for all of them." Sangre swayed her head gently from side to side. *"So you now have no choice but to compete in this contest. But the choice is still yours how you will compete."*

"What?" Harry frowned. *"I don't understand."*

"You could take the way of the hihheth." The word didn't translate very well, as neither "coward," "whiner," or "weakling" fully covered its possibilities. *"You could snivel and complain, and have*

to be brought to each of your tasks unwillingly, telling the world how unfairly you have been treated. Or you could raise your head high and bare your fangs, and show the world that although you did not choose this of your own free will, nevertheless you will complete it well. That is your choice. ”

“Moony told me something a lot like that. ” Harry let his eyes roam around the constellations he remembered from Astronomy class.

“There is much wisdom in him, if he says what I say. ”

Harry laughed aloud at the conscious smugness Sangre had put into her tone.

And she’s right. Moony’s right. Maybe I don’t have a choice about doing the Tournament, but I can either whine about it or just do it, and do it right. He sat up and squared his shoulders proudly. *I’ll show them what I can do. Hell, I might even win!*

“Do not count your eggings until they hatch, ” Sangre warned, and shook her head gently. Harry yelped as he slipped from his perch and slid down the slick-scaled back, flying off and landing in the thick leaves. *“Your scent was becoming prideful. ”*

“Sorry, ” said Harry, picking himself up. *“Can I do that again? It was fun. ”*

Sangre laughed. *“Very well. Come here. ”*

Harry had time for four more snake-slides before Moony returned, his face grave. *“It’s getting late, Harry, ”* he said. *“We should go back in. ”*

“But I thought you said we could stay out tonight. ”

“There’s been a change of plans. Please say goodnight to Sangre and come. ”

“Moony says I have to go in, ” Harry told the big snake. *“But I’ll come back soon. I’m sorry I didn’t visit any last year, but I was busy. ”*

“You have much to do in the school, I know. ” Sangre wrapped the end of her tail once around Harry and squeezed very gently. *“And it was probably better that you did not come. I had some rather sharp disagreements with a few of the denizens of the Forest. Some of the large spiders, for instance, thought that simply because my eyes were gone I was no more danger to them. ”*

“What happened? ”

“My scales are too thick for their fangs to pierce, and the younger ones are not possessed of enough intelligence to know where they might safely strike at me. I was careful to kill as few of them as I could, and finally the oldest one understood what I wished and decreed that his brood should leave me in peace. ”

Harry made a mental note to compare stories with Hagrid. *“I’m glad everything’s all right now. ”*

I'll see you soon. "

"Farewell, Harry. "

"He thinks I'm a baby," Meghan said for the fifth time, her sniffles almost gone so that she was understandable. "He thinks I can't have my own friends, and he tries to run my life. I hate him."

"I don't think you really hate him," Sirius told her again. They were sitting in an otherwise empty classroom, in a chair he had charmed to be a bit larger and more comfortable. "Come on, you don't hate your Captain, do you?"

"Yes, I do! I hate everyone who wants to boss me around and tell me what to do!"

"Does that include me?"

"No... but you're my Dadfoot."

"How about your mum? Do you hate her?"

Meghan shook her head.

"Moony and Danger?"

"No."

"Madam Pomfrey and your teachers?"

"Uh-uh."

"Why not?"

"Because you're allowed. You're older than me—grown-ups—you know better and you can help me. And because you love me. You don't want me to get hurt."

Sirius nodded. "Believe it or not, Meghan, that's all Neville wants too."

Meghan scowled. "That's what he said. But I don't believe him."

"You don't?"

"No. I think he just doesn't like Graham. I think he's..." Meghan stopped. An expression of wonder spread across her face. "He's *jealous*," she said. "Isn't he?"

"Yes, he is." Sirius kissed his smart little girl. "He's jealous of Graham, because you really seem to like Graham, and because you have classes with him, so you get to see him more. I think your almost getting sorted into Slytherin scared him a little, Pearl. He keeps on wondering if you really

should be a Slytherin, and if you really ever liked him at all.”

“I did—I do! But he’s been so *stupid* !”

“Boys just have to be that way sometimes,” said Sirius. “I speak from experience.”

Meghan giggled. “I know.” Her face grew solemn. “I want to be friends with Neville again, Dadfoot. I really do. But I don’t want to stop being friends with Graham. He likes to play jokes. He played one on Dursley last week.” She leaned up to whisper into Sirius’ ear.

Sirius laughed aloud, surprised. “He stuck it to him?”

Meghan grinned and nodded.

“Well, I take my hat off to him, then. And I don’t think you should stop being friends with him either. It doesn’t sound like there’s any harm in him. As for making up with Neville—well, I don’t know what to tell you. You didn’t do anything wrong, so it’s not like you can apologize…”

“I could,” said Meghan thoughtfully. “It’ll make him feel guilty.”

“So you could. Up to you. But don’t apologize for having your friends. That’s your decision, no one else’s. And if he tries to tell you it’s not, you can tell him—”

“Detention,” said a deep voice from the door, which swung wide open. “And ten points each from ___”

“Hello, Snape,” said Sirius, looking around.

The Potions Master stared at him, nonplussed. “Black,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“Talking with my daughter. What are you doing here?”

“Rounds. To ensure that all students are in their dormitories, where they ought to be.” Snape directed a pointed look at Meghan.

“She’s with me,” Sirius said firmly.

“I can see that.” Snape’s eyes glittered. “So, your precious godson has finally got himself into something he can’t get out of. And he has no one to blame but himself.”

“I thought it had been established that Harry didn’t put his own name in the Goblet.”

“Oh, so he says and so the Headmaster believes, but I am not so easily deceived as some…”

“Merlin’s beard, Snape, do you actually believe you’re smarter than *Albus Dumbledore* ?” Sirius shook his head. “I have to hand it to you, that takes some real egotism.”

“I am less biased on the subject of Harry Potter than the Headmaster...”

“No, you’re simply biased in the opposite direction.”

Snape pounced. “Then you do not deny that the Headmaster favors that scar-headed brat you’ve brought up to be just like his father?”

Sirius sighed. “Leave James out of this, will you? That was twenty years ago, and Harry’s not his father, no matter how alike they look. I’ve already apologized to you for the stuff we used to get up to, and I’m sure James would have too, if he’d lived to the point where he realized how inappropriate it was.”

Snape’s glare could have incinerated the Goblet of Fire in an instant. “I have never believed your foolish and inadequate lie. I refuse to be bought off with half-measures.”

“What do you want, then?” Sirius met Snape’s eyes, feeling Meghan turn in his arms to look at her professor. “What is it you want?”

Snape didn’t answer.

“You’re hurt,” Meghan said suddenly, sliding off Sirius’ lap and pattering across the room, hand held out in front of her. “Will you let me see?”

Snape jerked his arm away from her approaching hand as if she were red-hot. “Get away from me,” he hissed at her.

“There’s no need to be rude,” said Sirius, standing up. “She wanted to help you.”

“I need no help from you. Or from any of your brood.” Snape turned his back and stalked away down the hall, his black cloak whirling around him.

“Looks like a crow,” Sirius muttered, coming to the door to watch his old enemy go. “Like an old crow waiting for something to die.”

Meghan caressed the stone of the wall, following Snape with her eyes. “Is there a bird that’s like a crow, but bigger?”

Sirius nodded absently. “A raven. You’ve seen them—remember when we went to the Zoo in London?”

“Mm-hmm.” Meghan’s hand was against her chest. “Cat and dragon, phoenix bright,” she chanted dreamily, “and raven, something something night...”

“What’s that?”

“A poem I heard once. Can we go back upstairs?”

“Of course.” Sirius took Meghan’s hand. “Why did you say Snape was hurt?”

“He was. I could feel the hurt, but not tell where it was, so I did a spell Madam Pomfrey taught me—she does it with a wand, but I don’t have to—and then I could see he was hurt in three places. His hand, his arm, and his chest. His hand looked like it was burned—maybe he touched a hot cauldron, or spilled a potion on it. But I couldn’t see his arm very well, it was shadowy, like Luna talked about with Draco last year. And his chest looked all funny. I’ve never seen anything hurt like that before. It was like it wasn’t part of his body at all.”

“Well, people aren’t just bodies, you know,” said Sirius. “Maybe he was hurt in his soul. Assuming he has one.”

“*Dadfoot* .” Meghan kicked his ankle gently. “Everybody has a soul.”

“I know, I know. Even stinky old Snivellus.” Sirius turned into a secret passage that would save them a flight and a half of stairs.

But what does he care about enough that it would hurt his soul?

Severus yanked open a cupboard, snatched out a bottle, and poured himself a large glass of wine, which he drank off without even tasting it.

“*What do you want, then?*” Black’s voice rang in his head. “*What is it you want?*”

He poured himself a second glass and drank half of it at a gulp. *I want time to reverse itself. I want a chance to undo the greatest mistake of my life. I want it all never to have happened.*

He finished the glass, the better to block out the sight of those eyes, so wide and frightened, ridiculously juxtaposed with that face, better suited to pride and arrogance than to such plebeian things as fear.

Potter may not be his father, but he is still far too like him for my taste. By tomorrow, he will think being entered in the Tournament is a fine adventure, and brag about it to the whole school. There must be some way of keeping his head properly deflated...

The wine and his well-worn habits of thought were doing their job, keeping the unwanted images away. Potter’s face, his name, his foolish and reckless actions, all these were easy to hate. He threw himself into the arms of that hate and shut his mind to other thoughts.

Ah, yes. Something small and unexceptionable, bearing a changeable message, perhaps...

“Minerva and Danger cleared out the common room,” Moony said as he and Harry approached the Fat Lady’s painting. “They were waiting to give you a hero’s welcome.”

Harry snorted. “Reluctant hero, maybe.”

“Better than no hero at all. I’ll say good night, Harry, I’m not supposed to be here, and I’d rather someone like Severus or Moody not see me.”

“Moody?” said Harry in surprise. “Would he turn you in?”

Moony shrugged. “I don’t know, but better not to take the chance. The hearing starts on Monday, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Remind everyone about the last Animagus session tomorrow, will you? I know I owed last week, but some people might have forgotten. Can you let everyone know?”

“Sure.” Harry hugged his Pack-father briefly. “Good luck.”

“Thank you, and the same to you. Take care of yourself. Good night, Harry.”

“Night, Moony.”

“School champions need their rest, you know,” said the Fat Lady chidingly as Harry approached her portrait.

“I know,” said Harry. “Boggart.”

The portrait swung open, and Harry climbed through the hole, only to stop short as it shut behind him. The common room was almost entirely dark, lit only by the embers of a fire.

What’s going...

“HOORAY!” bellowed a great number of voices as the lights came on. Gryffindors leaped out from behind every piece of furniture, cheering lustily and crowding around Harry. Near the stairs, Fred and George struck up a chorus of “For He’s a Jolly Good Wizard.”

Harry resisted the urge to beat his head against the wall and instead started to push his way across the room. After the first three people refused to listen to his protestations that he hadn’t really put his name in the Goblet at all, he gave up and concentrated on getting to the boys’ staircase. “I’m tired,” he told people over and over, “and I’m going to bed. Keep on without me.”

“But we can’t have a party without the guest of honor!” said Lee Jordan, looking scandalized.

“You do it for me,” said Harry, lifting off the Gryffindor flag Lee had tied around his neck like a cloak and draping it over Lee’s shoulders instead. “Take it in turns being me. Good night.”

He fled up the stairs, followed by another round of the song and more cheers.

I don't think I saw anyone from the Pride down there...

He walked through the door of his dormitory and nearly ran into Draco. "Sorry."

"It's all right. Where've you been for the last couple hours? Everyone's been looking for you."

"Around," Harry said, waving his hand vaguely. "Seen Ron or Neville, or the girls?"

"I haven't seen Hermione, she went off somewhere with Letha, but Meghan came back a little while ago, and Ginny and Luna went off to their dorm. I think Neville's down in the common room hiding from the party."

Harry frowned. "What about Ron?"

"Right here," said Ron, sitting up on his bed. Harry hadn't seen him before because he was lying so still. "So you're school champion. Congratulations." He gave Harry a very strange smile, staring penetratingly at him. "How'd you do it? Ginny's invisible ink?"

Harry felt a very strong urge to either scream or howl. "I did not," he said slowly and carefully, "put my name in the Goblet of Fire."

Ron's smile was definitely becoming a grimace. "You don't have to lie to me, Harry. You got away with it, you don't have to worry about getting in trouble."

"Ron has been on about this for the last hour and a half," said Draco, making a show of not looking at Ron as he spoke. "I've been trying to tell him you wouldn't do that, but he won't listen."

Sudden, irrational anger flared up in Harry. "You've been trying to tell him? Why?"

Draco blinked, taken aback. "Why? Because... because he's wrong."

"And you're the big judge, figuring out who's right and who's wrong? What if you're wrong? What if he's right and I really did put my name in the Goblet?"

Both boys stared at him. "Did you?" Draco finally asked.

"No, but that's the point! It's none of your business—either of you—whether I did or didn't! But I thought *you*," he hurled the word at Ron, "were my *friend* and might believe me when other people don't! And I thought *you*," he rounded on Draco, "knew I don't like other people fighting my battles like I'm still a baby who can't do it for myself!"

"I was just trying to help!" Draco spluttered, over Ron's incredulous, "Why should I believe you? I watched you do it with my own eyes!"

Harry whipped out his wand and aimed it at Ron. "*Furnunculus!*"

Ron was only an instant behind him. “*Densaugo !*”

Draco aimed for the point directly between them. “*Oppilorbis !*”

The two spells collided in midair, ricocheted off Draco’s block, sped together towards the door—the *opening* door—

And hit Hermione full in the face.

She shrieked. Harry and Ron both dropped their wands in shock as Draco raced across the room to her side. “Neenie! Are you all right?”

Hermione shook her head frantically, hiding her face in her hands. Harry winced as he saw, between her fingers, boils popping up all over her skin. Ron looked horrified at the sight of her front teeth, which were beginning to show beneath the bottoms of her palms.

“Come on, let’s get you down to the hospital wing. Or maybe Letha hasn’t left yet.” Draco put his arm around Hermione and led her out onto the landing, then looked back over his shoulder. “And both of *you* can go to hell.” He slammed the door behind them.

“You’d better get to bed,” said Ron, glaring at Harry. “Get your beauty sleep so you look good in the newspaper.” He yanked the bedcurtains shut.

Harry was left alone, staring at the velvet hangings. “Beauty sleep,” he muttered under his breath. “If it takes sleep to make you beautiful, you need all you can get... maybe a hundred years’ worth...”

Again he saw Hermione’s stricken eyes as boils welled up on her face and her teeth grew enormously. “That’s your fault,” he hissed towards the hangings, “your fault, it was your spell that hit it and made it go that way...”

Every light in the dormitory suddenly went out. From the common room he heard a chorus of startled voices.

“Hoy, what happened?”

“Where’s the lights?”

“What happened to the fire?”

“What’s wrong?”

Harry’s mind cleared rapidly, emptied of anger or any other emotion beyond a desire to be alone. The darkness was his friend. It would mask him for long enough that he could get where he was going. And he knew where he was going, and how to keep other people out.

He rummaged quickly through his trunk and wardrobe until he found what he needed—pajamas,

clothes for the morning, toiletries, and his Invisibility Cloak. He snatched up the lion that sat on his bed and pulled the Cloak over his head, heading for the door, which he opened silently.

People were playing Tag in the darkness with beams of wandlight. Harry slipped carefully between them, silent as a shadow, until he stood by the dark fireplace. "Stealth mode, thank you, Godric," he murmured, and felt the hole in the wall open under his probing hands. His clothing went down the slide a few moments before he himself.

"Godric says, restrict access to Harry Potter only," he told the ceiling in the red bedroom, recalling how Draco had sealed the entrance that led to the Slytherin common room back in first year. He went over to the kitchen and the library and sealed their entrances likewise.

There. Now no one can get at me unless I let them.

He sat down on the floor of the main room and stared at the opposite wall.

It might not be so bad to just stay in here...

"Oh, I knew he'd do something like this," Hermione said worriedly the next morning, when the door of the Hogwarts Den refused to open. "I hope he's all right..."

"He's just sulking, probably," said Draco. "He's being very stupid about this."

"You should talk," snapped Hermione. "Go away, you're not helping."

"Fine." Draco turned on his heel and marched towards the boys' stairs. Ginny and Luna emerged from their dorm in time to see him pass.

"What's with him?" Ginny asked, coming over to stand by the fireplace with Hermione.

"He's mad at Harry. And Ron. And they're mad at each other. And now I think he's mad at me, too, and I shouldn't have shouted at him, and Neville and Meghan still haven't made up..." Hermione laid her head against the stone. "No one's speaking to anyone anymore and I don't know what to do."

"Why do you have to do anything?" Ginny asked. "It's their problem, isn't it?"

"She's alpha female," Luna said. "It's her job to help. And the first thing to do is talk to Harry."

"Yes, but I can't! He's locked us out by this door, and he's probably locked the one in the hospital wing too, so we can't go in that way either!"

"What about the one in the Slytherin common room?"

Hermione lifted her head. Ginny turned to look at Luna. "That's not a bad idea," she said. "But how are we going to get into the Slytherin common room?"

“Do you know where Meghan is?”

“In her dorm, I think,” said Hermione doubtfully. “But what does she have to... oh!”

She raced off towards the stairs.

Meghan had a friend in Slytherin House.

“But we still have a problem,” said Ginny ten minutes later as the girls sat in a circle in the common room. “Even if Graham lets us in, we can’t just walk into their common room. We need some way to hide. And I bet Harry took the Invisibility Cloak with him.”

“We could get Neville to whisper us invisible,” Luna said.

Meghan looked at the floor. “I don’t know if he would,” she said. “Especially not for something like this.”

“We’ll talk to him, Meghan,” said Hermione. “Do you know where he is?”

“I think he’s out in the greenhouses. But I don’t know for sure.” Meghan sniffled once. “I wish he’d let me talk to him. I hate being angry at him, and I hate him being angry at me. But I’m allowed to have friends, aren’t I? Even Slytherin friends? And that’s all we are, we’re friends, Graham and I, we’re just friends!”

Hermione scooted over on the couch to hug her crying little sister. “I know, Pearl,” she said. “I know you’re just friends. I know you are.”

But Neville doesn’t. Or he doesn’t believe it.

Hermione made a decision. “I’ll get Neville to make me invisible to everyone except the Pride,” she said. “That way I can talk to Harry. Ginny, you do what you can with Ron. Shake him, maybe.”

“I have a better idea,” said Ginny. “Luna, you going to handle Draco?”

Luna nodded. “I don’t think he’s really angry with Harry,” she said. “I think he’s still angry with himself, even after what Mrs. Danger told him last night.”

Hermione sighed. “He still feels like this is his fault, doesn’t he? Because Harry did that stupid dance in the dream?”

“Maybe we should all do the dance around Harry,” said Meghan. “If it’s that powerful.”

“Spreading out trouble makes it better,” said Luna. “That could work.”

“But we need Harry to do that,” said Hermione. “So I’ll go talk to Neville and see if he’ll whisper

me invisible. Meghan, you go find Graham and ask him if he'll let me into their common room for just a minute, and that I don't want to spy or take anything. I'll find you when I'm ready, but remember, he won't be able to see me."

"I'll go find Ron," said Ginny, getting up. "Wherever he's got to now."

"And Draco's up in their room." Luna flexed her fingers. "Maybe I can get him to take me down to the music room, when Harry opens the Den again."

The lionesses of the Pride scattered.

"Excuse me," called a harsh voice as Hermione jogged across the lawn. She stopped and turned.

Viktor Krum had hailed her, and was now hurrying to her side. "I am sorry to stop you," he said, drawing even with her, "but I haff heard a story that Harry Potter vas not in his bed last night, that he has run away from his school, and I recalled that you often are near him, so ven I saw you I thought that I vould ask..."

Hermione pulled herself out of contemplation of Krum's rather surly but strangely attractive features. "What? Oh, Harry. No, he hasn't run away. He's just... off thinking somewhere, he does that sometimes, I'm actually looking for him now..."

"I saw you vith your staff," Krum said, waving in the direction of Hagrid's hut. "Vith the large man, and your friends. You are fery good. Perhaps you vould like to try our staffs sometime."

Hermione felt her mouth dangling open and quickly shut it. "Yes," she said, her heart racing. "Yes, I think I'd like that. But some other time, I really have to go now..."

"Goodbye, then." Krum bowed to her.

"Goodbye." Hermione ran for the greenhouses, her mind in a daze.

He saw me... he thinks I'm good... Viktor Krum thinks I'm good...

She didn't pay attention to the odd buzzing noise in the air by her ear.

Neville nodded when Hermione made her request. "I can do that. Harry still hasn't come out, then?"

"No, and I want to make sure he's all right. If he fell and hurt himself or something, no one could get to him."

"He'd be able to call a house-elf, though," Neville pointed out. "Unless he was unconscious."

“I know, but I still want to make sure.”

“All right.” Neville closed his eyes and muttered to himself for a moment, then opened them. “That should do it. Only the Pride will see you or hear you.”

“Thanks, Captain.” Hermione hugged him quickly and turned to hurry back to the castle, then turned back. “By the way, Meghan doesn’t hate you.”

“That’s good,” said Neville dully.

Hermione shrugged. *I tried.*

She doesn’t hate me. That’s wonderful. Neville looked down at the handful of seedlings he’d wrenched out of the potting tray he was working on. *She doesn’t hate me.*

But how do I feel about her?

“She has a way to be invisible to everyone but you?” Graham repeated. “And you want me to let her into our common room? She could do anything, go anywhere...”

“But she won’t,” Meghan said impatiently. “She wouldn’t. She doesn’t want to do anything except go through your common room to another part of the castle.”

“There’s nowhere to go from our common room except to our dormitories.”

“That’s not true, and I can prove it.”

“Fine.” Graham grabbed Meghan’s hand. “Come to the common room and prove it. I trust you. If you show me where your sister’s going to go, then I’ll let her in.”

“But people will see me...”

“I don’t care. They make fun of me enough for hanging around with you, it won’t hurt to let you in.”

“Won’t they get mad that I know your password, and where your door is?”

“You can stand a little ways away while I open it so you don’t hear the password, and it’s hard enough to find the door as it is. I’m still not always sure I have it right. You probably won’t be able to find it again from one time.”

Meghan looked around the entrance hall and breathed a sigh of relief as Hermione slipped in through a partially open door. “My sister’s here,” she said. “And I know how you can make sure she doesn’t go anywhere she shouldn’t.”

“How?”

“What does he say?” Hermione asked, arriving beside them.

Meghan took Graham’s hand and guided it to Hermione’s arm. “Hermione’s right here,” she said as Graham started in surprise at feeling something he couldn’t see. “I’ll keep her far away with me while you open the door,” she ignored Hermione’s sound of indignation, “and then you can take her hand and lead her inside and over to the fireplace. She won’t let go your hand until she’s in the... the way to the secret place that we know, and you’ll see it close behind her. That way you’ll be sure she doesn’t go anywhere else.”

“How do I know she won’t come back?”

“Because I say she won’t.” Meghan stared into eyes nearly the same dark brown as her mother's. “Do you trust me or not?”

Graham gave a slow nod. “I trust you,” he said. “I’ll let her in.”

“Took you long enough,” said Alex from his portrait as Hermione climbed out from under the green-draped bed.

“Whatever happened to ‘Hello, nice to see you?’”

Alex’s response, if he made one, was drowned out by the slamming open of the door. Harry stared at her. “How did you get in here?”

Hermione pointed under the bed. Harry groaned. “I knew I forgot something.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you did. What if you’d got hurt...” Hermione stopped. “What’s wrong?” she asked, seeing the look on Harry’s face.

“What’s wrong?” Harry sat down on the bed. “What *isn’t* wrong? Ron thinks I’m a cheater, Draco thinks I’m a baby, you must think I’m totally careless and out of control...”

“I’ll thank you not to put words in my mouth, Harry Potter,” Hermione said firmly.

“But I hexed you last night!”

“It was an accident, as much Ron and Draco’s fault as yours. And Draco does not think you’re a baby. He’s worried about you. Do you know he thinks this is his fault?”

“What?”

“He thinks that stupid dance you did in that one dream really took. So it’s his fault for transferring all his trouble to you.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Please. I did the dance, I took the trouble, it’s my fault if it’s anyone’s—and why are we acting like that *means* anything, anyway? I made it up! It’s a total crock!”

“I’m not the one you should be saying that to.”

“I know.” Harry sagged. “But I can’t go out there, Hermione, I just can’t. I can’t stand everyone staring at me and whispering about me... I can’t...”

Hermione folded her arms. “You faced Lord Voldemort,” she said. “*Twice*. You broke a Memory Charm *and* a Body-Bind from the inside. You captured two Death Eaters. And now you’re scared of a bunch of kids?”

Harry smiled a little, sheepishly. “But I didn’t care if Voldemort and the Death Eaters *liked* me,” he said. “It sounds stupid, but I want people to like me. I thought Ron did like me.”

Hermione shook her head. “Ron does like you,” she said with certainty.

“He’s got a funny way of showing it.”

“Oh, Harry, don’t you understand? He’s jealous!”

“*Jealous?* Of what?”

“You. And I know, it doesn’t make any sense,” she added quickly, forestalling Harry’s indignant reply. “No, this tournament isn’t anything you wanted to be in. Nor does he, really. But you’re getting all the attention, all the fame and fortune, and that’s what he wants, or at least what he thinks he wants. I’m sure he wouldn’t like it as much as he thinks he would. I didn’t like it much myself. But it’s like Letha always says—you see yourself from the inside and other people from the outside. He only sees the outside of what you have, and it looks really good. And he wants it.”

“Or he thinks he wants it. More than he wants to be my friend.” Harry stared at the carpet.

“Fine. He doesn’t have to be my friend if he doesn’t want to be.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! He blew his mouth off once, and now you’re not going to be friends anymore? As if you’ve never done anything you regretted!” Hermione glared at him, then let her look soften. “I’m not saying you have to do anything about it yourself. But if he apologizes, will you promise to listen?”

“Sure,” Harry said grudgingly. “Fine. It’s just... I hate it when everyone points and stares. And they’re all going to. And whisper, and talk about me.”

“Yes, and they’ll talk and whisper even more if you just disappear like this. There’s already rumors that you’ve run away from school because you’re afraid to be in the Tournament...”

“I am not!”

“I know that. And you know that. But everyone else doesn’t know that.”

Harry sighed, a strangely prolonged sigh that had quite a bit of hiss to it. Hermione jumped as an answering hiss came from Alex's portrait, one that went on for nearly a minute. "Would one of you mind translating?" she said acerbically when he was done.

"It's nothing worth repeating," said Harry. "But I'll keep it in mind," he added to Alex. "And just so you know, you're the third person to tell me that."

"Well, you know what they say." Alex reclined in his chair. "If one man calls you a niffler, ignore him. If another man calls you a niffler, think it over. But if a third man calls you a niffler, dig for treasure."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other, then back at the portrait. "What?" they said in unison.

Alex rolled his eyes. "It just means, if three different people all have the same opinion about you, it's very likely to be right. Granted, this isn't so much about you as it is about what you ought to be doing..."

"Close enough," Harry said. "All right. You win. Time to dig for treasure."

"In other words, you're coming out?" said Hermione.

"Yep." Harry stood up. "I'd better prove I haven't run away. And if I have to be in this damned Tournament, I'm going to do it with some style."

Hermione giggled. "Now you sound like my brother."

"I'd like to meet this brother of yours sometime. He sounds like a real interesting bloke. See you, Alex."

"Bye, you two. Don't forget to unlock the doors on your way out."

"I won't." Harry shut the door of the green bedroom behind himself and Hermione.

"You see?" Ginny said as Ron picked himself up off the floor. "There's no way Harry could have got up to my dorm. Whoever took my invisible ink—if anyone did, I might have made a mistake—but if someone did, it was another girl. And I don't think Harry has any."

"He doesn't." Ron stared at the slide the girls' staircase had formed. "Why does he have to be so bloody famous, anyway?" he burst out bitterly.

"I don't know. But he hates it, Ron, you know he hates it. He'd swap with you in a second—it's his dream to make his own life, not have some destiny hanging over him."

"Yeah, well, what kind of life am I going to make?"

Ginny looked at her brother. "I don't know," she said quietly. "What kind of life are you going to

make?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“It’s your life, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but—I’m not good at anything!”

I’m not good for anything, Ginny heard under Ron’s words. I’m worthless, useless, I’m not even a good friend...

“That’s not true,” she said to all the statements. “Who worked a Rubik’s Cube in less than five minutes on the train? Who can beat anyone at chess, even Mr. Padfoot? Who was out in the shed all the time over the summer helping Dad with his Muggle stuff? Not me.”

“But I hit Hermione with a curse.”

“That was an accident.”

“And Harry probably hates me.”

Movement caught Ginny’s eye. Harry had climbed out of the hole by the fireplace just in time to hear this. He slammed his finger against his lips as she took a breath to say something, then pointed at Ron and shook his head hard.

“No, he doesn’t,” Ginny said, looking back at Ron. Harry flashed her a thumbs-up and disappeared quickly out the portrait hole as Hermione climbed out of the Hogwarts Den entrance and closed it behind her.

“And Draco’s mad at me.”

“I am?” said Draco from the boys’ stairs, Luna behind him.

Ron jumped and looked around. “Well, you were.”

“I won’t be if you apologize to Hermione.”

“He’s not the only one who has to apologize,” said Hermione, making Ron jump and spin again. “If it wasn’t for that block you threw, only one of those curses would have hit me.”

“I am most truly sorry, gracious sister, and I humbly beg your pardon,” Draco said, sweeping an elegant bow. Luna prodded his behind with her toe, and he yelped as he lost his balance and nearly fell down the stairs. Recovering his balance, he glared at her. “Don’t do that!”

“But you look so funny.”

Ron cracked a smile. “Sorry, Hermione,” he said. “I never meant to curse you.”

“I could tell. You certainly weren’t aiming for me.”

Ron sighed. “I didn’t really want to curse Harry either... damn it, I know he didn’t do it himself, but I can’t just go *say* that to him! Not in public!”

“I know something you can do,” said Luna. “You wouldn’t have to *say* anything, but it would let Harry know that you’re really sorry and you do want to be friends again.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

Luna explained.

Ron looked appalled. “I’m not doing that!”

“I’ll do it with you,” said Draco quickly. “If you do it for five seconds alone, I’ll join in.”

“So will I,” said Hermione.

“Me too,” said Ginny.

“And me,” said Luna.

Ron seemed momentarily tempted, then shook his head hard. “No. I’m not going to. It can just stay the way it is. Everything is fine.”

Everyone else rolled their eyes.

That night, at Animagus practice, neither Neville or Ron got anywhere with trying to transfigure their heads. After Ron’s third major mistake, Remus called halt on both of them. “Do you boys have something on your minds?” he asked. “I don’t care what it is. But do you?”

Both of them grudgingly nodded yes.

“I thought so.” Remus pointed at the door. “Out. I’m not taking the chance that whatever’s bothering you will create a problem I can’t fix in time. You’ll have plenty of time to get your heads on straight, too, because this is likely our last meeting until the hearing’s over, and it starts tomorrow.”

“But I want to finish!” protested Ron. “And I’m so close!”

“Me too!” Neville looked distraught. “I’m almost done with my incantation, I’d just need the potion!”

“You need to finish your last transfiguration. And for that, you need clear minds. Which neither of you has tonight, and you’re unlikely to have by the time we’re done here. So off you go.”

Casting each other looks of commiseration, the boys dawdled across the classroom, pausing every now and again to look hopefully over their shoulders. Remus made it a point to be showing Ginny a different way to hold her wand or correcting Luna's pronunciation every time they looked.

I know you want what I'm teaching, and you're both very close, but holding onto anger, especially anger with no good reason for it, will ruin your magic, and your lives too. The sooner you learn that, the better.

They were actually at the door when Neville turned and ran back into the room, skidding to his knees beside Meghan. "Are you really just friends with that boy?" he demanded.

"Yes, of course," Meghan said scornfully. "He's too young to think about anything else than that. Besides, I think he might fancy Natalie someday. She already fancies him a little bit."

"And you don't—I mean—is there anyone else you..." Neville fell silent, a listening silence, though no words were being spoken. Remus risked a quick glance behind him to see the brown-haired boy's eyes fixed raptly on Meghan's hands, which were moving with practiced care. Draco caught Remus' eye and winked at him.

Turning his head away from Neville and Meghan brought Remus into line to see Ron, who was watching them unabashedly, and scowling, but not as if he were angry with them... more as if he were wrestling with a decision, Remus thought...

"I think I can do it right now," Neville announced, standing up. "May I try again?"

"If you like."

Neville touched his wand to his own head. "*Spiro et spirabo,*" he said carefully. "*Non saucius ero, et dicebo et cogitabo. Caput mea immutabit in capitem simii argentei cuius non comparet.*" As he spoke the last word, he twirled the wand around his head three times, then rapped it sharply once on his crown. "Ow," he said ruefully.

"Did it work?" Meghan whispered.

With an odd wavering and rippling, Neville's head changed shape, shrinking a little, jaw lengthening, features moving. He sprouted a crop of silvery fur, and his eyes turned black. From the neck up, he was a demiguise.

Remus quickly drew his own wand and cast the necessary diagnostic spell, but his eyes had told him already what the spell merely confirmed. "It worked perfectly," he said. "Congratulations, Neville. We'll find a way to get you home long enough to take that potion very soon."

The demiguise grinned triumphantly and vanished its head in celebration as the rest of the Pride cheered.

“Mr. Moony?”

“Yes, Ron?” Everyone else was packing up to leave, flush with Neville’s total victory and Draco’s and Luna’s partial successes, but Ron was lingering in the classroom.

“I know you’re going to be very busy these next few weeks—months, even—but... maybe, could you find a little time to come and see me do the final transfiguration?”

Remus regarded him. “This means a lot to you, doesn’t it.”

“Yes, sir. I want to...” Ron broke off.

Remus set down his bag and shut the door behind Meghan with his wand. “Go ahead,” he said quietly.

“I want to show I can keep up,” Ron said. “I want to show I can do it just as well as they can. Even if I can’t—third is still better than I’ve ever been before. I don’t want to be just another person in a crowd, and if I wait, everyone else will catch me up and we’ll all finish together. I mean, we always knew Hermione would be first, and it’s not a big surprise that Harry was second, but I want to be third. And I’m done with my incantation, all the way done. If I’d finished my transfigurations tonight, I’d be ready.”

“Well...” Remus tapped Danger’s mind and asked her to ask the other two Pack-adults a question. “There’s always tomorrow. Do you think you’ll have your problem off your mind by then?”

“I know I will.” Ron lifted his head. “I’m going to do something about it.”

“In that case,” said Remus as Danger gave him an answer, “there will certainly be someone here tomorrow night. Maybe not me, but one of us will be here. If you’re ready, then so will we be.”

Ron’s face lit up. “That’s—thank you!”

“You’re quite welcome. You’d better hurry back to the Tower, though, before Filch or Professor Snape comes along.”

“Yes, sir. Have a good night, Mr. Moony.”

“You too, Ron.” He watched the boy leave. **So what do you think he’s going to do tomorrow?**

Probably apologize to Harry. But I don’t see why he couldn’t have done it tonight.

Nor do I. But he has his own mind, his own ways of thinking, and if we can’t bend a little to accommodate another, what good are we?

Oh, I can think of a few uses for you...

Harry was sitting in the courtyard during afternoon break, enjoying what sun there was and trying to ignore everyone staring at him, when he heard footsteps approaching him, and caught unease and determination on the wind in a scent he knew. He turned to look at Ron, who looked back at him with his jaw set.

“Stand up,” said Hermione behind him, startling him a little. “That’s right, up you come...”

“Right out here,” said Meghan, tugging at his hand and pulling him away from the wall he’d been sitting on. “That’s good.” She backed quickly away, leaving Harry facing Ron.

“Something for you?” Harry asked coolly.

Ron took a deep breath and jumped into the air. “Aaaggh!” he shouted as he came down. And jumped again. “Aaaggh!” And again. “Oooh! Ahhh! Hunh, hunh, hunh, hunh, baaahhhh!”

Draco darted out of nowhere and joined the insane dance, which had gathered everyone’s attention in the few seconds it had been going on. “Bawk, bawk, bawk, bawk,” he chanted, hopping around and flapping his arms like a chicken.

Harry couldn’t keep a straight face. *I don’t believe this.*

Hermione joined in, her choice of vocalization a high-pitched yowl. “Oww, oww, oww, oww, oww...”

Ginny’s yowls were similar, but a bit deeper. “Mowwr, mowwr, mowwr...” Harry found himself watching the arc of her red hair as it rose and fell in counterpoint with her jumps.

Luna made little noises like Ginny’s owl Pigwidgeon as her feet hit the ground. “Ooo, ooo, ooo, ooo...”

Neville and Meghan were jumping hand in hand, one up, the other down, yelping an insane duet. “Eee, ahh, eee, ahh, eee, ahh...”

Ron, still capering around and yelling, met Harry’s eyes and grinned at him bashfully, then brought his hands up to his face and stroked them down both cheeks.

Harry surrendered to his rising laughter, nodding frantically even as he laughed, and then turning the laughter into his own noises as he, too, began to jump up and down, joining in the dance rather than being the one danced around. And other people were beginning to join in, he noticed—Seamus and Dean were bouncing with them, as were a few small Hufflepuff girls, a Ravenclaw or two—

And then suddenly it seemed that most of the courtyard was doing the Trouble-Taking Dance, all jumping up and down and making a variety of odd noises, most of them by now related to laughter in some way, as it all struck everyone as so very funny. A few people were up on the low walls of the courtyard, jumping on them. Harry thought that looked like a good idea, and bounced his way over to join them.

And from that vantage point, he saw the one thing that could make this day even better.

He waved his arms frantically to get people's attention and beckoned for silence, and for them to keep jumping, pointing in the direction of the person he'd seen. The word spread quickly, so that when Professor Snape rounded the corner of the outdoor passageway, he was confronted with a courtyard full of students all leaping up and down in complete silence except for the sound of their feet and the occasional stifled snigger.

It was easy to hear the bell ring from inside the castle, with no one talking or making a sound. And it seemed the most natural thing in the world to keep jumping as they collected their books and possessions and streamed back into the castle, hopping and bouncing past Professor Snape in silence and attempting valiantly not to laugh at his expression of total and complete bewilderment.

It had almost been worth fighting with Ron, Harry thought, to be able to make up like this.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 37: Bodyguards and Badges (Year 4)

Chapter 37: Bodyguards and Badges

Remus sat in the waiting room, contemplating his thumbs. He'd tried reading, but his nerves were too edgy. He rather envied Danger, who had her knitting to keep her hands occupied, and Scribner, who was reviewing the facts of their case one more time.

I swear they're delaying on purpose...

No, I can't go into this assuming they're prejudiced. They might not be. Then I'll just look stupid. Assume neutrality, but be prepared for anything.

His capricious mind chose this phrase as a reason to present him with a replay of the nightmare he'd had last night, which had brought him wide awake at three AM, panting. Danger had, naturally, awakened as well, but curiously, she hadn't been privy to it, so he'd had to tell her about it.

And it was bizarre. I was hovering over a mountaintop, watching Bellatrix Lestrange dueling with Sirius. She managed to work him around to a point where he had a long drop behind him, then made him dodge a Killing Curse and duck right into something else, I didn't even see what, but the point is that it knocked him backwards...

And then Aletha climbed up there, just in time to hear Bellatrix laughing and gloating. She didn't say anything, just walked up to Bellatrix, looked at her for a moment, then shoved her off the cliff too. She watched her fall, then turned around and started climbing back down. So strange...

The dream had been so real that it had given him a wrench to see Sirius alive at the breakfast table in the morning, and Aletha laughing at some joke he'd cracked, calling him names and kissing the back of his head as she passed.

She seems – she is – so happy and calm. But by the same token, she could do some pretty awful things without turning a hair... some part of me had no trouble believing she would kill Sirius' murderer...

The door into the hearing room opened. "Mr. Lupin?" said the young wizard on the other side.

"Yes?"

"They're ready for you."

"Thank you." Remus waited for Danger to finish tucking away her knitting, then offered her his arm.

"Nervous?" Scribner asked them quietly.

“Oh, not at all,” Danger said airily. “I always look green in the mornings, it’s my nervous digestion, don’t mind it in the least.”

Remus found himself able to smile a little at her outrageousness. “A bit,” he admitted for himself.

“Don’t be. We have an excellent case, and justice inclines to our side.”

“Be still, my heart,” Danger said. “A lawyer who believes in justice.”

“Say rather that I hope for it, Mrs. Lupin.” Scribner inclined his head to her. “Shall we?”

“After you,” Remus said.

Lawyer, client, and client’s wife entered the hearing room.

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“Well?” was Aletha’s first remark when Remus and Danger appeared in the living room that evening.

Remus shrugged.

“How informative.”

“Don’t know what we can tell you,” said Danger, sitting down. “There’s a panel of three judges...”

“There’s something you can tell me right there.”

“I would sing my song without a burden,” said Danger irritably.

“Snappy and quoting Shakespeare. You must have had quite a day. Come to Mama Letha, now.” Aletha wiggled her fingers suggestively.

“Are you trying to lure my wife away from me with base and unnatural practices?” Remus inquired from the couch.

“Yes, of course I am. Come on, Danger, you’re bound to be tense after that.”

“Remus probably needs it more than I do...”

Remus lifted a hand, and a curtain of fire descended behind Danger and nudged her forward. She bared her teeth at him, then walked very deliberately across the room and sat down on a footstool in front of Aletha’s chair. Within a few moments, she had her eyes closed and was moaning quietly as Aletha massaged her shoulders.

“If I promise to do you next, can I get some kind of coherent account of your day?” Aletha asked

Remus over Danger's head.

"There really isn't much to tell, Letha. It was mostly opening statements – the WFS officer saying that they're just following the law, Scribner saying that the law's outdated, and a third party, an old friend of yours, direct from the Minister of Magic himself. Do you remember a Madam Dolores Umbridge?"

"Umm." Aletha shut her eyes in thought. "Small dumpy woman. Looks like a toad. Tried to tell me there couldn't have been a dementor in the London Den the day I stopped one from Kissing Sirius. And didn't she also try to throw a tomato at him the day of his trial?"

"That's the one. If you'll believe it, she was wearing exactly the same lime-green cardigan today that she was when I set it on fire back in 1990."

Aletha laughed aloud. "So what was she doing there?"

"Supposedly, she's there as an observer. In reality, I think she's trying to swing the decision against us. When she took the floor, she stayed as far from our table as was humanly possible, and said several things that were just this side of insulting."

"Who's insulting?" Sirius asked, having Apparated in just in time to hear this word.

Remus recapped his day. Sirius grimaced. "More bad news, Moony. Word in the cubicles is that there's new legislation in the works that will make it illegal for employers to hire 'dangerous' types. And guess what types are in the small print as dangerous."

"What else is new," said Remus.

"Whenever this law comes up, Umbridge's name is attached to it."

"I wasn't actually asking, but thank you for telling me." Remus sighed, leaning back into the couch. "So we're fighting not one, but two enemies."

"Three," said Danger, opening her eyes.

"Three?" Sirius asked, sitting down in his armchair.

"Scribner was able to give us a rundown on the judges, and one of them is publicly and fervently anti-anything-unhuman."

"But we only need a two-thirds decision," Remus said. "It's the other two we have to convince."

"Well, here's hoping." Aletha nudged Danger in the small of the back and beckoned Remus over. "May the Pack's days of separation be few and soon ended."

"Amen," said Sirius heartily.

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The next morning dawned overcast and cool. The Pack-adults awoke slowly, easing into wakefulness. Aletha went downstairs first, to check on the potion in her cauldron – the boiling times were a little off from what she was used to, both because she was using the powdered dragon’s teeth and because she had two portions there instead of one. After she had checked the potion’s consistency, she walked around her cauldron and peered out the small window of the room to see if there was frost on the ground.

She yelled in shock and dived to the floor, yanking out her wand just in time to shield her cauldron from flying glass as a rock crashed through the window. One or two shards of glass hit her, but a quick “*Evanesco!*” removed them.

Footsteps pounded on the stairs. “Stay where you are!” Aletha shouted. “I’m fine, just stay where you are!”

“What do you mean, stay?” demanded Sirius. “What was that? Did you drop something?”

“Why are there people all around the Den?” asked Danger’s voice from farther away.

“I don’t know,” said Aletha, crossing her fingers. She’d been able to see that two of the people outside the window were carrying signs, and that the wording on them was anything but complimentary.

“I do,” said Remus in disgust.

Aletha sighed. She’d been hoping he wouldn’t notice. *I should have known better. If it’s to do with us possibly getting hurt, he notices everything.*

“They’ve got signs,” Sirius said, his voice absent as he tried to read the lettering through the window. “‘Leave Our Children Alone’? ‘You Have No Rights’? Oh, for Merlin’s sake...”

“Sirius, no,” Aletha tried to say, but she was too late. The front door creaked open.

A chorus of angry yells and the sounds of debris hitting a Shield Spell. “All right, clear out!” Sirius bellowed. “All of you, off our land before I arrest you!”

“Our land? You one of them too?” shouted a man’s voice.

“You filthy turncoat!” screamed a woman. “How do you know you won’t wake up to find your children slaughtered some morning?”

“Is that a threat?” Sirius shot back.

Somewhat subdued mumbling, but no clear answer.

“For the second time, this is private property. Get off our land. You have three minutes. Anyone

I find here after that, I'll arrest. Tell your friends out back so they don't end up doing penal servitude."

Grumbling noises, cut off by the closing door.

Aletha wanted to bang her head against the floor, but it was littered with broken glass. She repaired the window with her wand, then performed the necessary operation. *Why do people have to be so stupid?*

"Letha, will you Unbreak the back windows?" Sirius called from the front of the house. "Danger, Moony, can you get the ones upstairs?"

"Already on it," Danger called back.

"Will do," Aletha answered. She cast the first spell from where she was, then stood up to check on the potion (unaltered) and the people outside (dispersing, but not before one middle-aged wizard caught sight of her and mouthed something Aletha wasn't sure she'd seen correctly, and didn't want to). She watched them around the corner, stepped into the music room to cast Unbreakable Charms on the back windows, then hurried back up the stairs, catching the side windows as she went.

Sirius passed her on the way. "I'm calling the Ministry," he said after their quick kiss. "They're not getting away with this."

In his bedroom, Remus was standing beside a window. Aletha crossed to him and stood beside him, looking out at the demonstrators lining the road. "They can't stay there," she said with carefully firm certainty. "Sirius is calling in the MLE's right now. They'll have to prove they're no threat to secrecy or disperse."

Remus leaned on the windowsill. "They'll find some way to stay," he said quietly. "I'm sure of it. Muggle-repelling charms on the perimeters of our land, where we can't control it. Maybe spells on the signs to make them seem to be about something else. They'll find a way."

"Don't let them get to you. They're bigoted fools with nothing better to do."

"I'd just feel so much better if I were sure they're wrong."

"They're wrong," said Aletha baldly, surprising a chuckle out of Remus. "Who do you think knows you better, that bunch of Fwooper-bait or your own sister?"

Remus turned to her with a shadow of his usual smile. "I'm proud to have a sister like you," he said. "Though I could wish you didn't have to be associated with me publicly."

"You could. I couldn't."

"But it's bound to hurt your image..."

Aletha suggested an unpleasant destination for her image and anyone who cared about it. Remus cracked another smile. “You have some very deeply rooted insecurities, Remus Lupin, if you think we’re going to give you up on account of *image*,” she wound up.

“Yes, do remember who you’re talking to,” said Danger, coming into the room. “This is the woman who was willing to look like an unwed mother for four years.”

“Not that there’s much stigma attached to that anymore, but point taken,” Remus acknowledged. “I do seem to have a built-in ‘curl up and hide’ mode, don’t I?”

“As long as you’re not seriously considering giving up the custody suit, you can curl up and hide all you want on your off hours,” said Aletha. “We’ll even help you.” She frowned. “How did those goons get onto our property, anyway? What happened to the wards?”

“Let’s see,” said Remus, tapping his wand three times against the wall. A colored picture appeared in front of him, and he sighed. “We’ve let our own spells deteriorate,” he said. “Carelessness, mostly. And the blood wards are quiescent right now because Draco isn’t here.”

“Well, putting our own spells back up can be our first step,” said Danger. “And wouldn’t it be interesting if we found evidence that some of these... protestors helped along the deterioration?”

“More than interesting,” said Aletha, finding a grin coming to her face. “That’s actionable.”

“It counts as breaking and entering,” Remus finished. “A warded boundary is considered the same as a locked door.” He peered out the window again. “Not that I want to see any of them go to Azkaban, but having them barred from coming here again might be nice.”

“I’ll run down and remind Sirius,” said Aletha, already on her way to the door. “And we should probably alert Albus. The cubs might get fallout.”

“Oh, please,” said Danger scornfully. “As if Albus Dumbledore would allow anyone like this within a mile of the school.”

“He had to allow the dementors last year,” Remus pointed out. “His jurisdiction ends at the school gates.”

“His official jurisdiction,” said Danger, her voice growing quieter to Aletha’s ears as Aletha got farther away. “They’re bound to beef up security if he thinks it’s needed..”

If Remus replied, it was lost to Aletha. She took the stairs two at a time, caught Sirius just before he pulled his head out of the fire and told him about the wards, then went into the kitchen to start breakfast. Danger might be the best cook in the family, but Aletha’d picked up enough to keep herself from starving. And there was only so much harm she could do boiling a kettle and putting bread in the toaster, which was in mezzo-soprano mode this morning. “*Voi, che sapete*” from *The Marriage of Figaro* filled the air; Aletha hummed along, and felt her mood brightening.

Then she looked at the newspaper and scowled.

So this is why everyone came running.

The headline, in larger type than Aletha had seen used since Sirius' trial, read:

WEREWOLF SEEKS CUSTODY OF 14-YR-OLD GIRL

"I've raised her since she was small," says Remus Lupin

WFS officer: Werewolves "constitutionally unable to parent"

Aletha was vaguely aware that the toaster had switched over to an aria from *Carmen* .

We must thank Arthur. A singing, psychic toaster.

Her first instinct was to hide the newspaper, destroy it, anything so that Remus didn't have to read this headline, and the article accompanying it, which was surely just as bad. Then she realized how silly that was.

In the first place, he's an adult, fully able to handle himself. In the second, he knows what people are saying and will say about him. And in the third, he'll hear this from the officer in court today anyway, so why should I bother to try to hide it from him?

She flattened the edge of the paper where she'd crumpled it in her hand, laid it on the table facing towards the door, and busied herself with making tea.

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The Pride was greeted in the Great Hall that morning with stares and whispers. This was nothing new to them, but the particular target was.

"Psst, Granger-Lupin!" hissed a fifth year Slytherin girl as they passed that House table. "How's your daddy? Owwooooo! Owwooooo!"

Hermione stopped dead and faced the Slytherin, whose friends all began to snicker. "Were you trying to howl?" she asked.

The girl nodded, grinning meanly, her friends now convulsed with giggles.

"Because it sounded more like a demented chipmunk, if you ask me," Hermione continued blithely.

The giggles stopped short.

Hermione tipped her head back and let loose with her best impression of Moony and Padfoot outside after dark on the full moon. All conversation in the Hall stopped dead as everyone turned to look.

“That is a howl,” Hermione said, bringing her head down and staring the Slytherin girl in the face. “And I can teach you how to do it, if you ask me very nicely. Otherwise, save your breath.”

“Awesome!” Ron hissed as Hermione rejoined the Pride.

“That was great, Neenie,” Draco said.

“Thanks.” Hermione pressed her hands against the sides of her face, trying to rub her blush away. “I just hope I don’t regret it.”

“Don’t worry, you will,” said Harry as they arrived at the Gryffindor table.

“You’re so supportive,” Hermione said huffily.

“No, just realistic.”

Fred leaned down the table as the Pride found seats. “You’re in the newspaper,” he said to Hermione

“No, really? I never would have guessed.” Hermione took the *Daily Prophet* Fred held out to her and skimmed the front page. As she read, her lips pulled back from her teeth, and she began to breathe more heavily. Harry frowned. He knew the danger signals from of old, but he was too far away to do anything about it. Draco was on the other side of the table, Ron probably wouldn’t move fast enough, Luna was oblivious, and Neville and Meghan were still wrapped up in each other since they’d made up their fight...

He caught Ginny’s eye. *Get the paper*, he mouthed, indicating Hermione.

Ginny nodded and with one swift pull, had the newspaper away from her friend’s hands. Hermione bristled and hissed in indignation. Ron caught her wrist as she made to swipe at Ginny’s cheek. “Snape’s looking,” he said in her ear.

Hermione subsided. Harry signed thanks to Ginny, while reconsidering his original thoughts on Ron’s relative swiftness. *He’s not nearly as dense as he used to be.*

“Should I read this aloud?” Ginny asked the Pride at large, shaking the paper. “Just so we all know what’s in it?”

“Sure,” said Draco, mashing some scrambled eggs under his fork. “Let’s hear all the lies at once.”

“There ought to be laws against people like Rita Skeeter,” said Hermione, still glaring at the newspaper. “There really should be. In the Muggle world, you can’t print things that aren’t true about people.”

“They’re not printing anything that’s not true here,” Ginny pointed out. “Just people’s opinions. You can’t really say an opinion’s true or not true.”

“Moony isn’t dangerous! And he is so ‘fit to parent’!”

“We know that, Hermione,” said Neville. “But the rest of the world doesn’t. Isn’t that why he’s doing this in court, so that the rest of the world will know it?”

“Isn’t that why you changed your name?” Meghan added.

Hermione nodded. “Read, please,” she said to Ginny. “Let’s just hear it all at once and get it over with.”

The article was exactly like the headline – true in essence, but written in such a way that no one could fail to be sure that the rapacious werewolf Remus Lupin had designs on the purity and innocence of the poor child he’d corrupted by raising her.

“How can she be so pure and innocent if he’s corrupted her already?” Luna wanted to know.

Lupin’s wife Danger, the sister and guardian of the child in question, was prone to impulsive decisions – witness her quick marriage to Lupin, only two weeks after meeting him – and subject to a debilitating Muggle disease which, it was heavily hinted, might have damaged her brain.

“How did she know about that?” Harry asked in surprise when Ginny reached this part of the article. “We haven’t told anyone about that. Except you lot, and you wouldn’t blab.”

“Haven’t,” said Ron, as Neville and Luna both shook their heads. “You didn’t have a Healer in or anything?”

“No, Letha did it. She ran all the tests and everything...”

“But she did them at the Bonham School,” said Hermione, bisecting a fried egg with a vicious smack of her fork. “And she did research on lupus, too. Those results are probably either publicly available or someone sufficiently sneaky could get to them.”

“But there wouldn’t be any names attached,” Draco objected.

“She took a lucky guess,” Hermione said. “Or worked it out somehow. There would be age and sex and things like that on the test sheets.”

“And it doesn’t really matter how she got it,” Harry finished. “The point is, she’s wrong. And we have to work on proving it.”

“How?” asked Ginny, folding the newspaper.

Draco made a face. “We’ll have to do something that we hate above all else,” he said.

“Something that strikes contrary to the very centers of our beings. We’ll have to act... *normal*.”

“You made a good start with your howl,” said Luna to Hermione.

Hermione smiled wanly. “Thanks, Luna.”

Harry sat up a bit straighter. “Yeah, thanks, Luna,” he echoed. “You’re right. You’re more right than I think you know.”

“What do you mean?” Ron asked.

“Why should we have to act normal?” Harry asked Draco. “For that matter, what is normal? To Muggles, nothing we do here is normal. Same for pureblood snobs. Why should we try to fit someone else’s definition of normal?”

“Because if you don’t, someone else is going to think you’re messed up and decide against you?” Neville suggested.

Harry shook his head. “I’m not talking about doing things that make people think we’re messed up,” he said. “We’re not about to savage the first years and writing our homework in their blood.”

Draco snapped his fingers. “Nuts, there go my plans for tonight.” Luna looked sidelong at him. “Kidding,” he hastily added. “Kidding.”

“But you’re not everybody else,” Ron said, nodding. “There’s no reason you should stop doing the stuff that makes you you, just because somebody thinks it’s weird.”

“We’ll stand by you,” Ginny added. “Pride together.”

“Pride forever,” everyone chorused quietly.

Eight hands were piled in the center of the table.

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The Pack-adults had the satisfaction of seeing several of the protestors, including the one who had thrown the rock that broke the window in the potions room, arrested by MLE personnel before breakfast was over. At the same time, a visitor arrived.

“Wotcher, everyone,” said Tonks, spinning around a chair and straddling it. “Any chance of a brew?”

“Let me bring the kettle up,” said Danger, setting said object on the stove. “How are you?”

Tonks shrugged. “Life as usual. Charlie says hello. Sirius, is there any way to tell if a man’s ever going to pop the question?”

“Oh, give him some time,” said Sirius, rebutting the last bite of his toast. “You’ve only been together what, three years?”

“Five,” Tonks corrected. “Officially. We were friends a long time before that, but we started

dating sixth year. And we've been living together for a year now, and still nothing."

"He's probably working up his courage," said Aletha. "He may be afraid you'll brain him if he dares to ask."

"I'll brain him if he keeps on *not* asking! Just because I have a job doesn't mean I don't want to get married!"

"He might have been waiting for you to finish your training," Remus suggested. "And for his job to stabilize from that move last year. There could be lots of reasons. But I'm positive it's not because he doesn't care about you, or want you to stay with him. Maybe he's just shy."

"Shy? How do you get shy out of dragon-keeper? Thanks," Tonks added as Danger handed her a mug.

"Shy around people," Remus said promptly. "Animals don't talk back. As long as you're neither food nor threat, you can handle them. People have all kinds of strange and incomprehensible motivations."

"Women more than most," Sirius added, and automatically blocked Aletha's smack to his ear, taking advantage of the wrist hold to pull her over to him and kiss her temple. "For blokes, at least."

Tonks blew on her tea. "So what you're saying is, don't give up?"

"Right," said Danger. "You could always start dropping hints. Go visit his parents and comment how they seem so happy together. Come visit us, we'd love to have you."

"Not to mention it'd be handy to have an extra Auror and a dragon-keeper on the premises in case any of these idiots get ideas again," added Sirius.

"But wouldn't I get docked at the Office for it? They always tell us not to get chummy with the folks we're bodyguarding..."

"That's if you don't know them already," said Remus. "Right, Sirius?"

"Well..." Sirius frowned. "I'm not sure, actually. I'll check regs today about that. But if you're allowed, sure, come on over."

"And bring your clueless man," Aletha added. "He won't stay clueless for long, if we have anything to do with it."

Tonks grinned and took a large swig of tea. "Thanks. Ready to go, bodyguardee?"

Remus chuckled. "When you are, bodyguarder."

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Predictably enough, the rest of the school was rather chilly towards Harry and the Pride over the next few weeks. Harry had expected the Hufflepuffs to be unhappy about his entry into the tournament, since if he hadn't entered Cedric would have been Hogwarts' only chance for glory, and he'd known the Slytherins would be nasty to him, because that was the natural order of things. He'd hoped for some level of sympathy from the Ravenclaws, but most of them seemed to think that he'd done it himself. He couldn't really blame them. Why, why had he ever been so stupid as to put that slip of parchment into the Goblet?

The news in the papers and the Pack-parents' letters was almost uniformly bad as well. The *Prophet* was following Moony's quest for Hermione's custody obsessively, with every article bylined by Rita Skeeter. "We're looking for an unbiased reporter the *Prophet* will print," one of Danger's letters read about a week and a half after the hearing had started. "And Gerald's printing an interview with Remus in the December *Quibbler*. Every little bit helps."

"I'm glad we can do something for your family," said Luna to Draco as they lounged in the common room. "Do you think Mr. Moony will end up winning?"

"I sure hope so," said Draco. "It never feels right without him there, you know? Like a piece of us is missing."

"Because it is," said Harry. "Ron." He tossed a ball of parchment into the air.

"*Accio!*" Ron said, aiming his wand at the parchment. It zoomed toward him, but lost momentum halfway there and landed on the carpet near his chair.

"*Accio,*" said Hermione, whisking the ball out of Ron's grasp as he bent to pick it up. "You have to say it like you really want it."

"Fine." Ron pointed his wand at Hermione's hand, now closed around the ball of parchment. "*Accio.*"

Ginny leaned over to Harry under cover of the laughter. "I guess he really wants her," she whispered.

"I guess so." Harry got up to help Hermione disentangle herself from a very embarrassed Ron. "Got a lot of power behind there, haven't you?" he added, shoving Ron's shoulder. "How's your incantation coming?"

Ron shrugged. "I have it done, but I still don't feel like I'm ready." He had successfully transformed his head for Letha the night after his Trouble-Taking Dance in the courtyard, and with special permission from Professor McGonagall, he and Neville had gone to the Marauders' Den one evening about a week later to drink their Animagus potion. "It's not like there's a big rush, is there?"

"Didn't you want to beat me?" Neville inquired from his place on the rug.

“Not like that’s hard,” Ron said airily.

Neville took careful aim. “*Accio Boll-*”

“I mean, why would I want to do that?” Ron gabbled out quickly.

The Pride only managed to settle down when a testy Katie Bell told them all to shut up laughing or she’d hex them to Antarctica.

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“I hate Potions, yes I do,” Harry sang under his breath as the Gryffindors headed down the stairs toward the dungeons. “I hate Potions, how about you?”

“Oh, come on, Harry,” said Draco. “Hate Snape, hate the Slytherins, but don’t hate Potions.”

“Why hate the Slytherins?” Colleen Lamb asked unexpectedly. “Some of them are all right.”

“Yeah, the dead ones,” said Ron, earning a laugh.

Colleen blushed but didn’t retreat into the background as she usually did. “Some of the living one are all right too,” she said quietly. “You just have to give them a chance.”

“Ooh, Colleen likes a Slytherin,” said Parvati Patil, giggling.

“Is he the one who writes you blank letters?” asked Lavender Brown.

“Blank letters?” asked Hermione.

“She gets letters at breakfast sometimes,” said Lavender. “But there’s nothing written on them. Just her name on the envelope.”

“And she always looks happy when she gets them,” Parvati added. “And runs out of the Hall without eating anything else.”

Colleen was leaning forward now, her hair covering her face, a face that was almost certainly brick red.

“Stop teasing her,” said Neville sharply. “What are you doing reading her letters anyway?”

“Yeah, that sounds more Slytherin than Gryffindor to me,” Draco said, staring at the girls balefully.

“They’re probably just jealous because they’re not pretty enough to have someone write them letters,” said Hermione. “Ignore them, Colleen.”

“Sorry,” said Lavender, looking contrite. “Didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

Colleen mumbled something which could have been an acceptance of the apology just as the Gryffindors rounded the final corner. Harry stopped short, nearly causing a ten-student pile-up. The Slytherins were all wearing some sort of badge on their robes.

“I don’t like this,” Hermione whispered.

“Ah, Potter,” said Nott, coming forward. “Like our new fashion?” He stuck out his skinny chest so that Harry could read the red, glowing words on his badge:

Support CEDRIC DIGGORY –

The REAL Hogwarts Champion

“And that’s not all,” Nott went on. He tapped the badge once with his finger, and bright green letters replaced the red:

POTTER STINKS

Harry felt one surge of heat rise in his chest. He forced it down. Nott wasn’t worth it.

“Really funny, Dora,” Draco drawled. “Just hilarious.”

Nott’s face went the color of his original message. He gave a choked little laugh. “Playing with my name, Black, you’re so cute. How’s your werewolf daddy? Have they decided to put him down yet?”

“Shut your dirty mouth,” Ron said angrily.

“Oh, look, a talking weasel!” Nott spun to face Ron. “It must have escaped from Hagrid – everything does sooner or later. How long do you think it’ll be before one of those Scoot things blows up a Beauxbatons horse and gets that lout sacked for good?”

“Nott, you’re so funny, I forgot to laugh,” said Hermione coldly.

“And the lady of the hour! Granger-Lupin!” Harry wondered if he was the only one hearing a small note of hysteria in Nott’s voice. Himself, he was rather enjoying watching the Slytherin try to deal with half the Pride at once. “Care for one of my little gems?” He stuck a hand into his pocket and pulled out a badge. “I’ve got plenty. But don’t touch my hand now, Mudblood slime’s bad for potions.”

Ron grabbed Harry’s arm and Neville Draco’s as they both pulled their wands.

“You keep odd company for someone who doesn’t like Muggleborns,” said Hermione, looking pointedly at Dursley. “Sure, I’ll take one.” She snatched the badge from Nott’s hand and drew her own wand. Nott backed away three paces swiftly, but Hermione wasn’t pointing the wand at him. Rather, she had it aimed at the badge, and she was muttering under her breath...

“There,” she said, tapping the badge twice and putting her wand away. “Much better.”

The badge she affixed to her robes bore the legend:

Support Them BOTH –

CEDRIC DIGGORY and HARRY POTTER

Smiling widely, Hermione pressed her badge to show the alternate message.

Either Way, It’s a HOGWARTS VICTORY

The Gryffindors broke into applause.

“Very impressive, Miss Granger-Lupin,” said Snape from behind her, making her jump. “Ten points from Gryffindor for magic in the hallways, and a further five for inappropriate additions to your uniform. And confiscation of the object.” He held out his hand.

“But they’re all wearing them!” Ron objected, pointing at the Slytherins, whose badges now all sported the red message.

Harry frowned. Ron wasn’t quite right. All the girls were wearing Nott’s badges, and Nott and his hangers-on had them, but Blaise Zabini, loitering at the back of the group, had nothing more than his Slytherin crest on his robes...

“Five more points from Gryffindor for cheek,” said Snape to Ron. “And detention.”

Ron looked about ready to explode.

“Unless you’d prefer it be fifteen points and two detentions,” Snape added idly.

“Calm down,” Harry hissed, grabbing Ron’s arm. Ron shook him off, but didn’t say anything else to Snape, instead stalking inside the dungeon and smashing his bag down onto a table.

“I hate him,” he muttered, sticking his hand inside his bag. “Greasy stinking git – yow!”

“Well, what do you expect, if you’re going to slam it around like that?” asked Hermione, coming to sit with them, as did Draco. “Here, let me see it.” She inspected the small cut on his finger. “*Ferula.*” A small bandage appeared around the finger. “There, now you won’t get poison in it.”

“Thanks, Hermione.” Ron glared once more at Snape, and at Nott, smirking at their table from across the dungeon, *POTTER STINKS* glowing green on his robes. “Bastard.”

“Just ignore him,” Hermione said loftily, unpacking her own bag.

The boys exchanged a three-way “girls-just-don’t-understand” look.

“Antidote recipes on the tables in front of you,” said Snape. “You will each brew your own, and at the end of class, someone will be selected from among you to test them...”

His eyes rested on Harry, who stared right back at him. *Go on, poison me. See how long you’ll last if I get hurt.* What his Pride didn’t do, the Pack would.

Someone knocked on the dungeon door.

“Come!” Snape called over the noise of twenty fires being lighted under twenty cauldrons.

Colin Creevey slipped into the room, winking very hard at Harry as he came.

“What’s with him?” Draco asked, watching the third year’s progress to the front of the room.

Harry shrugged. “Dunno. Does this say pinch or pint?”

“Honestly, Harry,” said Hermione. “You can’t read your own handwriting?”

“I was in a hurry.” Harry’s own name caught his ear. He turned to the front of the classroom.

“Potter cannot come at the moment,” Snape was telling Colin. “He has work to complete.”

“But sir, Mr. Bagman said all the champions, sir,” Colin said anxiously. “It’s something special about the tournament, he has to come right away, there’s a photographer...”

“Quick, poison me,” Harry begged his friends. “Before Snape says yes.”

“Very well,” said Snape icily. “Leave your belongings, Potter, you’ll be coming back to test your antidote.”

“Sir, Professor Dumbledore said to bring his things along...” Colin squeaked.

It was almost worth having to sit for photographs to see the look on Snape’s face, Harry thought.

“Out of my sight,” he ordered. “Both of you.” His gesture took in Harry as well as Colin.

Harry swept his ingredients back into his bag, muttered a quick goodbye to the Pride, and followed Colin out of the dungeon. “Are you sure there’s a photographer there, Colin?” he asked when the door was shut.

“Oh, yeah, he’s there! And a lady who says she’s a reporter, with blonde hair and big glasses and long red fingernails, and she wants to interview you!”

Harry groaned. That sounded like Moony’s description of Rita Skeeter. “More publicity,” he said. “That’s all we need.”

“Oh – oh, I almost forgot!” Colin stopped short. “She said she wanted to talk to Hermione too! I should go back and get her!”

“Colin, no, you really shouldn’t—” But Colin wasn’t listening, and Harry’s grab fell on empty air. He debated with himself for one second, then tucked his bag behind a handy statue and followed Colin back towards the dungeon.

“Harry!”

Harry jumped and spun. Ludo Bagman was striding toward him. “Going the wrong way, aren’t you? The wand weighing’s up along here, come on, I’ll show you where...”

“But sir, I have to—”

“Now, now, no buts, it’s your duty as a champion.” Bagman took Harry’s arm in a firm grip. Harry considered breaking loose, but he didn’t want to hurt Bagman. “Where’s your bag? That boy really seems to have mangled the message, he did seem a bit overeager, didn’t you understand it?”

“No, I understood. It’s over there. What’s wand weighing?” Harry retrieved his bag and followed Bagman up the stairs.

“Well, your wand will need to be checked, you know, make sure it’s up to snuff, no little hitches or glitches. Wouldn’t do to have a champion’s wand quit halfway through a task!” Bagman chuckled. “No, no, better to have an expert look it over first thing and be sure. And then a little photo shoot, champions and judges, and maybe a few questions from Rita Skeeter, she’s a reporter from the *Prophet* .”

“I know,” said Harry, biting down on an angrier response. “She’s written loads about... Mr. Lupin’s custody case.”

“That’s right, you’re rather involved with that, aren’t you?” Bagman moved to one side of the corridor, waving Harry up beside him. “Know anything... interesting about it?”

“Interesting how?” Harry asked blankly.

“Ah, never mind, never mind. Here we are. Here he is, champion number four!” Bagman announced, throwing the door open.

Harry walked into the room, trying to think about ice creams and other cold things to counteract the heat he could feel emanating from his face. Viktor Krum was standing off to one side, staring out a window. Cedric and Fleur looked around as he came in. Cedric nodded to him, but Fleur ignored him, returning to her conversation with the Hufflepuff.

“And here’s the lady herself, Harry – Rita Skeeter, Harry Potter, though I’m sure you know his name already,” Bagman said, ushering forward a witch in magenta robes.

“Indeed I do, Ludo,” said Rita Skeeter, her eyes fixed on Harry’s forehead. “Indeed I do.”

Harry waited a moment, then, when the eyes behind the jeweled spectacles showed no sign of

descending, he rose quickly onto his tiptoes, locking eyes with her and startling her into a small step backwards. “Madam Skeeter,” he said politely, holding out his hand to her.

Rita Skeeter stared at him for one moment longer, then smiled brightly and shook his hand. Harry kept a vague smile plastered on his face as her nails scratched him. “You won’t object, Ludo, if I monopolize Harry for a few moments?” she asked. “A bit of human interest, you know, youngest Triwizard champion and all that?”

“Not at all, not at all,” said Bagman, waving expansively. “As long as Harry doesn’t mind, of course.”

“No thank you,” said Harry quickly, yanking his arm out of the way just in time as Rita Skeeter released his hand and made a grab. “I don’t like interviews.”

He might as well have said that he was a Death Eater. Both adults goggled at him. Rita Skeeter recovered first. “Well, it’s sometimes our duty to do things we don’t like,” she said, smiling at him sweetly. “And I’m sure you won’t disappoint all my dear readers, who are simply dying to know how you came up with your brilliant idea of lofting your name into the Goblet of Fire...”

She made another grab, but Harry sidestepped. “I’d really rather not,” he said, moving out of range. “I just don’t like being interviewed...”

The door opened again. Rita Skeeter turned toward it and pounced. “Miss Granger-Lupin! How are you, it’s so nice to meet you, I’ve heard so much about you – Rita Skeeter, *Daily Prophet*, you don’t mind if I ask you a few questions, do you? Lovely...”

“Yes, I do mind!” said Hermione loudly, digging in her heels as Rita started to drag her toward the door. She brought her other hand around and squeezed at a certain place on Rita’s wrist. Rita yelped and let go.

Harry looked over his shoulder. Cedric and Fleur had stopped talking to watch, Cedric in surprise and Fleur in distaste. Krum had turned around as well, and he looked vaguely impressed.

“I’m not interested in your questions,” Hermione said, hands on her hips. “Did you have me called out of class just for this? I’m missing a very important lesson on poison antidotes right now! If one of my friends gets poisoned and I can’t save him, it will be your fault! I’m going back to class right now – no, I won’t answer even one little tiny question!” This was in response to a murmur from Rita. “If you want to talk to me, try some time when I’m not doing something more important.” She turned on her heel and marched out.

Cedric raised an eyebrow at Harry and waved him closer. “Is she always like this?” he asked. Fleur leaned in, and Krum drew nearer to hear.

“Pretty much,” said Harry. “She doesn’t like being crossed, and she really doesn’t want to answer questions about... you know.”

“I ‘ave seen somezing about zis ‘Ermione in ze newspaper,” said Fleur. “Somezing about a werewolf...”

“I don’t much want to talk about it either,” said Harry bluntly.

Fleur looked puzzled. “Is it somezing to do wiz you also, ‘Arry?”

“They haff grown up together,” said Krum from behind them all. “The verevolf is a father to both of them.”

“But *c’est impossible!*” Fleur objected.

“Well, not their blood father,” said Cedric hastily. “But – I’m sorry, Harry, but I don’t quite understand how it happened myself.”

Harry took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, and stopped in surprise at what his nose told him. There was no hint of contempt in Cedric’s scent, only honest curiosity. Fleur seemed a little patronizing and Krum frankly skeptical of anyone else’s abilities, but Cedric, at least, deserved a straight answer.

“Mr. Lupin’s my godfather’s best friend,” he said, drawing on the all-but-forgotten words they’d all learned shortly after Padfoot’s trial, when they thought people would never have done asking them how their Pack had started. “Because Padfoot – my godfather, that is, Sirius Black – couldn’t live on his own after he broke out of Azkaban, he shared a house with Mr. Lupin and his wife. So I grew up thinking about both of them like fathers. And Hermione is Mrs. Lupin’s little sister, so she was there too.”

Too late, he noticed Rita Skeeter standing nearby, an acid-green quill darting over parchment that she’d apparently charmed to float in midair. *Well, it’s not like that’s anything new. She’ll already have heard the same from Moony and Danger.*

“Zees Sirius Black,” said Fleur. “E ‘as a wife also? And a daughter?”

Harry nodded. “Her name’s Meghan, she’s a first year.” This, too, was safe territory. He decided, a little maliciously, to give Rita something she might not know. “Mr. and Mrs. Lupin are actually her godparents.”

Fleur emitted a little squeak. Krum’s eyebrows slanted up sharply in the middle. Cedric looked shocked. “Her godparents? I... er... why?”

“Do you have godparents?” Harry countered.

“Of course, my dad’s best friend and his wife...”

“That’s why.”

The door opened to admit Professor Dumbledore and Mr. Ollivander from the wand shop in

Diagon Alley before Cedric could say anything else.

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After the photographer was finally done, Harry left the room, evading one more try by Rita Skeeter, and hurried down to dinner. Most of the Pride was sitting in a little knot at the end of the Gryffindor table, all laughing.

“What’d I miss?” Harry asked, sliding into a seat across from Ron and Summoning a plate of chops.

“After you left, Snape decided on poisoning Ron,” Draco began. “And making him take his own antidote.”

Ron looked rather green, Harry noticed, and his plate was significantly more empty than usual. But he seemed to be in good spirits. “Everyone’s gotta do it sometimes,” he said, taking a careful sip of pumpkin juice. “And it was worth it to see Snape’s face.”

“And the best part is, he couldn’t even give you detention for it,” Neville added. “Because it was part of a class exercise – what were you going to say, no?”

“I wish I could have seen it,” Ginny said wistfully.

“What *happened?*” Harry demanded.

“He threw up on Snape’s shoes,” said Hermione. “And robes. And cauldron.”

Harry laughed aloud. “Hat trick!”

Ron grinned, but it turned into a grimace. “He finally let me have some of Hermione’s after I got the cauldron,” he said. “But I think it didn’t take right because I waited so long. I still don’t feel right.”

“Well, here comes someone who can help with that,” said Luna, looking towards the doors. Meghan came running in, hand in hand with Natalie, waving to Graham Pritchard as they passed the Slytherin table.

“Snape,” said Meghan as soon as she got a look at Ron.

Everyone nodded.

“What did Professor Snape do?” Natalie asked, sitting down beyond Neville.

“He had a lesson on poisons and antidotes,” said Draco. “And to make us test our antidotes, he had Ron take poison.”

Natalie’s eyes widened.

“Don’t worry,” Harry said quickly. “By the time you’re a fourth year, you’ll know loads of antidotes. And even if you don’t, Meghan can help you out.”

After examining Ron, Meghan had summoned a house-elf and asked it to bring her a particular potion. Now she poured a dose into an empty goblet and handed it to Ron. “Drink it fast,” she instructed. “You’ll think you were poisoned again, but then it’s over.”

Ron stared at the thick khaki liquid, then pinched his nose and drank it off. Immediately he was seized with a fit of coughing, but Harry could see his complexion changing back from house-elf to human coloration. “Better,” he choked out. “Actually... better.”

“Good,” said Meghan. “Now eat something.”

The rest of the Pride cracked up. “Unnecessary words if there ever were some,” said Draco.

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“What’s in the mail this morning?” Remus said cheerily, watching Aletha opening envelopes.

“Three hate, two fan, and a Howler.” Aletha slid the fan letters across the table to Remus. “Say when.”

“Pull,” said Remus, aiming his forefinger into the air.

Aletha tossed the Howler high. Remus shot it down with a burst of flame. A garbled yell came from it, then nothing.

“My turn,” said Danger, grinning. “Pull.”

The three hate letters disposed of, Remus read portions of one fan letter aloud. It was a florid piece written by a witch from the east, who thought Remus was just too utterly adorable.

“Although I know you are devoted to your dear Danger,” Remus read, “I wonder if you possibly have a brother...”

“Well, sure, but I’m taken too,” said Sirius, addressing the letter. “And Moony got all the adorableness in the family.”

“Yes, it skipped a generation over here,” Aletha added.

“Ouch.”

“What? You said so yourself.”

“Yes, but I did that in the expectation that you would tell me it wasn’t true and pet and coddle me, and now I am left alone in the cruel, cold world.” Sirius placed his hands over his heart and tilted his head back, attempting to look pitiful.

Aletha flicked his ear. “Stop that or you eat your next meal on the floor.”

Danger turned to Remus as the squabble between the Blacks took on a predictable shape. **What about the other letter?** she asked silently.

Remus pulled the dingy parchment out of his pocket and handed it to Danger. She unfolded it.

Dear Mr. Lupin,

My name is Brian and I am nineteen years old. I was bitten by a werewolf two years ago. Since then I have not been able to find work, my girlfriend has left me, and even much of my family refuses to see me. I pay my mother and father as much as I can for room and board, and the damage I do at full moons, but I fear that someday soon it will not be enough, and I will break out and do the worst.

I had considered a final solution to my problems, but your story has inspired me to keep trying. Maybe someday I will meet you at a party somewhere, and we can introduce our wives and children to each other, and talk about work and the bad old days. What you are doing has made me think it might not be impossible. Thank you for giving me hope again.

Sincerely yours,

Brian Li

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Danger went out to Diagon Alley that afternoon, alone. “Trust me, I can handle myself,” she told Tonks when the young Auror tried to accompany her. “Nobody will mess with me more than once. Besides, I’m going to have my hood up, and I’m not going into any stores. How could anyone possibly recognize me?”

Tonks’ answer came back to Danger now as she hurried through the crowd.

“They have ways...”

Someone was stalking her.

The wind was in her face, so she couldn’t tell anything about him from that, and besides, with all these people around, one scent would probably be lost. He, like she, wore a hooded cloak, but his silhouette was bulkier than that of anyone she knew. And Remus was busy with Charles Scribner, working out a delicate argument for the next morning, he couldn’t help her now...

I’ll try to handle it for another minute myself, she decided. *Then I yell for help.*

She slowed, parallel to the mouth of a small side alley, and risked another glance over her shoulder. Her black shadow was gone.

There, see? I was making it up, thinking he was following me, when he was just headed somewhere in a hurry...

Movement beside her caught her eye. Someone in a hooded, black cloak was making straight for her, coming in from the side. Danger darted down the alley, her heart pounding. *I'll find a place he can't follow – I'll Apparate away –*

The alley was a dead end. And now, in this small, enclosed environment, a scent reached her nose. Blood, old, caked blood, and unwashed man, and unwashed something else...

“Well, well, little Lupin did fairly well for himself, it seems,” said a gravelly, gloating voice. A hand with yellowed, claw-like fingernails pulled down the hood of the cloak, revealing a scarred face covered with matted hair. Stained, fang-like teeth were bared in a predatory smile. “Let me introduce myself. Fenrir Greyback, very much at your service.”

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 38: The First Tasks (Year 4)

Chapter 38: The First Tasks

Danger shrank against the brick wall. Time had slowed, had stopped. She'd be trapped here forever. "Go away," she heard a shaking voice say. It took her a moment to recognize it as her own.

Greyback leered at her. "Frightened, princess? Scared of little old me? Or is it just that you don't like the truth? This is what we all become, beautiful. Even the ones who fight it, even the ones who try, this is what they come to in the end. I thought I'd get a jump on the process."

I can't go for my wand, he'll see that. Her thoughts tumbled over one another, scurrying forward just long enough to be seen before scrambling for cover again. *I could flame him but then he'll know, he'll know I can do it, I can't give it away like that – unless I kill him – but I can't do that, I don't want to kill again, please, not again –*

Danger, what in God's name –

Danger laughed aloud, explosively. "Well, I'm stupid," she said aloud, opening her senses to Remus. "How could I not have realized that?"

Vaguely, she heard her love curse, felt him move quickly, decisively. He was coming. She had only to hold Greyback off for a few moments. Her fear was gone, though as she looked at him it started to return. "What do you want?" she said, for lack of a better question to ask to keep her enemy busy.

"Nothing like what you're thinking." Greyback chuckled, scratching his chin. "Though I can't say I'd mind, if we met again sometime." His eyes sized her up like a piece of meat in a store window, and seemed to decide it wasn't quite what he wanted today. "But not now. I have a message for Lupin – I would have owled him, but it was just my good luck to see you here today. I thought you could pass it along to him..."

A small explosion of air hit woman and werewolf in the face. "Why don't you tell it to me, then?" Remus said quietly from his place between the two, his wand already out.

Greyback didn't move a step. "Yeah, why don't I? Nice to see you again, Lupin. I was just telling your... *wife* ... how well you've done for yourself."

"Yes, I'd say I have done well," Remus said neutrally. **You're all right?**

Just fine – he hasn't touched me. He stinks, though.

"Getting into court now, I see. What's the matter, tired of this one already?" Greyback looked over Remus' shoulder at Danger. "Need a fresh one, younger, more limber? You must like the

look, or maybe the taste, if you're taking it from the same stock."

Danger trembled with Remus' rage, but Remus himself sounded perfectly calm. "One more insult, Fenrir, and you won't have to wait for the full moon to taste blood."

"Widdle puppy's growing fangs!" Greyback simpered. "I'm so proud!"

"Say what you came to say and leave."

Greyback drew back a pace, his eyebrows up. "Do you give me orders?" he asked in a tone Danger recognized. It was the one Remus used when Harry or Draco was getting out of hand.

"I don't obey you, Fenrir. I'm not of your pack."

"Liar," Greyback growled, moving forward again, two steps, three, staring down at Remus. "I made you what you are. You're mine."

Without taking his eyes from Greyback's, Remus scuffed a line on the ground with his foot. "Come and take me, then."

The silence lasted four heartbeats, six, eight. Neither man moved, neither spoke.

Well, this could get boring, Remus sent to Danger.

Greyback flinched ever so slightly.

What was that?

I don't know...

Another flinch.

Danger grinned to herself. **On second thought, maybe I do. May I come in?**

Of course, but why?

Watch this. Danger poured herself into Remus, leaving her own body behind as fully as she dared, and through his eyes watched the other werewolf step back, unnerved, then break off eye contact and turn away, shaking his head.

Danger leapt back to her own body so that Remus wouldn't have to smile with her, although she knew he would anyway. **The eyes have it,** she said.

That's truly awful. Excuse me while I take advantage of this.

Sure.

"You had a message for me?" Remus said aloud as Greyback turned to face him again.

“Yeah.” Greyback’s teeth were bared now, and Danger gulped as she caught his scent. He was mad and no doubt about it. *Pissing him off might not have been the wisest of moves...*

“Give it and get out.”

“Go right ahead with your little lawsuit,” Greyback said harshly. “You might even win it – I hope you do. Parental rights for werewolves’d be a fine thing for me, wouldn’t it?” He grinned savagely at them.

Danger felt sick. *God, I never thought of that... if this opens the door for people like him...*

“Suitability will still be an issue,” said Remus calmly. “And not even the best-bribed judge in the world would find you suitable to take care of a child.”

“Not even one with... problems of his own? Or her?” Greyback sniffed the air deliberately. “Sisters look that much alike, stands to reason they must smell alike too. I don’t think I’d have any problems finding a little girl who smelled like that...”

Danger shrieked angrily. Remus snapped up his left arm to hold her back, and, at the same time, thrust out his wand silently, and unnecessarily, Danger knew. Greyback had time for one startled yelp, and then flame was all around him.

Remus, no—! Visions of Quirrell rose in her mind.

Just watch.

The flames died. Greyback still stood in front of them, still alive, still with all his parts attached. Danger could see them perfectly clearly, since the werewolf no longer had any clothes. Or any hair. And every visible square inch of his skin was a bright, painful-looking red.

Like a terrible sunburn, Remus said smugly. **All over him, all at once.**

If you make me laugh in front of him, I shall do the same to you. Danger locked her lips into neutral and gave Greyback exactly the same kind of sizing-up look he had given her earlier, with the same rather contemptuous, “Not today, thanks,” eyebrow flicker at the end of it.

Do you think you can Apparate home?

Just stay with me.

Every step of the way, my love. “Stay away from my Pack,” Remus said to Greyback, tucking his wand away. “Unless you want more of this.”

Greyback hadn’t moved a muscle since the fire had vanished, except for his face – that was curling into an expression of purest hatred and anger, the sort Danger hadn’t been sure human beings could feel –

Of course, he's not precisely human. By his own choice, but still...

She rose on her toes and shut her eyes, fighting to banish the hatred and focus on her destination. *There's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home*, she chanted in her head.

You forgot to click your heels, Remus said as everything hurtled away from her and invisible bonds pressed in all around.

Danger administered a mental smack.

xXxXx

Meghan and Natalie, smiling proudly, presented Hermione with a large stack of *Support Cedric Diggory* badges at lunch on Monday. By dinnertime, Hermione had made the necessary improvements to all of them, and Draco had thought to check with Professor McGonagall and get her permission to make “additions” to their uniform. The next morning, most of the Gryffindors took a badge on their way out the portrait hole, and by lunchtime, they were starting to pop up on robes with blue or yellow embroidery as well.

Harry was on his way back to the common room that night when he heard someone call his name. “Harry! Got a second?”

He turned and gulped – Cho Chang was running down the hall towards him.

“Er, hi,” he said, hoping his face wasn’t as red as he was afraid it was. “Hi, Cho.”

Cho smiled at him. “I like your badge,” she said.

“Thanks – Hermione made it for me. Out of the ones the Slytherins were wearing. You remember.”

Cho nodded. “I thought they were mean,” she said. “Is it true what I heard? You really didn’t put your name on that parchment I saw you put in the Goblet?”

Harry felt curiously light-headed – was it possible Cho, of all people, might believe the truth? “Yeah. It’s true. I just...” *...wanted to impress you.* “...wanted to show I could do it. I was sure that parchment was blank – and I was right, there wasn’t any name on it, someone else must have put my name in, because it was a different slip, a different shape and all, it looked like it was cut off an essay...” He stopped talking, suddenly acutely aware that he’d been babbling.

Cho didn’t seem to notice. “Cut off an essay? Do you think a teacher did it, then? Maybe Snape?”

Harry blinked. That was a possibility that hadn’t occurred to him. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I mean, I know he doesn’t like me, but I didn’t think he’d do something like that.”

“Well, maybe he wouldn’t. He probably wouldn’t. It’s horrible of me to bring it up, forget it, but I couldn’t help but remember how Professor Lupin hit him last year, and the stories about him and Professor Black when they were at school, and I knew he didn’t like you...” Cho shook her head slightly. “Listen, what I wanted to ask you was, do you have an extra one of those badges? I think I’d like one.”

Harry closed his mouth quickly. “Sure,” he said, plunging his hand into his pocket and praying that he really did have one. “Sure.” A pin pierced his finger, but he felt no pain, only relief that he had what Cho wanted. “Here you go.” He pulled his hand out again and handed her the badge.

“Oh, you’re hurt!”

“I’ll be fine.” It was true. He knew his finger had to be throbbing, he’d stuck it badly, but he couldn’t feel a thing. “Thanks. For wearing it, I mean.”

“It’s only true.” Cho pinned the badge to her robes. “Thanks, Harry. I’ve got to go, but thanks awfully. I’ll see you later. I hope.”

“You too,” said Harry hastily as she hurried away.

Once she was gone, he jumped into the air and spun around, punching jubilantly upwards, then looked both ways, turned into Wolf, and chased his tail until he was too dizzy to stand. It matched his inner feelings perfectly.

Shetalkedtomeshetalkedtomeshetalkedtomeshetalkedtome ...

xXxXx

On Wednesday, Harry and Hermione got identical notes in the mail.

Dear Mr. Potter/Miss Granger-Lupin, the notes read,

I’m terribly sorry for the bad impression I seem to have made starting out with you. I really don’t know what can have happened, and hope we can somehow straighten things out. As I understand it, you have some free time on Friday afternoon, between your lessons and dinner. Perhaps could we schedule a meeting somewhere? I know you’re not allowed to leave Hogwarts grounds, but nothing says I can’t come in. Perhaps a nice private chat in a classroom? Please respond promptly.

Yours,

Rita Skeeter

Harry handed Ron his note to read, with Ginny and Neville peering over his shoulders. Draco got Hermione’s and held it where Meghan and Luna could see. “Well?” said Harry when the last head came up.

“Well what?” said Ron.

“Should we go?” said Hermione.

“No,” said Draco, Neville, and Luna all at the same time.

“Why not?” said Harry, pointing at Draco.

“Because she’s trying to get you to say something she can blow out of proportion and make you look bad in the newspaper.”

“Neville?”

“Same answer.”

“Luna?”

“Because obviously, she wants to get you to drink some Preterro Potion, so you’ll think she’s your best friend and tell her everything she wants to hear. And then all your hair will fall out and you’ll have overactive tear ducts.”

“Obviously,” said Harry. “Who’s got a quill?”

The notes went back to Rita Skeeter with three words on each of them, not counting the signatures.

No thank you.

xXxXx

On Thursday, the *Daily Prophet* ran an article on the Triwizard Tournament. Or at least, the headline was about the Triwizard Tournament. The body of the story was about Harry Potter. It seemed that Rita Skeeter, if denied a personal interview, was not above talking to other people to get their opinions.

Harry refused comment on the subject of his parents, but a student close to him, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, “Oh, yeah, Potter cries for them sometimes at night. I used to hear him wailing all the time, calling their names and all. I don’t think he’s ever really got over that.”

All the Gryffindors swore they hadn’t said it, and no one could see how it could have been anyone else. “Of course, it could just have been someone *lying*,” suggested Draco. “Because I’ve never heard you cry for your parents at night, and I’m in a position to know.”

Colin Creevey timidly admitted talking with Rita, but denied telling her anything about crying – “but I did tell her you go around with Hermione all the time, because you do, and she was really interested in that... I hope you’re not mad... you’re mad, aren’t you? I’m sorry, Harry, I’m really sorry, I’m really, really...”

“It’s fine,” Harry said tiredly. “I’m not mad.”

Though I think I might go mad.

Because Rita had put her own interpretation on his going everywhere with Hermione.

Harry is seen everywhere with the lovely Hermione Granger-Lupin, whose name has been in the newspapers lately for reasons of her own. Perhaps these two famous, intelligent teens can find some measure of happiness together.

Harry had nearly chucked the paper across the Great Hall when he’d read this, and had to be forcibly restrained from sending his drink after it.

What part of “she’s my sister” does this woman not understand? he’d written home in a very angry letter that night.

An answer had come by return owl the next day.

Dear Harry,

Probably the part where there’s no blood between you. Don’t let it bother you too much – or, if it does, there’s a very simple way to stop the rumors. Find somebody else, go to a very public place, and snog her brains out. If you can get Hermione to watch and look disgusted but not angry, that’s always a plus.

Learned anything about the first task yet? I know you’re not supposed to know what it is, but rumors always get around schools like Hogwarts. If you do hear anything, let us know right away – it’s only your teachers you’re not allowed help from, remember.

How does meeting up in Hogsmeade next Saturday sound? Have a real Pack lunch, all eight of us, or all twelve if the rest of the Pride wants to come. Chin up, Wolf – easier to bite ‘em on the arse that way!

Padfoot

Harry kept this letter in his pocket all through the next week.

xXxXx

Remus stepped out of the Three Broomsticks and looked around nostalgically. *How many times have I been here now? And yet it’s always the same, and always a little different...*

His expeditions here as a Hogwarts student, with the other Marauders, presented themselves for review first. Then came a few visits after he’d left Hogwarts, usually with one or another of his friends, sometimes on Order business but sometimes just for fun. After that came years of visits in disguise, calling himself John White, always having that little worry in the back of his head – what if he was recognized, or Harry or Draco was?

The day the Pack had celebrated being Animagi together was followed by the night Harry'd gone into the Chamber, which was quickly succeeded by a year's worth of visits with the Pride in tow, culminating in the night...

Well, why ruin a perfectly good day thinking about that?

"Professor Lupin!"

Remus turned to greet the three excited Ravenclaws who were running up the street towards him, and the four Hufflepuffs who came after them, and the seven or eight Gryffindors who came after *them...*

"I see student telepathy is working again," Aletha remarked as she came out of the pub.

"Professor Freeman-Black!" cried one of the Ravenclaws, and the crowd split neatly down the middle.

Aletha shrugged one shoulder, but Remus could see she was pleased to be remembered. Sirius, who followed her out of the pub, was likewise mobbed, with the result that Madam Rosmerta came outside with a broom after a few minutes and shooed them all away from the entrance. "You're blocking traffic," she said, swatting at them. "Either come in or get out of the way."

I see our lot, Danger told Remus. Since she had been only an assistant teacher, and had taught an elective subject at that, she'd had only a few admirers to talk with. **They're hanging back at the end of the street.** She chuckled. **Wasn't Meghan indignant when she found out the same rules apply to her as to any other first year. No Hogsmeade until she's a third year.**

I wouldn't be so sure. Remus thanked another pair of students for their good wishes about Hermione's custody case. **Don't forget, this is a little girl who knows where all the secret passages are, and where Harry keeps his Invisibility Cloak.**

And that's assuming Harry didn't give it to her... Danger slipped down the street into scent range, and after a moment Remus felt her rich chortle at the back of his mind. **Sure enough, one invisible Pearl. Should we bust her?**

We have no authority to do so. But I think we might drop a word in Minerva's ear...

Oh, and ruin her fun?

Remus sighed heavily, surprising the third year Hufflepuff he was talking to. "I'm sorry, please go on," he said to her quickly. "What did Professor Moody teach you yesterday?"

"Why don't you ask me that?" growled a voice.

Remus looked up. "Auror Moody," he said, bowing slightly.

"Lupin," Moody acknowledged, shaking Remus' hand. "Care for a drink? Black, Freeman-Black,

any takers?”

“Past three years’ worth of Defense teachers,” said Sirius, holding the door of the Three Broomsticks open for Moody. “Sounds like fun.”

“What about the cubs?” Aletha asked Remus quietly.

“They’ve got something to do, and they’re not hungry yet. They’ll meet us here in an hour or so.”

“All eight of them, right?”

“How did you…”

“Motherly intuition. That and Neville standing with his hand resting on nothing at exactly the level of Meghan’s shoulder. We’ll have to tell him not to do that.”

“So whose’s the Cloak?” Moody asked when they’d ordered drinks.

“Beg pardon?” said Remus.

Moody fixed him with a mismatched stare. “Your lot was down at the end of the street, with yours, Black, under an Invisibility Cloak. Is it that one Potter used to play around with?”

“That’s it,” said Sirius. “Dumbledore had it when James died, and returned it to us when Harry was ten. He’s had it ever since.”

“Uses it to get around at night?”

“I don’t think we should answer that question,” said Aletha. “Besides being detrimental to one of our own children, it will show us up as either very incapable or willfully ignorant parents.”

Moody chuckled. “Doubt it. At least the ignorance. Glad to see you’re back in school, Freeman-Black. Always thought it was a waste when you quit.”

Aletha’s lips thinned, but she nodded. “Thank you.”

“And you,” Moody said, turning to Danger. “Barely know you, but you seem like a nice girl. How d’you put up with them?”

Danger smiled. “I’m glad I seem like a nice girl,” she said. “The first time we met, you thought I might be capable of murder.”

Moody frowned, then shrugged. “Anyone’s capable – I mean, any half-decent witch or wizard could make a curse take to that extent – but not everyone has the real desire. And of course, there’s other ways of killing than curses.” He fumbled at his hip for his flask, swearing under his breath.

“You’re sitting on it, Moody,” said Remus, twitching an eyebrow at Sirius and Aletha. “Move.”

Aletha covered a smile while Sirius snorted a little. Moody just grunted and pulled the flask around to his hip again. “Thanks,” he said, taking a swig from it.

That’s odd, Remus said as Moody reholstered the flask.

What is?

Oh, never mind. I’m probably making it up.

Their drinks arrived, and the conversation turned to different teaching methods and materials covered with the various classes. But Remus couldn’t forget.

When Danger mentioned the first time they met, he looked confused for a second. And he didn’t seem to think what I said was funny – it’s like he doesn’t remember that night at all, and you’d think he would...

Moody pulled out his flask again and took another swig, blotting a few drops that ran out the corner of his scarred mouth with the hand closest to Remus. On a whim, Remus took a deep breath through his nose, and let it out in a cough of distaste.

Blah. Smells like overcooked cabbage. What in the world is he drinking?

Draco’s comments on Moody came back to him now – it did seem awfully odd for an ex-Auror, especially one so very against the Dark Arts, to try to make a fourteen-year-old behave as if he had the Dark Mark, no matter who his father had been. Moody had always been thorough, but this seemed a little much.

Across the table, Danger scribbled something on a napkin and slid it over to Aletha. Aletha glanced it over, then took the offered quill and wrote an answer.

Are you as worried as I am about this one? Danger said sharply, shooting Remus a view of the napkin.

Remus took a hasty gulp of his drink to mask his nervous swallow.

What potions smell like cabbage? Danger had written in her semi-tidy scrawl.

And underneath, in Aletha’s neat copperplate, was the answer.

Yes, he said, still looking at it through Danger’s eyes. **Yes, I think I am very worried about this one.**

Should we take it to Albus?

Not right now – he’s got the first task to manage on Tuesday, he’s probably out of his mind,

or as close as he ever gets...

The same thought occurred to both of them. **Moody won't be in his office on Tuesday**, Danger said thoughtfully. **He'll be down watching the first task...**

Remus looked into his glass, watching his reflection change as ripples ran across the surface of the hot wine within. **You'll cover for me?**

What kind of question is that?

xXxXx

“Well, people like Moony, at any rate,” Harry said as the Pride browsed around in Honeydukes. “Wish they liked me that well. Maybe I should become a werewolf.”

“Please don't,” said Ginny. “You're hard enough to manage as it is.”

“Why, thank you.” Harry bowed.

“Besides, you don't have to be a werewolf to win,” Luna added. “You're a wolf, and a werewolf's cub. That's enough. Or it will be, with the blood.”

“Um. Right.” Harry pulled another bar of chocolate from the shelf. “There, I think that'll do me. I'll wait outside.”

After paying up, he slipped out the door into the brisk November wind and people-watched. There were still quite a few students sporting *Support Cedric Diggory* badges, but they were now matched, if not outnumbered, by those wearing *Support Them Both* badges. These latter gave Harry thumbs-up and friendly waves as they passed, which he returned, if somewhat half-heartedly.

He'd spent the past few weeks alternately fearing the first task and sure that he could handle it. As the time grew nearer, though, fear took up more time and surety less.

Cedric and Fleur and Krum have had so much more practice at this... they know so much more... and I don't even know what it is we have to face...

“You look worried,” said a small voice beside him.

Harry jumped and looked. There was nothing there. “Pearl, don't scare me like that,” he hissed out the corner of his mouth.

“Then don't be so scared to begin with. What's wrong?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you're getting all worked up over nothing. For all you know, it's a contest to see who can

kill a rabbit fastest, and you'd win that right away."

"Yeah, by doing something completely illegal!"

"Or maybe it's a running race, but in a place where no one can see you," Meghan continued.

"Then you'd win, because four feet are faster than two."

"Unless they're watching inside the lanes for interference. I would if it was me."

"Or maybe it's like Luna said over the summer. A swimsuit contest." Meghan giggled. "I think you should win that."

Harry lost all control and stared at her, or at the place where she should have been. "A swimsuit contest? You think I'd win a swimsuit contest? Meghan, four of the judges are men! They're not interested in looking at other men in swimsuits! And even if they were, Krum and Cedric have me beat hands down – Krum plays international Quidditch, and Cedric probably works out every day – and just think about Fleur! She's part veela, she'd win the instant she smiled at the judges!"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Maybe nothing. You're crazy."

"I know. But do you feel better?"

Harry sighed, then laughed. "Yes. Yes, I do actually feel better."

"Well, tha's good," said a large voice, "but I'd worry abou' yeh a little if yer talkin' ter thin air like that."

"Hagrid!" squealed Meghan, then gasped contritely and squeaked, "Sorry."

"Under that Cloak o' yers, is she?" said Hagrid, looking at Harry sternly. "Yeh didn' ough'ter encourage her ter sneak aroun' like this, Harry. But tha's not what I'm here ter tell yeh..." He glanced around to make sure they were alone, then leaned in. "Meet me at midnight," he whispered. "Out at me cabin. With that." He pointed to where Meghan was.

"All right," said Harry in bafflement. "How do you like that?" he asked Meghan as Hagrid strode away. "First he tells me I shouldn't encourage you to sneak around, then he sets an appointment that means I *have* to sneak."

"He's just Hagrid," Meghan said. "He's allowed to be different."

"Let's go have lunch," said Draco, coming out of the store. "Being in there was making my mouth water so much I'm surprised I didn't float away."

"Everyone else?" Harry asked.

“They’re coming.”

“Four, five,” Harry muttered as Ron and Ginny came out the door, comparing Bertie Bott’s. “Six, seven.” Luna, sucking a Peppermint Toad, and Hermione, looking disapproving. “And eight.” Neville, who held out a small bag which promptly disappeared. “All right, let’s go.”

xXxXx

It was nearly one o’clock in the morning before the Pride heard the expected bounce in the red bedroom. Draco sat up from where he’d been trying to do some homework. *The pendants got hot about fifteen minutes ago, and they’re still not all the way cool yet...*

“About time,” said Ron as the door opened. “So what was it?”

“You look terrible,” said Hermione, getting up and hurrying over to Harry. “Sit down – what’s wrong?”

Harry collapsed into the chair Hermione Summoned for him. “I know what the first task is,” he said in a monotone. “It’s dragons.”

Meghan gasped. “What?”

“Dragons?” Draco said over her in shock.

“You’re kidding,” Ron blurted.

“How do you know?” asked Ginny.

“Hagrid showed me. Took me around into the Forest where they’re keeping them. Charlie’s there, Ron, that’s what he meant about being here – he’s part of the team taking care of them.” Harry stared at the wall. “There’s four, one for each of us, we have to get past them or knock them out or do something to them, I don’t know what. They’re all mothers, though, loads of eggs, Charlie told Hagrid he had them counted... I don’t know what I’m going to do. How do you face a girl dragon?”

“You could always dress up as a donkey and make her fall in love with you,” said Luna.

Everyone looked at her for a few seconds. Then Harry began to laugh. It sounded a little strained, but it was a laugh, and the rest of the Pride joined in quickly. Before too long, they were all flat on the floor, catching their breaths and trying not to look each other in the eye, since they knew if they did they’d just set each other off again.

God, she’s great. Dress up as a donkey and make her fall in love with him. Wonder where she got that?

“Thanks, Luna,” said Harry when everyone had settled down a bit. “I’ll have to remember that. Anyone else?”

“What can you do that a dragon can’t do?” Neville suggested.

“Scream,” said Harry. “Get toasted by fire.”

“How about the other way around?” said Ginny. “What can a dragon do that you can’t?”

“Brew potions,” said Draco.

Harry made a face at him. “Thanks. You want to face the thing?”

“No thanks. And you’re not allowed to take anything into the ring but your wand?”

“Nope.” Harry sighed, staring at the ceiling. “What can a dragon do that I can’t do. Kill me?”

“Breathe fire and fly,” said Meghan. “That’s about all dragons do, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Ron seemed distracted by something. “Fly,” he muttered. “Fly... that’s it!”

“What’s it?” Hermione asked.

“Fly! Harry, you can fly!”

Harry started flapping his arms. “Not working so well,” he said. “You’re the bird Animagus, not me.”

Ron threw a pillow at him. “On your Firebolt, moron!”

“Yeah, and where am I going to get it?” Harry threw the pillow back.

“Oh.” Ron looked disappointed. “Didn’t think of that.”

“But that’s the easy part,” said Draco as the answer came to him. “Come on, Harry, how do you get something that’s far away?” He picked up another pillow. “Get the pillow. Come on, get it.” He yelped and quickly dropped the pillow as Wolf launched himself at it. “Not like that!”

Harry turned back and spat out feathers. “Define your terms, then,” he said over the laughter.

Draco groaned and picked up the mutilated pillow, repairing it with his own wand, then walked a few paces away and faced his brother. “*With your wand*, get the pillow from me and take it to you.”

Harry drew his wand and pointed it toward Draco. “*Accio Pillow* .”

Draco lifted his hands in triumph as Harry caught the pillow in his left arm. “There. You see?”

“Yeah.” The fear was starting to lift from Harry’s eyes. “Yeah! I can – I can leave the window open, leave the Firebolt on my bed, and then I’ll just Summon it from the castle, and fly rings around the dragon! It can’t possibly move as fast as me – I can kick its spiky arse!”

“Yeah!” cheered the Pride.

“Let’s hear it for Harry!” shouted Neville. “Defeater of dragons! Hip hip—”

“Huzzah!” shouted the Pride.

“Hip hip—”

“Huzzah!”

“Hip hip—”

“Huzzah!”

After which, of course, they simply had to play pirates.

They were aided in this by the Hogwarts Den itself, which obligingly changed its main room into a very good mockup of a pirate ship, or at least a very comfortable one. Everything was cushioned, or soft, or smooth and silky...

Nearly an hour later, Draco nestled between two of the guns, arranging his back against the firm carpeted surface. He could see Hermione’s hair dangling down from the crow’s nest, Harry’s quiet snores were coming from the quarterdeck... Cap’n Neville was asleep at the wheel with Meghan curled next to him... Ginny seemed to be hugging the mainmast, and Ron was sprawled every which way on the deck...

He slid his hand under the gun and found another hand already searching for his. “Sweet dreams, matey,” he whispered.

“Arrrr,” he heard her answer sleepily.

xXxXx

“Hey, Diggory, who’s your girlfriend?” said Paul Hallman the next morning, poking Cedric in the ribs.

“Huh?” Cedric looked around. “What girlfriend?”

“Oh, come on, man, you’re telling me you got a Whisperer and it isn’t even from your girlfriend?”

“I got a Whisperer?” Cedric looked down at his plate. Sure enough, a sky-blue envelope lay upon it. He picked it up. “Um, Paul, I’m going to go see what this is. I’ll be back later.”

The handwriting on the outside of the Whisperer was rather spiky, with very tall capitals, Cedric noticed on the way to his common room. If he had to guess, he’d say it was a boy’s writing, rather than a girl’s.

But I don't swing that way.

Still, there were other reasons for sending Whisperers than love notes. Cedric tore the envelope open and held still as it fluttered up to the side of his head and fit itself carefully around his ear. Then it began to whisper – in a boy's voice.

“Cedric, this is Harry Potter.”

Cedric nearly stopped listening right then – what reason could Harry Potter have to send him a Whisperer? But there couldn't be any harm in hearing the message out, could there?

“I wanted to say thanks – I saw you wearing a *Support Them Both* badge yesterday – and I wanted to tell you something.” A long pause, then very fast, “The first task is dragons.”

Cedric froze. *But we're not supposed to know that...*

“I know we're not supposed to know that, but Madame Maxime's seen them and so has Karkaroff, and I don't think they're going to keep quiet about it. I didn't think it was fair for you to be the only one who didn't know. And I wanted to say, thanks for being so decent about this whole mess – I swear, I didn't put my name in that Goblet, and if this hadn't happened I'd be out there cheering for you on Tuesday. I'll still be cheering for you – I want Hogwarts to win, no matter what.” A soft laugh. “Though I'd rather not spend a week in hospital either. Good luck finding something to get past a dragon.”

The Whisperer drifted away from his ear, landed in his hand again, and disintegrated, trickling through his fingers as a shower of fine blue sand. Cedric closed his hand around the sand, feeling its slight weight in his palm.

“Wow,” he said quietly.

Would I have done that for him? Gone against the rules to make sure things were fair?

I don't know if I would or not...

xXxXx

“Harry, d'you reckon there really is anything to Divination?” Ron asked worriedly on Monday. “Because Trelawney keeps going on about how the angle of Neptune with respect to Mars means people who were born in July are going to die horrible messy deaths...”

“What am I going to do, get eaten by the Venomous Tentacula?” Neville inquired. “Ron, don't you know by now not to listen to that old fraud?”

“Easy for you to say – you weren't there when she pulled off a real one!”

“Would you both just shut up?” Harry said. “I'm trying to practice. All right. *Accio Trevor!*”

“Oy!” Neville intercepted his toad in midair. “Practice on something else!”

“Fine. *Accio Neville.*”

The results of this spell wouldn't have been nearly so funny if Neville hadn't been holding an open vial of ink in his other hand.

xXxXx

Remus, are you sure about this? Danger asked as the Pack-adults walked through the Hogwarts gates.

No. But I'm never going to have a better opportunity. Let me know how it goes.

I will. Harry's going to have your hide if he finds out.

And who's going to tell him?

True enough. “For the record,” Danger said, speeding up to match Sirius and Aletha's pace, “Remus was with us all the time.”

“Of course,” said Aletha. “Every minute.”

“Where else would he be?” Sirius asked.

A moving patch of scenery detached itself from the three and made its careful way towards the distant castle.

xXxXx

“Oooh, this isn't fair, why did Harry have to be last?” Hermione grumbled, watching Fleur Delacour leave the field with her golden egg and the dragon-keepers quickly move in to secure her sleeping Welsh Green. “It just makes us all more nervous...”

Ron paid no attention to this. Charlie was one of this group of dragon-keepers. *Come on, look up here,* he willed his brother. *Look up here...*

And like magic, Charlie turned his head and looked, and waved when he saw Ron and Ginny. *How's Harry?* he mouthed, drawing a lightning bolt on his forehead in case they didn't get the idea.

Both of them smiled broadly and gave Charlie two thumbs up. Harry, in fact, had been very pale all morning, and hadn't eaten much lunch, but had seemed ready to tackle his dragon when he'd left the castle with Professor McGonagall...

“Oh my God,” said Draco suddenly.

Ron turned. “What?”

“The window.”

“The window?” Then it hit him. “Harry never opened the window,” he said. “In our dorm. Did he?”

“No.”

“Oh no,” said Meghan. “And there isn’t time to go back and open it, is there?”

“Probably not,” said Neville, watching as the dragon-keepers brought in the snorting Chinese Fireball. “Depends on how long Krum takes... but someone’s got to try... who’s fastest?”

“Ron,” said Luna. “He’s faster than anyone, because he doesn’t have to run. I could do it too, but not yet.”

“What?” said Neville.

Hermione gasped. “Oh!”

“Yeah,” said Ron, a sick feeling creeping into his stomach. “Yeah.” In truth, he wasn’t sure he could fly. What if he botched the transformation? What if something went wrong and left him half-bird, half-human?

“You’d better hurry,” said Ginny as Krum entered the arena. “I don’t know how long we’ll have.”

“Good luck, hawk-man,” said Draco. “Get that window open for us.”

“Ron, you have to do this,” said Meghan, putting a hand on his arm. “You’re the only one who can.”

“And you can,” Luna added, putting her hand over Meghan’s. “You can do it.”

Ron looked around at all his friends, took one glance over his shoulder at Krum, then turned and ran for the steps.

I’m the only one. The only one who can. The only one. His footsteps echoed to that beat. *The only one.*

Once behind the stands, he ran a little ways along for good measure, to get away from the stairs. Then he pulled a grubby slip of parchment out of his pocket, took a deep breath, and started to recite.

“Pinnae mei capitisque alae russae sed corporis suffuscae sunt. Quiritatio mea hostes meos terrent et praedas meas exterrent. Cum supervolo, documines et spectacula video quae alii non vident. Inter alios et periculum advolo si debeo, sed non strigo petens praedae.”

The world became much bigger. Ron blinked his eyes. He could see everything! Absolutely everything – especially if it was moving! And he could hear just fine too. The shouts and cheers behind him were actually louder than he liked. “Quite some nerve Mr. Krum is showing there!” Bagman’s voice was roaring. “He may just be our quickest champion yet!”

Not much time, then. Ron waddled forward, letting out a low squawk of unhappiness at this form’s ungainly maneuvers on the ground, then spread his wings and beat them a few times timidly. *Um... up?*

Nothing happened, and he could hear the cheers getting louder behind him. *Up Sesame,* he tried. *Alakazam . Hocus pocus. Oh, dammit, just fly!*

He ran forward a few steps, swept his wings down and back, and just flew.

His body knew what to do, it seemed. All he had to do was steer. *To the castle,* he told himself, and felt his wings set on a current of warm air, which was rising and lifting him with it. He’d be level with Gryffindor Tower in no time – he was going to make it!

He let out a screech of joy and coasted forward to the next thermal.

xXxXx

This is too easy. There has to be a catch somewhere.

Remus had waited a good half-hour after everyone had left the castle, then started for Moody’s office. He’d been expecting a hard time getting in – certainly so paranoid a man would have his door not only locked, but booby-trapped? But the knob had turned under his hand and the door opened to him as if it were still his own office, with his and Danger’s quarters behind it.

Maybe Dumbledore forgot to remove my access after last year. Remus stepped inside and looked around, noticing the Secrecy Sensor, the deactivated Sneakoscope, the large mirror hanging on one wall...

Wait a second. Something’s not right there. He turned back to look at the mirror again.

That’s no ordinary mirror. That’s a Foe-Glass. With me in it. Which means...

He took another look around the office. *I don’t like this.*

xXxXx

Ron landed a bit awkwardly on the windowsill outside the fourth year boys’ dorm, then recalled that he couldn’t balance like this in human form.

How can I do it, then?

He flapped his wings hard, hovering just above the stone sill, then mentally muttered *Reditio mihi,*

and yelped as his knees hit the stone hard. Ignoring the pain, he drew his wand and pointed it at the window. *“Alohomora !”*

The window popped open – *and just in time!*

For Harry’s broom was rising from his bed, hesitating like a dog unsure if it hears its master’s voice –

Then it shot forward, and Ron realized too late that he was right in its path.

xXxXx

Remus jerked his head up, his heart pounding. *What was that?*

He placed a hand on his chest and strove for calm. *Nothing. It was nothing.*

But it had sounded horribly like a scream...

Who would be here to scream? You’re letting your nerves run away with you. Start looking. If you’re right, there’s bound to be evidence around here somewhere.

It took him only a moment to locate several bottles of a thick liquid which smelled revoltingly like overdone cabbage. And under the bottles...

Well, well. Remus lifted out an essay in a handwriting he knew well. An essay missing the name at the top.

This is ridiculous – why not just throw this in the fire? It’s evidence against him, whoever he is... but, of course, anyone who found this would already have found the Polyjuice, and he must have thought no one would ever do either...

Aletha had given him the rundown on Polyjuice Potion, so he knew what was needed to make it, and what to make it work. *He’d need something of Moody, some part of the man. And he’s obviously not up on quite everything Moody’s ever done. So that suggests...*

Remus’ eyes roamed to the trunk with the seven keyholes, sitting innocently under the window. He’d heard stories about a trunk like that from James and Sirius. Each keyhole led to a different compartment, with the seventh being the largest, because Moody never traveled without some way to lock up a prisoner should he take one...

Silently, Remus knelt by the side of the trunk and laid his wand against the first keyhole. The standard opening spell might work for the first one, even the first two, but after that he was going to have to get creative.

“Alohomora ,” he whispered, and the trunk sprang open for the first time.

xXxXx

It had been an interesting first task to be sure. The Diggory boy – pretty, but not much for brains – fair hand at Transfiguration, though. The Delacour girl – even prettier, but she seemed better equipped in the brain department – must have some real power behind that Trance Charm of hers. Krum, of course, not pretty and not too brainy, but well up in brawn – Conjunctivitis Curse, a classic. And now Potter. It was odd how the boy had come up with this idea all alone, without any of the hints he'd been prepared to drop...

But all to the better. Makes me less noticeable.

And did I or did I not see his best friend changing forms behind the stands? Didn't think Weasley had that much brains, to manage Animagus at his age. That one might be worth watching.

It was as Potter swooped and dived in the air that he felt the first tremblings of warning against his hip.

What in...

He pulled out the keys on their ring and looked at them. Back in September, when he'd first started this job, he'd charmed the keys to shake on their ring if anyone ever tried to break into the trunk, and they were more than just shaking now, they were dancing madly in his palm –

Dammit, at this rate they'll be into the thing before I can get back to the castle and stop them! Especially with this bloody leg! He snarled in silent frustration as the crowd gasped and shouted.

Only one thing to do, he decided. Get out before it's too late. I can't do anything if I get caught or killed, or Kissed...

He heaved himself out of his seat and started down the stairs, watching, out the back of his head, Potter flying circles above the dragon's head. *This is one thing I'm going to miss, this eye. Maybe I could find some way to keep it without losing one of mine...*

As he was crossing the lawn, he heard the crowd roar, and above it Bagman's voice, "Would you just look at that, witches and gentlewizards! Harry Potter, youngest champion, still gets his egg the fastest! Let's hear it for him!"

As if they need encouragement. He looked up at the sound of a scream high above. A hawk floated on the air between castle and stands – a hawk with rather clumsy wing beats...

He smiled. *How convenient that Mr. Weasley should happen along just now.*

xXxXx

On his broom, Harry nearly dropped the golden egg as his pendants went frigid.

It can't be me, I'm out of it...

He leaned forward, willing his pendants free of his robes, and they came – he caught them

awkwardly with his free hand and flipped rapidly through –

Ron? What's happened to Ron?

“Mr. Potter! Land here, if you please!” called Professor McGonagall from below.

Harry dived, but didn't land. “Take this, please, Professor,” he said, handing her the egg. “I have to go – Ron's in trouble...”

“What?”

“Harry!” Hermione screamed from the stands. “That way!” She was pointing away from the stands, towards the castle and the road to Hogsmeade.

Harry leaned back and climbed sharply.

xXxXx

“Neville, can you slow him down?” Draco asked, peering at the running figure through Ron's abandoned Omnioculars.

“I can try.” Neville closed his eyes. Meghan slid up beside him and took his hand. After a second, he opened his eyes and shook his head. “Nothing. I think I have to be on the ground to do it.”

“On the ground,” said Ginny, her face very pale. “Got it. Luna?”

“Right.” Luna drew her wand. Ginny's was already out.

“*Deleo !*” they shouted together, wands pointing downwards.

An explosion rocked the stands, leaving a huge hole in its wake.

“Right,” said Neville, and jumped down, still hand-in-hand with Meghan.

Draco refocused the Omnioculars on the distant running figure, now shooting spells over its shoulder at Harry, who was dodging –

He let out a whoop. “Yes! That's got it! Go Neville!” Faintly, in the distance, he could hear Harry echoing this sentiment, and with reason – thick tendrils of plant matter were springing up from the ground, twining around the running man's feet and legs, making him slow down to tear through them. He could use his wand to cut himself free, but then he'd leave himself open to Harry's spells – he could tear them loose with his free hand, but he didn't have one, it was busy holding hawk-Ron in place on his shoulder –

The man spun around to face the stands and shouted something unintelligible, then threw the hawk away with all his might – Hermione, watching through her own Omnioculars, gasped, then

squealed as Harry went into a steep dive and caught the bird's foot just in time to keep its head from bashing into the ground –

Not that it would be so much of a loss, of course.

Professor Moody ripped free of the thick grass trying to bind him and dashed through Hogwarts gates, rotated on the spot and was gone.

“That’s it,” said Draco, lowering the glasses. “Let’s go.” He jumped down through the hole in the stands and took off running towards the distant figures. As fast as he was, though, Ginny was faster.

“Is he going to be all right?” she demanded, staring at the limp figure in Harry’s arms.

“Should be,” Harry said, handing Ron to the panting Meghan. “He’s breathing. But we’ve got to find some way to make sure no one knows it’s him...”

“Damage control, at your service,” said Letha, catching up to them. “Moody, or whoever that was, spotted Ron crossing the grounds and transfigured him into a form that would be light and easy to carry. Give him here, I’ll change him back. Is he hurt?”

Meghan shook her head. “Just unconscious,” she said. “And his leg was strained, but I fixed it.”

“Good girl.” Letha took the bird in her arms, and Padfoot cast a Privacy Spell around her.

“Well done, Harry,” he said, grinning, as Danger and Professor McGonagall came running up, most of the school close behind them. “Well done both times.”

No one noticed the faint buzzing noise above them.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 39: The Heart of Hogwarts (Year 4)

Chapter 39: The Heart of Hogwarts

Albus Dumbledore, halfway to the gates of Hogwarts, felt something press against his legs. He looked down and met the brown-blue eyes of a tan wolf, staring earnestly up at him. Moving to the side of the river of students – distantly he heard Minerva ordering them all back to the stands – he knelt and entered the minds opened to him.

The office of the Defense teacher – potion bottles and a mutilated sheet of parchment on the desk – an open trunk, with a ladder leading down into it – and at the bottom of the ladder –

He stood up. “I’m on my way,” he said aloud, and started for the castle.

This does make sense of a number of confusing things...

xXxXx

By the time the Privacy Spell around Letha and Ron dissipated, Meghan had cleaned and healed Harry’s cut with her wand, and congratulations had been offered all around on Harry’s quick victory. He was expecting the same from Ron, so he was naturally a little surprised when the first words out of his friend’s mouth were, “You bastard, your broom almost killed me!”

“What?” said Harry, echoed by almost everyone else there.

“You forgot to open the window,” Ron said, punctuating his sentences with sweeping gestures. “So I went to do it for you. I was outside on the windowsill, I’d just opened the window, and your bloody broom up and shoots straight at me! I missed getting speared by this much – and then I lost my balance and fell!”

“And how did you survive this fall?” said Professor McGonagall, leveling a glare at him, equal parts accusation and wary disbelief. “For that matter, Weasley, what were you doing on the windowsill?”

“This is another of our special projects, Minerva,” said Letha before Ron could respond.

“The ones you don’t want to know about,” Padfoot added, letting his eyes rest on Hermione a moment.

“Really?” Professor McGonagall gave Ron another look. “I wouldn’t have thought... well, congratulations, Mr. Weasley. I suppose it’s too much to ask that this level of achievement be demonstrated in your homework.”

Ron closed his mouth. “Yes, Professor. I mean, no, Professor. I mean, I will.”

“I see. Has anyone seen Albus?”

“He’s on his way to the castle,” said Danger, who had come up in time to hear this. “I can explain what’s just happened, or at least give you the gist of it so you can tell the students what you think they need to hear...”

xXxXx

“So Moody was never really Moody,” said Seamus over dinner. “He was some other bloke all the time.”

“They think he was probably a Death Eater,” said Harry, serving himself some more potatoes. “Because of... things he did.” His eyes met Draco’s for one second. “Like entering me in the Tournament.” The essay had been produced as proof positive that Harry hadn’t entered himself, and people were suddenly being nicer to him than they had been for weeks.

“And Moody got a look at one of them,” Draco added. “Not the one who impersonated him, but another man who came along, and he was a Death Eater for sure.”

Harry was grateful his brother had left the name off, though Moody had been able to provide one. This was a good day, and he didn’t want to ruin it by thinking about Wormtail.

“And Moody said he never got a good look at him?” Dean asked. “I mean, the bloke who was pretending to be him?”

Ron shook his head. “Never did,” he said. “I mean, he saw him loads of times, but he was always under the Imperius.”

Hermione shivered. “Just think of it,” she said. “We had a Death Eater as a teacher, and a man under the Imperius Curse right here in Hogwarts, and we never knew about it. We might never have known about it, if... somebody hadn’t gone in Moody’s office.”

“Yeah, who did that?” asked Dean. “Whoever it is, we owe them.”

Draco shrugged. “If they’re not telling, there’s probably a reason,” he said. “Maybe it was a student and they got off detention for it because they found the stuff out, so they don’t want their name known.”

“Or maybe that’s part of the deal,” suggested Neville. “They can’t be famous for it, but they won’t get in trouble either.”

“That’s not fair,” complained Seamus. “We ought to be allowed to know who it was.”

Harry ate another bite of potatoes and very carefully said nothing at all.

xXxXx

Remus knelt and let his hand trail down the wood of the office door, finding only smooth grain under his fingers. No trace was left of his furious assault of last Christmas, when, transformed, he had let his anger get the better of him and been taken over by the wolf. By all indications, he might never have lived in this place.

Dumbledore was going through the drawers of the desk. He had brought Moody up from the trunk's dungeon himself, and Snape, rather less sour-looking than usual, had taken the Auror to the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey said he was undernourished and weak from being under the Imperius for three months, but aside from that, the only thing wrong with him was a bad haircut.

Dumbledore sat down heavily in the desk chair. Remus turned to face him, standing up. "Anything?" he asked.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Nothing. Nothing which might tell us who he is, or why undertake such a masquerade..." He stared at his hand for a moment, then closed it into a fist. "I fear I am losing my way, Remus," he said very quietly indeed. "How else could it be that I did not see the difference between a man I have known for forty years and an impostor?"

"Because he put his first priority on fooling you, maybe," Remus suggested. "Did he seem to be avoiding you his first few weeks here? Saying he needed to rest a lot, or needed to get ready for class, or other excuses like that?"

Dumbledore looked up. "Yes," he said, nodding slowly. "Yes, he did. You think that instead of doing that..."

"He was interrogating Moody, working out every little nuance of everything you and he had ever done together. And he put so much time into that, that he didn't have enough time to learn about Moody's interactions with other people. Or maybe he just hadn't thought of it yet, when we met him on Hogsmeade on Saturday."

Dumbledore smiled. "And so, although I myself was fooled, my reputation, at second hand, still won the day. I suspect you of trying to cheer me up, Remus."

"Is it working?"

The smile grew, and some of the famous twinkle returned to the light blue eyes. "It is. I could play the fool more often, if results like this come of it."

"I envy you that attitude," said Remus, sitting down in one of the chairs in front of the desk. "I'm fairly sure I'm being played for a fool in this custody case. Mr. Terence Shybrook, honorable counsel for the prosecution, and Officer Amalda Custer of WFS, are throwing every possible legal hassle in our way, Dolores Jane Umbridge, supposedly impartial observer, is helping them, and the warlocks aren't doing much about it either."

"Let me see, which warlocks are hearing your case again? Ursula Longwood, Bartholomew Sly, and Roberta Mables, I believe?"

“That’s them. And they’re delaying and recessing on every pretense, and occasionally none at all. Do you have any idea how satisfying it would be to go in there and just roar at them all until they go deaf?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “You have my sympathies. I have been in legal situations before this.”

“They’re trying to delay Hermione’s testimony. I’m sure of it. Oh yes, and speaking of Hermione...” Remus outlined the meeting with Greyback. “Not that I think he could get in, but forewarned and so forth.”

“I can, if you like, have him watched,” Dumbledore offered. “So that you know his approximate location at all times.”

“That would be a big help. Thank you.” Remus looked out the window at the darkening sky. “I know I shouldn’t have humiliated him like that, but I wasn’t about to let him get away with making threats...”

“Whom do you suspect of delaying Hermione’s testimony in the case?”

Remus shook his head. “Whom *don’t* I suspect? Sly is openly disgusted with our case, Mables seems unsure, Longwood is very cautiously friendly toward us, but still isn’t doing anything to keep all these delays from piling up... Shybrook and Custer, of course, are just out-and-out against us, and the *observer*...” Now he smiled, and let it go just the least bit wicked. “Scribner is going to try to get her on the stand and under oath tomorrow.”

“And let her hang herself with her own rope.”

“Precisely.”

xXxXx

“So what does the egg do?” Ginny asked, stroking it as it lay in Harry’s lap.

Harry shrugged, waving off a plate of treats that George was passing around. “Dunno. Bagman said there was a clue to the next task inside it, but I haven’t looked yet.”

“Go on, then, what’re you waiting for?” Fred asked, taking a jam tart from the plate.

“All right.” Harry set his nails into the groove and pulled.

Everyone yelled as a horrid screeching sound filled the room. Harry got his reflexes under control just in time not to transform in the middle of the common room, instead merely knocking the egg off his lap. Hermione was backing up as swiftly as she could for the people around her, an expression of pain on her face. Harry kicked the egg towards Draco, who clapped it swiftly shut. Blessed silence fell.

“What *was* that?” said Lee Jordan, rubbing his ears.

“A banshee, maybe,” said Seamus. “D’you reckon they’d make you fight one of those?”

“Or someone being tortured,” said Neville, looking rather pale. “But they wouldn’t do that to you, it’s illegal.”

“People aren’t supposed to fight dragons either,” said George, picking up the plate and repairing it, then Summoning back the treats and dusting them off with his wand. “Sounded like Percy singing in the shower to me...”

Almost everyone laughed at this. “That sounds like something I could handle,” Harry said, accepting the egg back from Draco. “Though not something I’d enjoy.”

“Who would?” said Ron, then frowned at George and the snacks. “These aren’t hexed, are they?”

“Nothing but the custard creams,” said Fred.

Neville stared down at his hand, then glared at the twins. “Tell me after I’ve eaten one, why don’t you.”

“Oh, did you eat one?” said George, sounding very entertained.

“Yes. What do they do?”

“Wait and see,” said Fred airily.

“What if I don’t want to wait and see?” Neville asked.

“You’ll still have to,” said George. “Don’t worry, it doesn’t take lo – oof!” Neville had neatly tripped him up, and was now sitting on him. Fred started to the rescue, but Harry and Ron jumped him, and Lee Jordan was taken down by Draco, Hermione, and Ginny, as Meghan and Luna quickly joined Neville on top of George.

“Now,” said Neville, still in a reasonable tone. “What do they doooooo—” His word swelled into a chirp, which was not surprising considering he’d just turned into a Neville-sized canary.

“Thaffs whaff,” said George into the carpet. Meghan let him up amid gales of laughter from the rest of the House. “Don’t worry,” he added cheerily, “it’s not permanent.”

The canary eyed him beadily but stayed where it was.

“Have you shown this to anyone else?” Harry asked, getting off Fred’s back.

“No, you’re our test audience,” said Fred, accepting Harry’s hand up. “Why?”

“Can you hide these inside other foods?” Harry continued, ignoring the question.

“Sure,” said George. “It doesn’t take much to invoke the charm, and you could probably disguise

the taste. Why?"

Harry sighed. "It's just a shame there's no way to make sure he gets one," he said as if to himself.

"Who?" Fred asked.

"Oh, no one important," said Harry. "Just thinking." Absently, he rattled his pockets.

The twins and Lee exchanged looks, then descended upon Harry and carried him off to the dormitories, from whence they emerged about five minutes later, all looking like cats that had caught Neville (who had molted by now). None of them would answer questions.

"All will be revealed tomorrow at breakfast," was all they would say.

"And I'm getting an awful headache, so I'm going to bed," Harry said finally, rubbing his forehead. "Good night, everyone, I'll see you all tomorrow."

"Fine friend you are," Ron grumbled as they climbed the stairs. "I nearly break my neck for you, and you won't even tell me what's going on tomorrow."

"Never said I wouldn't tell you," muttered Harry out the corner of his mouth. "I'm just waiting until we're somewhere safe. Captain?"

"Already on it," Neville said.

After artistically mussing their bedcovers and pulling their curtains, the boys went back downstairs, laden with pajamas and toothbrushes, and followed the girls down the stone slide, walking through the crowded common room without anyone seeing them. In the morning, the house-elves would pull back the hangings, so that their dormmates would assume they'd already got up and gone down to the common room or to breakfast. It had worked for three years now, even back in the time when they'd had to sneak down after everyone else went to bed.

Aboard the HMS *Hogwarts Den*, Harry finally revealed his secret, and the Pride laughed themselves nearly sick. Even Crookshanks, who had come down with Hermione, seemed to be smiling at the thought of the next morning.

"But there's something else," Harry said when everyone had caught their breath. "Neville, I'm sorry, I think I messed up – I was cheering for you when you did that thing with the grass, and he must have heard me, the fake Moody, I mean—"

Neville shrugged. "So he knows I can do that. So what?"

"But he shouted something. And he was looking back towards you. I think he meant it for you." Harry looked down at the carpet, then back up at his friend. "He said, 'I should have killed you when I had the chance.'"

Meghan squeaked. Luna's eyes lost their dreamy look. Draco swore under his breath, as did Ron.

Hermione and Ginny were wide-eyed. Neville just looked confused. “When he had the chance?” he repeated. “He had lots of chances this year – he took me up to his office, we had tea together – but why would anyone want to kill me?”

“Don’t know.” Harry shook his head. “I just don’t know.”

xXxXx

Ron was making his usual preparations for bed on a den-night. He’d collected sheet, blanket, and pillow from the communal stores off the bathroom, and was now looking for a nice big spot where he could comfortably sprawl. There was loads more choice since they’d reverted the main room to its usual state – the pirate ship was fun, but it made things feel a bit cramped. He spotted a place between Hermione and Luna and made for it –

When suddenly a spitting orange furball appeared there instead.

Ron yelped and jumped back, dropping his things. Crookshanks hissed and lashed his tail.

“Crookshanks!” Hermione scolded. “Bad cat!”

Crookshanks ignored her, instead stalking forward, glaring at Ron. “Er, I think I’ll sleep over here,” Ron said, hastily gathering his things and retreating to a space beside Harry. Crookshanks sat down and purred, then returned to Hermione’s side and nestled against her.

“What was that about?” said Draco, looking from cat to boy.

“Search me.” Ron did a belly-flop on the cushioned surface. “That cat’s a little weird.”

“I heard that.”

“I didn’t mean you, Hermione.”

“I know. But you’re not allowed to be mean to Crookshanks either.”

“Why not? He’s mean to me.”

“He’s just a cat, Ron. He doesn’t know any better.”

“But why is he nice to everyone else?”

“Well, he’s lived in the same house with us,” said Harry, rolling over. “And he likes girls better than boys, so Ginny and Luna are all right. Neville, do you want to...”

“No.”

“All right, don’t, then. I was just asking.”

“I’ve been a bird already tonight. I’m not going near that cat.”

“You’re not a bird now,” said Luna.

“The cat doesn’t know that.”

“He does if he can see you.”

“Yes, but I’m not taking any chances.”

“Go to sleep,” said Hermione. “Lights out, please.”

The illumination in the room vanished, except for a dim glow which the Pride had discovered came from the walls. There didn’t seem to be any way to turn it off, and it wasn’t bright enough to interfere with sleeping, so they used it for a night-light, to make sure no one tripped over anyone else on the way to the bathroom.

It was a nice place, the Hogwarts Den, Ron thought sleepily. And life was pretty good overall. Harry’d got through the first task with barely a scratch, and the Death Eater who’d entered him had been discovered – they were going to have a real Auror for a teacher within a few days – and Christmas was coming...

Christmas. Ron let out a big sigh. *I should think about what to get people for presents...*

Sleep overtook him as he was considering the alternative merits of Fred and George’s prank candies (if they could be induced to sell him any) and regular old chocolate from Honeydukes.

xXxXx

Severus Snape yawned and took another sip of his drink, scowling at the Great Hall in general. He hadn’t slept well the night before on account of his arm, and would have appreciated not being bearded in the hall by Igor Karkaroff in a panic before he’d even had his coffee yet. Still, at least there had been no students around.

And whoever was impersonating Moody, he was found out before he had the audacity to help himself to my supplies. Severus had no doubt that was what would have happened. Ordering boomslang skin would be a dead giveaway that Polyjuice Potion or something else highly difficult and delicate was being brewed by the orderer.

I could wish that Potter had succeeded a bit less in his task, or that I had not had to use two different pain-killers this morning, but other than that, this would seem to be a fairly good day. He would have to be careful about what he touched or imbibed today, though. One of the pain-killers had an ingredient in it that tended to make other potions’ effects last longer. That was all to the good where pain relief was concerned, but some potions had rather unfortunate effects...

“Pastry, Severus?” said Professor Flitwick, levitating the plate towards him. “They’re quite good.”

“Thank you,” said Severus, taking the plate. He regarded the four pastries remaining with a careful eye, then chose the second from the left. He couldn’t have said why he took it, only that it seemed slightly more appetizing than the rest.

If he had been more awake at the moment, he might have noticed that the icing on this pastry was ever so slightly green-tinted.

And if he had been more awake at the moment, he would certainly have noticed the sudden silence at a portion of the Gryffindor table, the youngest red-headed male stuffing an unopened letter into his pocket in anticipation.

As it was, he handed the pastries down the table and took a bite of the one he had selected, washing it down with coffee. *For once, Filius was right. These are quite good.*

He had time for two more bites before it hit.

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“Oh, you *didn’t*,” Hermione said around her hand. “You didn’t *really*...”

“Why does she ask questions she already knows the answers to?” Ron asked Draco.

“Habit, I suppose,” said Draco, sneaking another look over his shoulder. “I never knew feathers could look greasy.”

“He needs to preen,” said Luna rather loudly, escalating the laughter in the Hall even farther. Even the teachers were sniggering as the extremely large canary fled through a side door, chirping angrily in a very deep voice.

Professor Dumbledore rose, his eyes quite merry. “There will be no Potions classes today,” he announced, and sat down again.

“Nicely done, gentlemen,” said Harry to the twins and Lee under cover of the applause. “The second half of payment will be forthcoming as promised.”

“Gosh, I wish I could buy my pranks done,” said Ginny.

Harry tweaked one of her braids. “It keeps them happy, it keeps them from pranking us, and it ensures that they take the blame. Where’s the problem?”

“Did I say there was a problem?”

“You were acting like there was a problem.”

“Well, there isn’t any problem.”

“I’m glad there isn’t any problem.”

Ginny grinned. “How many times can we say the word ‘problem’?”

“Problem problem problem ploblem...” Harry laughed. “Ploblem?”

“Plobrem,” said Ginny, stretching her eyes to make herself look Oriental.

Harry frowned. “That’s not funny.”

“It’s not?”

“No, it’s mean.”

Ginny looked hurt. “I didn’t mean it to be.”

“I know, but it still is.” Harry wasn’t quite sure why he was arguing this point – it had certainly destroyed the fun they’d been having – but he felt it had to be said. “You shouldn’t do things like that.”

“Why not?”

“Because... you just shouldn’t.”

“What a marvel of reasoning you are. *Because you just shouldn’t.*” Harry stared. Ginny had imitated his voice almost perfectly. “I think I just shouldn’t sit here anymore. Excuse me.”

And before Harry could say anything more, Ginny had ducked under the table and was beside Luna, asking her about an assignment for Charms.

He finished his breakfast pensively, rubbing his forehead and trying to come up with better reasons than “because you just shouldn’t.”

xXxXx

“State your name,” said Charles Scribner to the small woman in the witness chair.

“Dolores Jane Umbridge.”

“Occupation?”

“Senior Undersecretary to the Minister.”

“That would be the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge?”

“Yes.”

“Did you hold this position in his previous administration as well?”

“I did.”

“And in the Vilias administration?”

“No.”

“No? Were you dismissed?”

“I left,” said Umbridge with some dignity, straightening herself in the chair.

“And what did you do during the Vilias administration, Madam Umbridge?”

“I held administrative assistant jobs at the Ministry, in the outer office of the Minister, the Ludicrous Patents Office, the Spirit Division of RCMC, the Floo Network Authority...”

Remus frowned as Umbridge continued listing jobs. **Floo Network? I wonder when she worked there?**

Why?

Oh, just curious.

“Why so many jobs, Madam Umbridge?” Scribner was asking now.

“I like variety in my work, Mr. Scribner. I would spend a few months, perhaps up to a year, in one job, then move on.”

“Of your own volition?”

The large eyes opened even wider. “Of course of my own volition – what are you insinuating, Mr. Scribner?”

“Counsel will refrain from insinuation,” grunted Warlock Sly.

Danger groaned mentally. **Oh, come on. We pay him good money to insinuate.**

“Yes, Your Honor,” said Scribner. “Now, Madam Umbridge, may I ask – why exactly are you here?”

“Well, I’ve come to witness this hearing, as an interested observer. History in the making, you see.”

We hope, Remus said.

“A werewolf suing for parental rights – it’s never been done before.” Umbridge tittered. “The Minister is very interested in this case, very interested indeed.”

But just which way does that interest go?

Scribner paced around the floor. “And are you interested in this case, Madam Umbridge?”

“I suppose so.” Umbridge fussed with her cardigan. “I’ve always been so very fond of children, you see.”

Yes, I understand they’re delicious with chips.

Danger choked, causing Umbridge to stare at her for a long moment before returning her regard to Scribner. “I just hate to see a child unhappy,” the dumpy woman finished.

Scribner nodded slowly. “You hate to see a child unhappy,” he repeated. “Madam Umbridge, when you’re not observing this case, what exactly are you doing for the Minister at the moment?”

Umbridge frowned. “At the moment... oh, let me see... well, I know it’s a law, but which one? I’ve worked on so many.”

“Is this the law?” Scribner Summoned a large scroll from his table and handed it to Umbridge.

“Why, yes, this is it. How clever of you to have a copy ready.” Her smile was poisonous.

Ha. She didn’t count on that.

Think we’ve got her now?

I certainly hope so. Remus pressed Danger’s hand. **Getting rid of her will be half the battle won.**

What’s the other half?

You’ll see.

“Your Honors, I’d like to submit this as evidence,” said Scribner, reclaiming the scroll from Umbridge.

“Very well,” said Warlock Mables, stretching out a hand. “Let’s see it.”

Scribner handed it over. “I believe you’ll find,” he continued, “that it is designed to lay heavy penalties on any employer who hires ‘dangerous’ people. And in the footnotes of this law, included in the categories of ‘dangerous’ people, are werewolves.”

The warlocks seemed to have come to this conclusion themselves by this time. “Your point being, Mr. Scribner?” said Warlock Sly.

“My point being, Your Honor, that Madam Umbridge clearly has an agenda against werewolves. An observer who wishes to take part in the case, as Madam Umbridge so clearly does, should be impartial, or if on a particular side, should state that from the outset. If Madam Umbridge wishes to become a witness for the prosecution, I would have no qualms about that, but as an observer, she leaves something to be desired.” Scribner seated himself at the defense table.

“Nice work,” Remus said quietly as the warlocks put their heads together.

“Makes a refreshing change to be telling the truth. Let me know if you ever have anything else of this sort that needs doing.” Scribner had his hands behind his head.

The warlocks were straightening up again. “Your point is taken, Mr. Scribner,” said Warlock Longwood. “Dolores Jane Umbridge is hereby stricken from the case as official observer. Madam Umbridge, you may leave the courtroom.”

Umbridge looked shocked. “But – Your Honor! I represent the Minister of Magic himself in this affair!”

“You do?” Warlock Longwood looked down her nose at Umbridge. “I wasn’t informed. Were either of you?” she asked her colleagues.

Sly shook his head. “News to me,” said Mables. “Why’s the Minister so interested in a simple custody case, anyway?”

“This is no simple custody case,” said Umbridge passionately, standing up. “The outcome of this case could very well be a turning point in our society – and you three warlocks could be the saviors of wizarding Britain as we know it, if you only decide correctly. The future of our children is at stake. For all our sakes, for the sakes of the children, do not let them fall into the hands of filthy half-breeds–”

“Objection!” shouted Scribner, jumping to his feet. “This woman was told to *leave* the courtroom, not start delivering a speech!”

“True,” said Warlock Mables. “Officers?”

Two burly young wizards in MLE robes moved in and took Umbridge’s arms politely but firmly. “Right this way, ma’am,” said one of them.

“You must not let yourselves be blinded by sentiment!” Umbridge cried shrilly as they escorted her from the room. “You must see past the façade of humanity that this creature projects...” Her voice was lost as another officer shut the door behind the three.

Scribner caught Remus’ eye and gave him a quick nod, stepping back. “Your Honors, if I may,” Remus said, standing up.

At the prosecution table, Officer Custer and Mr. Shybrook exchanged confused looks.

“Bit irregular, but nothing wrong with it,” said Warlock Mables. “We’re listening, Mr. Lupin.”

Ah-ha. That speech you were practicing last night...

Did I give it well?

Riveting. But bear in mind, I'm a biased audience.

So are they.

There's a difference.

I know. I'm ignoring it. Here goes.

Luck, my love. Danger blew a mental kiss.

"I don't know if I project a façade of humanity or not," Remus began, getting chuckles from Warlocks Longwood and Mables and a smile from Officer Custer. "If I do, it's without my intention. I would rather not pretend to be anything I'm not. Despite what some may say, I am human. I never asked to be a werewolf, and there's no way to change it now. I've learned to live with the worst parts of it, and my friends, and especially my wife, have helped me see the good in it."

Warlock Sly snorted under his breath, but kept listening.

"If there was some way to get what I want without challenging an existing law, I would gladly do it. I don't want to make trouble. I never have. But I see no reason why what I've had for twelve years should be taken from me just because one fact about me becomes more widely known. If this is the price of getting my life back, then so be it."

"Getting your life back?" Warlock Sly said, leaning forward. "This isn't about your life – you're free to go lead your life as you please."

"But I'm not," Remus said, meeting the other wizard's eyes. "I'm not free to lead my life as I please. If I were, I wouldn't be here right now. I'd be at home, reading my children's letters from Hogwarts, thinking about seeing them over the Christmas holidays. My life, Your Honor, is not just about me. It's about the people I love, the people I spend it with. That's what makes life worth living for me."

He turned to the prosecution table. "Mr. Shybrook has argued, and Officer Custer and other expert witnesses have testified, that all werewolves are rapacious, incapable of self-control, dangerous. This is true of many werewolves. But it is also true of some men who are not werewolves. In a court of law, men should be judged by their actions. Not by the labels which have been placed on them, however true these labels may be. After all, I don't deny..." Remus smiled wryly. "...*what* I am. But neither will I deny *who* I am, and what I have done. And it seems to me that you," he nodded to Shybrook and Custer, "refuse to see either of those things at all."

He faced the bench again. "Your Honors, this case is not, ultimately, about all werewolves or all children. It is about one man, who happens to be a werewolf, myself, and one child, Hermione Granger-Lupin. If Officer Custer or Mr. Shybrook could prove to my satisfaction – and I like to think I am not an unreasonable man – if they could prove to me that my gaining Hermione's legal guardianship could in any way harm her, I would drop this case immediately. If they could prove

that my proximity would harm her, I would swear never to see her again. But they have done neither of these things, and so I persist.”

Warlock Mables nodded. “What is it you want, Mr. Lupin?” she asked, not unkindly.

“I’ve said my piece,” said Remus. “Let Hermione speak for herself. Mr. Scribner?”

“We request a four-day recess, Your Honors,” Scribner said, rising. “And at the end of that time, Miss Granger-Lupin’s testimony in court.”

“Objection!” Shybrook was on his feet. “Defense has not proved that testifying in court would be in the child’s best interest!”

“How could it possibly be against it?” Danger blurted, staring at him.

“Order,” grumbled Sly, banging his fist on the bench.

“As to the child’s best interest, surely that could be best determined by letting her speak for herself,” said Scribner smoothly. “She’s fourteen years old and quite intelligent enough to say what she wants.”

“With the man who’s had charge over her since she was a baby sitting in front of her, I have no doubt she’ll say what she’s been trained,” said Shybrook with a trace of a sneer in his voice.

Remus stood. “I would agree to remain separate from Miss Granger-Lupin,” he said. “Perhaps another room to watch the proceedings...”

“Oh, so she can know that if she puts a foot wrong, she’ll have you to answer to, is that it?” The trace had developed into a full-fledged sneer.

“If I’m that horrendous a monster, I’m sure she’ll tell you so and be shot of me forever,” Remus retorted, earning an honest laugh from Warlock Longwood.

“Request approved, Mr. Scribner,” she said after garnering nods from her colleagues, brisk in Mables’ case and grudging in Sly’s. “And I doubt a separate room will be necessary, if you will agree not to try to influence Miss Granger-Lupin’s testimony, Mr. Lupin.”

Remus smiled. “Your Honor, no influence will be necessary.”

“I’ll take that in the spirit in which it’s meant,” said Longwood dryly. “This hearing will resume in four days’ time.”

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“Harry, you feeling all right?” said Ron at lunch. “You don’t look so good.”

Harry shrugged one shoulder. “I’ve had a headache all morning. It started in the common room

and it won't go away."

"Do you mean a headache," said Hermione, flattening her hand on her brow, "or a *headache*?" Her finger traced a lightning bolt down the center of her forehead.

Harry indicated his scar.

"And why haven't you told anyone?" demanded Hermione.

"Hermione, it's just a headache."

"Just a headache. Didn't you have a headache like that over the summer, after you had that dream?"

"What dream?" asked Draco.

Hermione held out her hand for Draco to touch. "Didn't you?" she asked Harry.

Harry looked briefly away from her. "It's neat on Moony and Danger," he said. "But it's just a little creepy on you. Yeah, I did."

"You dreamed about Voldemort?" said Draco, quietly enough that only the next three people over from him shuddered. Ron gulped but managed to keep from making any noise.

Harry nodded. "Do you think I should tell someone?" he asked.

"Yes," said Hermione emphatically. "I think you should have told someone hours ago. But now will do. Come on, Professor Dumbledore's just leaving."

"Doesn't waste time, this girl," said Ron, grabbing a last slice of bread as the Pride got up from the table.

xXxXx

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "Did your scar hurt at all last night, Harry?" he asked.

"I don't... wait, yes, it did. I remember I had a headache right after I talked with the twins about..." Harry clamped his mouth shut.

"Dear me, these old ears of mine," said Dumbledore to the wall. "They play the most shocking tricks on me – what were you saying, Harry?"

"I did have a headache last night, sir," said Harry, grinning to himself at Dumbledore's scent, which had just picked up a distinct trace of mischief. "But it went away."

"And began again this morning." Dumbledore frowned. "You will forgive me for asking a possibly impolite question, I hope, Harry, but did you do anything which might have altered your

surroundings? Do you have, for instance, a headache potion that you often take, or a charmed object you hold when you sleep?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so, sir."

"Do places count?" asked Ginny. "I mean, if Harry went somewhere unusual last night?"

"That would indeed count, Miss Weasley," said Dumbledore gravely. "Harry?"

Harry glared at Ginny. *Thanks a lot*, he signed.

You don't have to tell him everything, she answered, her fingers flying. *He wants to help*.

"Is this by any chance where you disappeared to after the Goblet of Fire produced your name?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry exhaled half a guilty sigh. "Yes, sir."

"And may I inquire – merely with respect to information, I have no desire to violate your sanctum – from which room of the castle you entered it?"

"The kitchens," Harry said. "That night, anyway."

"And there is another entrance in the hospital wing," Dumbledore said, glancing at Hermione. "And one in your common room, or you would not have been able to enter it last night. And, if I recall a certain story from your first year correctly, one in the Slytherin common room as well." Blue eyes flicked over Draco. "I would assume the other two common rooms also have their entrances."

"That makes sense," said Ron. "For the other two... you know," he finished lamely. "And you don't have to kick, either," he added with a glare at Meghan.

"Sir, do you know about this place?" asked Harry.

"I have heard rumors," Dumbledore admitted. "Or perhaps 'legends' would be a better term. The place I believe you have discovered was once known as the Heart of Hogwarts. It was crafted by the four Founders working together, as a place of rest and tranquility. One of the most ancient stories of the school's founding claims that after the castle was finished, as a private finale to the ceremonies which marked its opening, the Founders entered the Heart of Hogwarts, together with their grown children, and swore again to one another the oath which the Founders had sworn before beginning to build the castle."

"Did they swear in blood?" Luna asked.

"So it is said. And it is also said that the stones of that place recall that ancient oath, and its breaking, and that the Heart of Hogwarts rose up in rebellion and sealed itself away until such time as true Heirs to the Founders, Heirs in blood and Heirs in heart, should come to Hogwarts

again.”

“And that’s us, isn’t it?” said Luna, sounding pleased.

“If you have indeed found the Heart of Hogwarts, I think there can be no question,” Dumbledore said. “Two of you are confirmed Heirs in blood, and there may be others. All of you, I am quite sure, are Heirs in heart to the noblest traditions of the Founders, the qualities on which the Houses are based. So the Heart of Hogwarts has opened to you, and will shelter you through troubles. Especially you, Harry.”

“Why especially me, sir?”

“Your scar,” said Dumbledore, touching it gently with a long forefinger. “I believe that it may be indicative of some connection between yourself and Lord Voldemort.” He ignored Ron and Neville’s jumps and Ginny’s little shiver. “It pained you in your first year, when he was nearby, and recently, when you dreamed of him. I doubt he can have been pleased that his spy in Hogwarts was found out.”

“So... it hurts because he’s angry?” Harry hazarded.

“Quite possible.”

“But it won’t hurt when we’re in the Den... I mean, the Heart of Hogwarts.”

“Call it what you wish, Harry, it is your place now. And you are in a position to tell me. Did your scar hurt at all last night, after you entered this place?”

“No,” Harry said, thinking back. “No. It didn’t hurt at all.”

xXxXx

“So your scar means you’re *connected* to You-Know-Who?” said Ron later in the courtyard. “That’s just freaky.”

“One of these days we’re going to convince you that it’s just a name,” said Draco. “And you’re going to be able to say it right out loud, and hear somebody else say it without making faces over it.”

“Mum and Dad say it,” said Neville, breaking into the smile that still came up whenever his parents were mentioned. “They’re teaching me.”

“Teaching you?” Harry sighed. “Please. There’s nothing to teach. It’s a fancy anagram – remember, Ginny?”

“I try not to,” said Ginny from her place curled up in the sun with Luna combing her hair. “But yes, I do.”

“It’s just... I guess...” Ron leaned back against a pillar. “I’m running a race and I’ll never catch up,” he said. “No matter what I do, you lot can do it better or faster or smarter.”

“None of us can fly,” said Hermione. “Not without a broomstick. Maybe cats always land on their feet, but I’d still be dead if I fell off Gryffindor Tower. You’re not.”

“Yeah, well, I screamed most of the way down,” Ron said, but a smile was breaking over his face. “I can do it now. Just change, without thinking too much about it. I don’t need the incantation – I can just *do* it.”

“And that’s faster than anyone,” said Harry. “I still needed the incantation weeks after I first learned how.”

“So now we know how to get Ron to learn something,” said Luna, carefully disentangling a knot in Ginny’s red mane. “Push him off a roof.”

Ron joined in the laughter. “Not me,” he said. “But it might have worked with Percy. He’s actually scared of heights – not as long as he’s indoors, mind, or somewhere solid like the Quidditch stands. It’s just when he thinks he might fall.”

“That’s why he was so happy when he passed his Apparition test,” Ginny put in, her eyes closed. “It meant he’d never have to fly again.”

“He’s a nutter,” said Ron, shoving his hands in his pockets. His eyebrows went up. “What...” He pulled out a crumpled piece of parchment. “Oh, it’s that letter I got this morning. Doesn’t look like anyone I know.”

“Open it,” said Meghan, rolling over in the sun.

Ron did so and read it through rapidly. As he did, his face went from worried to indignant to scared. “Old hag,” he muttered. “She thinks she can come around here...” He handed the letter to Harry, who held it low so that everyone could see it.

Mr. Weasley,

I happened to be on Hogwarts grounds yesterday and witness to an amazing event – a young man with red hair falling from a tower window, and suddenly turning himself into a hawk, rather than being turned into one, as is the official story. Penalties for being an unregistered Animagus are quite severe, but I’m sure I could be convinced not to take my story to the authorities. Perhaps a few interviews on the real Harry Potter, even some convincing on your part to get him to talk to me as well? You have forty-eight hours to respond.

Rita Skeeter

“She signed her name to it,” said Draco in amazement. “That’s blackmail!”

“But she’s got me,” Ron said. “She knows. And she’s right – I’d only get off Azkaban because of

my age, and they'd probably kick me out of Hogwarts..."

"Dumbledore knows about us," said Harry. "He wouldn't do that."

Hermione was rubbing a handful of cloth between her palms. "Look, Ron, she has to have been within sight if she saw you. Did you see her? Hawks can see everything..."

"Let me think." Ron closed his eyes. "After I fell... when I pulled up... no, there wasn't anyone there. Not all along the lawns. Unless she ran into the castle, or the Forest, or ducked under the stands or something... nothing there but a big glittery beetle."

"Glittery?" said Meghan. "Glittery like how?"

"Like glittery. It was all green and sparkly, and had kind of a halo around it." Ron waved his hand. "Must have been magical."

"A glittery halo," said Draco slowly. "Does that sound familiar to anyone else?"

Harry and Hermione nodded. "Come on," Harry said, standing up. "We're free until Charms, and the kitchens are closest."

xXxXx

In the Den, or perhaps the Heart of Hogwarts, Harry and Hermione changed forms, as did Ron. "That's it," he said, changing back straight away. "You've both got it too. That same glittery thing."

"Neville, can you whisper me invisible?" said Hermione. "I want to get something." She vanished into the red bedroom and returned a few moments later with her arms full of a grouchy Crookshanks. "What about him?"

Ron changed again, and back. "No. Not him."

"So the beetle you saw wasn't a beetle at all," said Harry. "It was an Animagus."

"And Rita Skeeter has a name for being a fly on the wall in the oddest places," said Hermione gleefully.

"And she's probably not registered," said Draco, rolling his shoulders back. "So now you've got on her exactly what she's got on you."

"Which isn't enough," said Ginny. "You need more dirt on her, to keep her quiet."

"Easy to say," said Ron. "How do I get it?"

"Set up a meeting and have someone else there to listen who she doesn't see," said Luna. "She'll try to blackmail you, then you show her that you have someone else there, and she won't be able

to do anything about it, because it will be two against one.”

“Makes sense,” said Ron. “But she’ll want to check around wherever we meet and make sure there’s no one there.”

“You can use the Cloak,” Harry said.

Meghan shook her head. “Cloaks can fall off,” she said. “But I know someone you can take. Someone who can be invisible no matter what.”

“Someone like who?” asked Draco.

Meghan tapped Neville on the arm. “Like him,” she said.

“Meghan, I can’t be invisible outside Hogwarts,” Neville reminded her. “And I’m pretty sure Rita Skeeter will want to meet somewhere else.”

“Yes, you can,” said Meghan insistently. “All you have to do is change.”

Neville thumped his head against the nearest wall. “How long have I been too dumb to live?”

“Ever since we’ve known you,” said Ron. “But you’re getting better. You’re only about halfway too dumb to live now.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Morpheus the chameleon owl flew out of the Owlery later that afternoon, carrying a letter signifying consent.

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“I heard some very interesting news from Hogwarts,” said Aletha at dinner. “It seems Severus Snape ran afoul of a prank, and something he’d already taken on his own account made it last longer than it should have. Several hours longer.”

“What kind of prank?” asked Sirius eagerly.

“Swallow.” Aletha waited. “Someone turned him into a canary.”

“A canary.”

“Yes, a canary. You know, small yellow birds? Except this one was the same size as Snape. So a rather large yellow bird.”

The Pack enjoyed this image for several moments.

“And Snape never buys anything he doesn’t need, either,” said Sirius when he’d caught his breath.

“So you know what he said when he was a canary?”

“No, what?” said Danger.

Sirius deepened his voice. “CHEAP!”

“And it lasted for hours?” Remus asked when everyone was finished laughing at this.

“Apparently. But take this with a grain of salt, my information’s third-hand at best. I’m sure we’ll have first-hand accounts by morning.”

“Yes, I’m sure they’d write us about something like that,” said Danger, shaking her head. “A *canary* ...”

“I’ll find a cage for him if he’ll stay like that,” Sirius said. “With lots of birdseed to eat, and newspaper on the bottom...”

“That’s not nice,” said Remus.

“No, but it is funny.”

“True.”

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Neenie the calico cat bounded through the forest with the Snow Fox hot on her trail. Come on, silly, she called in animal-speak. They’re waiting!

You come on. I’m faster than you. The fox speeded up and tapped her with his paw. We’ll run together.

Yes. Together.

They dashed side by side into the clearing where the small house sat and resumed human shape, the shapes they had chosen for tonight. Hermione’s hair was just a touch less wild than usual, her face subtly different, and her eyes, instead of hazel, were clear bright blue. Draco’s were the same, and his hair was very like hers, though cut so short that the curls barely showed. Anyone who saw them would know that they were twins. That was the point.

Together, they entered the house, and were met immediately inside by the embraces of their parents.

“Sillies,” Danger said, holding them both in her arms as Moony held them all.

“I wish I could go to the hearing like this,” said Hermione. “But I do have an idea.”

“Good,” said Moony. “Because that’s why you’re here. It’s coming up.”

“It is?” Hermione pulled away. “You mean really? They’re going to let me testify?”

“On Monday, Kitten. Can you be ready by then?”

“Watch me.” Hermione did a little dance step. “Do you think they’ll listen, though? Won’t they just say I’ve been brainwashed?”

“They might,” Danger admitted. “But all we can tell them is the truth.”

“That’s all we can tell them,” said Draco. “But what if we could show them?”

“What do you mean?” Moony asked.

Hermione showed him.

“Impressive,” said Moony, blinking to readjust his eyes. “But remember, you are in charge here, so you might be skewing it towards what you want instead of what’s real...”

“I’ll try it again tomorrow, in real life – I just thought of it before bed, so I couldn’t try it then – but if it’s real, do you think it would work?”

Moony nodded, and Hermione saw with surprise that his eyes shone bright. “I think it would work,” he said. “And I can’t tell you how proud I am... how happy...”

“You couldn’t have bribed me or beat me into that,” said Hermione, laughing. “I’d like to see you try. And you haven’t even seen what Draco can do.”

“Oh, they don’t want to see that,” Draco objected.

“On the contrary, I’d like to see it very much,” said Danger.

“Course you would.” Draco drew his wand and demonstrated.

“Well, if I’d known about that...” Danger looked a bit staggered. “Are you sure?”

“Like Moony said, no. But if I could pick, that is what I’d pick.”

“You are a horrible flatterer, and I love you to death,” said Danger. “And I’m going to prove it by killing you. C’mere.”

The tiny dream house rang with laughter.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 40: Decisions, Decisions (Year 4)

Chapter 40: Decisions, Decisions

“How do I look?” Hermione asked nervously.

“Horrible,” said Harry and Draco together.

“Should I kick them?” Meghan asked.

“No,” said Aletha firmly. “You look fine, Hermione. Don’t be afraid.”

“We’re all with you,” Sirius added, putting an arm around Hermione from behind and squeezing. His eyebrows went up, but he said nothing, kissing the back of Hermione’s head before letting go, then beckoning Aletha closer.

Aletha kept her face straight. “Yes?”

“When did she start...” Sirius turned a little away from the cubs and cupped his hands in front of his chest. “Developing?”

“She has been for about the past year. She’s just more modest than she used to be, so you never noticed.” Aletha debated something internally for a moment, then decided for it. “Hug Meghan one of these days and be ready for a surprise.”

“Oh, no. Not already.”

“Oh, yes, already. Not much, but it’s starting.”

“Well, she always was precocious.” Sirius ran a hand through his hair. “Sometimes I wonder where the time went,” he said. “It seems like not that long ago, we were living in London, Meghan was a tiny little speck, the other three weren’t much bigger... and now look at them. They’re growing up. Quidditch players, fine students, school champions...”

“I know what you mean.” Aletha smoothed Sirius’ hair. “I can remember the time passing, but it doesn’t seem to add up right. I know it will, if I just take a minute to do it properly, but at a quick glance it doesn’t seem possible that it’s been twelve years and more since we started this crazy Pack business...”

The door of the courtroom opened. “We’re ready for you,” said the young witch in clerk’s robes.

“Thank you,” said Sirius. “Well, here’s to twelve more, and more than that.”

The cubs had arranged themselves in a line, Hermione leading and Harry bringing up the rear. Draco had his hand on his twin’s shoulder. Meghan was bouncing in anticipation until Harry

pressed down gently on her head. Hermione glanced over her shoulder.

“Go on, sweet,” Aletha said, waving her Pack-daughter forward. *And all my love go with you.*

Hermione lifted her head high and pushed the door open.

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Remus watched the Pack enter the courtroom, keeping his eyes away from the other side of the spectators' benches. In light of the defense bringing in five guests along with their witness, the prosecution had been allowed the same courtesy, so Dolores Umbridge was back, along with a few other officious Ministry types.

Our side is nicer-looking, Danger said. **And probably smarter.**

Definitely smarter. Remus watched the cubs, cataloguing each beloved face, just in case this day went badly. Harry's open grin, Meghan's saucy look, Draco's quiet smile, and Hermione's confident expression etched themselves into his mind and heart.

You are mine, no matter what happens here today. Mine now and forever. And even if they tell me to stay away, I will always be there to protect you should the need arise.

Which it will. But they won't. So you'll be able to. Danger frowned a little. **Did that make any sense at all?**

No. Not really. But that's all right, I'm used to it. Remus nodded to Sirius and Aletha as they found places in the row behind the cubs. **Ready for this?**

No. Let's do it anyway.

The day's proceedings began. Everyone stood for the three warlocks, the case was named and explained, and Charles Scribner stood to call a witness, one Miss Hermione Jane Granger-Lupin.

Hermione got to her feet, squeezing Draco's hand one last time, patting her cheek as Meghan blew a kiss, and smiling as Harry winked at her. Head up, steps steady, she walked across the courtroom floor and seated herself in the witness chair.

Here we go, Danger said, holding Remus' hand tightly. **God, I hope this works...**

“Miss Granger-Lupin,” said Scribner. “Your age, please?”

“Fourteen.”

“You're a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?”

“Yes, sir. A fourth year. Gryffindor,” Hermione added, patting the crest on her best school robes, which had been pressed for the occasion.

“And your background?”

“I’m Muggleborn, but I was raised magical.”

“Could you tell us how that happened, in your own words, please?”

Hermione rubbed her hands along her thighs, then folded them in her lap and began. Remus forced himself to relax. They’d taken the better part of two nights to put this story together and make sure it held up. It did, and more importantly, it avoided any mention of werewolf taming, which was something he did not want publicly known.

“Mr. Lupin met my sister in the park on 15 March, 1982, when my sister was taking care of Harry Potter and me. They enjoyed one another’s company, and Mr. Lupin explained to my sister that the unusual things she’d seen Harry do were actually magic. He let me play with his wand and discovered I was magical as well. My sister told him at this meeting that Harry was very unhappy living with his relatives. Over the next two weeks, they saw a great deal of each other, and finally they came up with a plan. They would get married, take Harry away from his relatives, and pretend that Harry and I were twins and both their children. And that’s what they did.”

Across the room, Shybrook’s quill was taking notes.

“Explain to us, if you will, Miss Granger-Lupin,” said Scribner, “how Sirius Black and Aletha Freeman-Black entered your life.”

“M... Mr. Lupin,” Hermione corrected herself smoothly, “and my sister needed a place to live once they were married, a place where no one knew them. Mr. Lupin thought of contacting his friend Aletha – Mrs. Freeman-Black now – and it turned out she had a place she could rent to them. Besides, Harry knew her too. It was only fair to let her be in on things.”

“And Mr. Black?”

“After he escaped, he came to find Letha...” Hermione stopped, unsure.

“Use your names for them,” Scribner encouraged her.

Hermione relaxed a bit. “He came to find Letha and tell her the truth, and she believed him. They were able to convince Danger and Moony, and they thought, as long as they were hiding Harry, they might as well hide Padfoot too.”

“And Moony and Padfoot are...” said Warlock Mables.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Your Honor. Moony is Mr. Lupin. Padfoot is Mr. Black. It’s just what we’ve always called them. From their school nicknames.”

Mables sat back. “All right, go on.”

“There really isn’t much else to tell. Meghan was born about a year later, and then Draco came...”

“Would you tell us how that happened?” Scribner said.

The Pack’s stay at Malfoy Manor could be told almost unexpurgated. Two or three of the Ministry officials looked impressed when Hermione explained how she and Harry had knocked Lucius Malfoy into the mantelpiece. Remus had a slight attack of nerves when she related the story of the contract, but she very carefully excepted him from the signers, “because he knew if he signed it, then it wouldn’t be legal, and he wanted it to be.”

You were worried? She remembers things, Remus, you know that.

Yes, but under pressure...

“Now, if you don’t mind, Miss Granger-Lupin, would you tell us when and why you changed your last name?” Scribner was saying now.

Hermione straightened in her chair. “It was just after Padfoot’s trial when I had the idea. Around Christmas 1990,” she added. “People made such a fuss over names then. I suppose that’s what got me thinking about it. I wanted to do something to tell the world who I belonged to. So I asked Danger about changing my name, and she helped me do the paperwork and consented for me, since she’s my guardian, and I added Lupin to my name for Moony’s birthday present in March 1991.”

Shybrook’s quill was moving faster than ever.

“And the events of this past May?” Scribner said. This had been the longest-argued point between him and the Lupins. He’d finally won them over by pointing out that Shybrook was unlikely to let Hermione tell things in her own words, and he would. “Better to have the truth on the table before Shybrook starts trying to color it,” had been his clinching argument. “And I think your Hermione can handle it.”

Hermione had agreed, but Remus could see the shift in her face as Scribner asked, and a moment brought him her scent laden with remembered fear. Still, she began in a strong voice. “I was taking part in a Combat Club match, at a sentry post, with Draco Black as my partner...”

The Animagus transformation became loosely tied ropes and a window that was larger than it seemed, and instead of Draco’s Slytherin jewel allowing him to seize Malfoy’s wand and escape, his exploding Combat Club wand had blinded the Death Eater for the crucial moment. Riding Buckbeak away needed no changes, nor did repelling the dementors, though Shybrook’s quill sped up yet again at this portion of the story.

Smart girl, said Danger, chuckling mentally at what Hermione hadn’t said. **Holding onto her aces. Is that everything?**

I think so. Except a couple of last questions...

“The events you’ve just narrated took place on a full moon, is that correct?” Scribner asked.

“Yes.”

“Were you at any time afraid that Mr. Lupin in his transformed state might bite you?”

Hermione shook her head. “No.”

“Why not?”

“I was busy being afraid of the Death Eater who wanted to kill me,” Hermione said tartly, drawing snickers from the Pack.

“Order,” said Warlock Sly testily.

“Also, I knew Moony took Wolfsbane Potion for his full moons,” Hermione finished. “When he does that, he has his human mind just like he does the rest of the time. So no, I wasn’t afraid of him.”

“No further questions,” said Scribner, sitting down.

Shybrook was on his feet immediately. “Miss Granger-Lupin – and may I say, that is a lovely name – you’ve stated that you lived with Mr. Lupin for quite a number of years. Beginning in 1982 – is that correct? Good. In light of the fact that the Wolfsbane Potion was not invented until early 1990, how did you feel about living with a werewolf growing up?”

“I’ve never been afraid of any of my guardians,” Hermione said calmly. “They take good care of us.”

“Did you ever see Mr. Lupin in his transformed state before he began to take Wolfsbane Potion?”

“But that would be very dangerous,” Hermione said, widening her eyes until she looked like Luna. Danger’s laughter resounded through Remus’ mind, Sirius was grinning, and Draco coughed a few times before he got himself under control. “Our guardians were always careful never to let us get hurt, or even be in a situation where we might get hurt if they could help it.”

Absolutely true, said Remus smugly.

Also not a real answer to the question, but we’ll hope he doesn’t notice that.

“So you were never allowed to see Mr. Lupin transformed until he began taking the Wolfsbane Potion?”

Damn, he noticed.

“We never saw him transformed and uncontrolled,” Hermione said.

Shybrook frowned, but didn’t seem to think the question worth further pursuit.

Phew. Remus sent an image of himself wiping his brow. **First hurdle past. Only several hundred left.**

And if we're sweating over here, just imagine what it's like up there on the hot seat...

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I hope I'm doing all right. I hope I haven't said anything wrong. I hope this all comes out well...

But all the faces looking her way were encouraging, hopeful, nodding, and Hermione dared to hope a little more.

“What was the atmosphere of your home like, Miss Granger-Lupin?” Shybrook asked her.

“My home is...” Hermione frowned. How to put it into words? “It’s where I want to be when I’m tired,” she said. “Where I want to go when I’m sick. And where I like to go when something goes really well for me. Because my family is there, and they’ll help me or be happy with me, whichever one is right. Because I’m theirs, and they’re mine.”

“Yes, you mentioned something earlier I wanted to ask you about.” Shybrook consulted his notes. “You said that you wanted to ‘tell the world who I belonged to.’ Are you saying that Mr. Lupin makes you feel like his property?”

Hermione fired up for a second, but intercepted several quelling glares from the Pack and got herself under control. “No,” she said simply. “Not like his property. Like his family. There are different kinds of belonging, Mr. Shybrook.”

Warlock Longwood chuckled. “Move on, Shybrook,” she advised. “You won’t get anything that way.”

“Very well.” Shybrook ran his finger down the scroll. “You mentioned, Miss Granger-Lupin, that Mr. Lupin and your sister only knew each other for two weeks before they were married. Do you think that’s unusual?”

“Objection,” said Scribner, standing. “This has nothing to do with the question before the court.”

The warlocks muttered to each other for a moment. “Sustained,” said Warlock Mables finally. “Stick with your subject, Mr. Shybrook.”

Shybrook returned to his table and accepted a note from Officer Custer, who was watching Hermione closely. Hermione caught the older witch’s eyes and held them for a long moment. Custer looked away first.

“Miss Granger-Lupin,” said Shybrook, looking up from the note. “Can you explain to the court exactly what happened to you on the night of 23 December, 1990?”

Oh dear. Hermione gulped. She hadn’t expected this. *What am I supposed to say?*

She looked over at the spectators' section. Padfoot was rubbing at the inside corner of his left eye, and Letha was nodding silently.

Tell the truth, Hermione translated. *All right...*

She skipped over the part about Danger's prophetic dream and went straight to the transformations in the cellar.

"Your sister turned you into animals?" said Shybrook with just the right amount of amazement in his voice. "Did Mr. Lupin know about this?"

"No, sir. He was upstairs."

"And why do you think your sister would do such a thing as turn you into animals?"

Scribner rose. "Objection, speculation."

"Overruled," said Warlock Sly. "Let's hear it, girl."

Hermione clenched her teeth briefly. *Don't call me girl*. "I know why she did it," she said sharply. "We knew Peter Pettigrew was hiding in his Animagus form, and humans in animal form can see other humans in animal form. Danger knew we'd have a better chance of finding Pettigrew that way."

"But did she know Pettigrew was so very nearby?" Shybrook pushed. "Why didn't she just go find him herself?"

"I don't know, maybe because she wore herself out doing the transformations and collapsed?" Hermione shot back. "And there's another reason she transformed us – so busybodies like you wouldn't come in and treat us like we were still babies and take us away from each other 'for our own good'!"

Shybrook took an involuntary step back.

"Everything the Ministry's ever done to us that's been 'for our own good' has been about splitting us up," Hermione said, feeling heat rising in her chest and letting it sweep her away. "You took Draco away for weeks, and you wouldn't let us see Moony for longer than that, and if you'd bothered to find out anything about us, you would have found out that we're happy when we're together, because that's how we've lived since I was too little to remember it!"

She flung out her hand towards the spectators' section, then to the defense table. "All the best memories of my life have these people in them. They love me. I love them. And it's been that way for twelve years. Why can't it be that way anymore? Why not?"

"Order!" snapped Warlock Sly, thumping the bench. "Sit down, girl! Hasn't anyone taught you any manners?"

“Yes, but I suppose I forgot them, since I haven’t seen him for so long,” said Hermione pointedly, seating herself again. Laughter from the spectators – on both sides! – rewarded her quip. And Moony was smiling, she saw in a sneaked glance.

“Everyone, settle down,” said Warlock Longwood. “Mr. Shybrook, continue, if you please.”

Shybrook cleared his throat. “Yes. Well. Miss Granger-Lupin, I take it, then, that you would describe your relationship with Mr. Lupin as very loving, very close.”

“He’s my father.”

“But do you not also consider Mr. Black in the light of a father?”

“Yes,” Hermione said cautiously, sensing that some sort of trap was being set.

“Then why are you so vehement that Mr. Lupin be a part of your life? Most people do perfectly well with just one father.” Shybrook smiled as if he’d said something clever.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “I suppose I’d do perfectly well with just one hand, too,” she said, “but that doesn’t mean I want the other one cut off.”

The spectators laughed again, and even Warlock Longwood chuckled at this. Shybrook looked down at his hands, frowning, then back up at Hermione. “Yes, but having two hands is a natural condition, Miss Granger-Lupin. People are born with two hands.”

“And as far back as I can remember, I’ve had two fathers and two mothers,” Hermione said. “That’s a natural condition to me. It means I have more role models, more places to go when I need help, more hands to help me up when I fall. More people to love me. Why do you want to take that away from me?”

Shybrook suddenly smiled again, and Hermione swallowed surreptitiously. “People who love you. You’ve been quite vehement on that point. But can you prove it? Can you provide proof for us, here and now, that Mr. Remus Lupin actually loves you and cares for you, and you for him?”

Hermione couldn’t help it. She laughed aloud.

“Is something funny, Miss Granger-Lupin?” said Warlock Mables, peering at her.

Hermione got herself under control. “Yes, Your Honor,” she said.

“Well, why not share it with the rest of us?”

“I’m just going to, Your Honor.” Hermione turned back to Shybrook. “Yes, sir. I can.”

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“This is it,” Harry whispered to Draco. “Hope she can do it on her own.”

“Me too.” Hermione had been able to produce the necessary proof several times in practice, but she had also failed quite a few times – in fact, she’d failed more often than she’d succeeded.

“She can,” Meghan breathed, holding hard onto Harry’s arm. “I know she can.”

“Well, why don’t you, then?” Shybrook said, stepping back.

“I need permission to use magic, Your Honors, if I may?” Hermione asked the warlocks.

“Go ahead, Miss Granger-Lupin,” said Warlock Longwood.

“Thank you.” Hermione stood up and stepped out onto the open floor space.

Scribner stood up. “If I may say a few words of explanation?”

“Shybrook?” said Warlock Sly. “You’re questioning now, it’s your decision.”

“I’m listening,” Shybrook said, leaning against his table.

“Miss Granger-Lupin proposes to cast the Patronus Charm,” said Scribner to the warlocks. “This is highly advanced magic, used in driving away dementors. In order to properly form a Patronus, the caster must concentrate very hard on a happy thought or memory. A truly powerful Patronus is known as corporeal, meaning that it takes on a form or shape.”

“We know that,” said Sly testily. “Get to the point.”

“The point, Your Honor, is that a corporeal Patronus takes on the shape of something that its caster believes will protect him or her. The form of a Patronus cannot be consciously altered, nor can it be produced forcibly. Miss Granger-Lupin’s Patronus will take the form of that which she naturally sees as protecting her.” Scribner nodded to Hermione and returned to his seat.

Hermione took a deep breath, and Harry saw her swallow again. She closed her eyes tightly, then opened them and lifted her wand.

“Expecto patronum!”

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It wasn’t enough. She could feel it even as she spoke. She didn’t have enough magic, she didn’t have enough will – she was going to fail, everything would fall through, Moony would never be able to come home again, and it would all be her fault...

The silver mist from her wand dissipated without ever assuming a shape. Hermione wanted to cry. She didn’t even have to look to see the smugness on Shybrook’s and Custer’s faces, and the horrible smiles on the spectators on their side.

“Just a moment,” said Scribner, rising, a slip of parchment in his hand. “May I request the

courtroom be darkened for Miss Granger-Lupin's second attempt, to let the form of the Patronus be more clearly seen?"

Second attempt, what second attempt? Hermione sniffled a little. *There isn't going to be any second attempt. I failed, that's all. I failed.*

"Seems reasonable," said Warlock Longwood. She waved her wand, and all but three of the torches on the walls went out.

Hermione's eyes adjusted almost instantly, as a cat's would. She took advantage of the fact to get a good long look at the defense table. *I'm sorry*, she signed rapidly to Moony, knowing she only had a few seconds before everyone else's eyes adjusted. *I'm so sorry, I messed up, I didn't do it right, it's all my fault, I'm sorry...*

Moony shook his head. *Try again, Kitten*, he told her. *You can do it.*

I can't.

You can. I know you can. Moony nodded firmly. *Try again.*

You can do it, love, Danger signed beside him. *Make us proud.*

Hermione turned her head to look at the spectators. *Knock 'em out*, Padfoot told her.

We love you, was Aletha's message. *You can do this.*

We're with you, Harry signed, indicating himself, Draco, and Meghan. *And everyone.* He patted his pendants. *All with you. Show them.*

"Miss Granger-Lupin, whenever you're ready," said Scribner from the defense table.

Hermione closed her eyes and found the memory she wanted to use. It was a summer night. Padfoot was telling a story. Meghan was snuggled against Letha, Danger supporting Draco's back. Harry's eyes were drifting shut as his body started to recover from a debilitating fever. As for herself, she lay curled in a man's lap, feeling his hand stroke her back over and over, her purr vibrating through both of them, in time with the words of the story, the beat of their hearts. Moony had come home. Nothing could be wrong with the world now.

She opened her eyes. "*Expecto patronum*," she whispered.

Silver smoke geysered from her wand and rapidly coalesced into the shape she'd been hoping for, the shape she'd prayed it would take. She knew at that moment how the Pevensie sisters must have felt on the morning after the most dreadful night ever to occur in Narnia.

The figure which stood before her was a brightly shining lion.

Another wave of Warlock Longwood's wand relit the torches, although they were hardly necessary

with the silvery light the Patronus cast. “Very impressive,” she said.

“But inconclusive,” said Shybrook, closing his mouth. “What does a lion have to do with Remus Lupin?”

“My client is a lion Animagus, a fact of which Miss Granger-Lupin is well aware,” said Scribner. “It makes sense that her Patronus would take the form she knows Mr. Lupin takes.”

“But Miss Granger-Lupin has herself stated she is a member of Gryffindor House,” countered Shybrook. “The lion is the symbol of Gryffindor. What if Miss Granger-Lupin is simply showing House pride?”

“The Patronus is a very personal protector,” Scribner said. “I doubt Miss Granger-Lupin’s House has much to do with it.”

“But you can’t discount it either.” Shybrook smirked. “Just because Miss Granger-Lupin feels protected by a lion, it doesn’t follow that she feels protected by Remus Lupin.”

“I can prove that,” said Hermione.

Both lawyers’ heads swiveled to face her. “Forgive me for doubting you, Miss Granger-Lupin,” said Shybrook, “but you claimed that at the beginning of this little exercise, and I, for one, remain unconvinced. What further proof can you offer?”

Hermione waved her wand, banishing the silver lion, though not without a pang. “Another Patronus,” she said. “One that not even you can say isn’t Mr. Lupin.”

Shybrook raised his eyebrows in a patently false way. “Another Patronus?” he said in a patronizing tone. “Did I misunderstand you, Scribner? I thought you said they were one to a customer.”

“They are, as far as I know...”

Hermione caught Scribner’s eye and nodded towards the Pack’s seats.

“Ah yes. I’d forgotten about that. Will you let me call a second witness here, Shybrook? He’s rather necessary for this.”

“Oh, go on,” said Shybrook disagreeably.

“Your Honors, if I may call Draco Black?”

The warlocks nodded. Draco was on his feet and crossing to Hermione almost immediately. **Good show,** he said, taking her hand around the wand. **Think you’ve got enough for one more?**

If you give half.

You know I will.

“Mr. Black, would you please explain your relationship to Miss Granger-Lupin?” said Scribner.

“We grew up as siblings from the age of four, but there was never any blood connection between us until this past May,” said Draco. “My blood father, when he kidnapped us, created a magical blood bond between us which makes us the equivalent of twins.”

“And because you are twins...”

“We can use each other’s magic,” said Hermione. “Or combine magic to do more than we can alone. That’s how we conjured the Patronus when the dementors were after us.”

“And is the form of your combined Patronus different than either of your individual ones?”

“Yes, sir,” said Draco.

“Do you think you could demonstrate your individual Patronus for us, Mr. Black?”

Draco let go Hermione’s hand and drew his own wand. “*Expecto patronum,*” he said, and a four-legged creature leapt from the end of his wand, solidifying after a moment into a wolf.

“Are you trying to claim,” said Shybrook, openly skeptical, “that this boy’s Patronus is a werewolf?”

“No,” said Scribner as Draco’s Patronus dissolved. “I’m claiming that their combined Patronus is a werewolf.”

The spectators on the prosecution side gasped. “Order,” said Warlock Mables, dousing the lights with her wand. “Go ahead, you two.”

Hermione felt Draco’s fingers close around hers again. **Ready?**

When you are.

Doors were opened and gates unlocked, sluices lifted and shutters thrown back. Two minds surged together, two souls touched and merged in a great laugh. This was going to be the best prank ever.

“*Expecto patronum!*” cried two voices as one.

The creature which emerged from the tip of the wand waved its tail gaily for all to see, trotting first to Shybrook and play-bowing to him, then galloping through the air to the warlocks’ bench.

“If you will note, Your Honors, the blunter snout of the combined Patronus than of Mr. Black’s,” said Scribner airily. “Also, I believe the Patronus has retractile claws...”

Front paw up, claws out, Hermione told the Patronus, which flexed its right front paw, revealing shining silver claws.

“And, of course, the tufted tail,” said Scribner as Draco had the Patronus turn around. “Miss Granger-Lupin and Mr. Black have had opportunity to see Mr. Lupin transformed in his harmless state over the summers for several years now. They are unlikely to make a mistake.”

I think he’s enjoying this, said Draco.

I’m sure he’s enjoying it, said Hermione. **Shybrook was treating him like he was stupid. Now he gets to return the favor.**

“I think we’ve seen enough,” said Warlock Longwood. “Mr. Black, Miss Granger-Lupin, would you mind?”

Draco let go Hermione’s hand, and the Patronus disappeared. Warlock Mables brought the torches up again.

“Mr. Shybrook, any further questions for these two witnesses?”

Shybrook looked up from where he’d been whispering with Custer. “No, no further questions, Your Honor.” More whispering.

“You may step down,” Warlock Longwood told Draco and Hermione.

Grinning, the twins shook hands. **Think we did good?** Draco asked his sister.

I know we did. Hermione shot Draco the image she’d just seen out the corner of her eye – Moony’s broad smile as he unfolded a note from Scribner. **See what it says?**

I like that. Draco followed Hermione back to the spectators’ seats. **I like that a lot.**

Shybrook rose. “Your Honors,” he said heavily, “my client, speaking for Wizarding Family Services, wishes to withdraw from this case. She feels it has been proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Remus Lupin is not an unsuitable person as defined by law, and therefore should be given custody of Miss Granger-Lupin. It is, of course, up to you to determine the final outcome, since the law is involved, but my client recommends that Mr. Lupin’s request be granted.”

Meghan sat up straight, quivering with anticipation. Harry’s grin reminded Hermione very strongly of Wolf. **This could be it,** Draco muttered, his fingers resting on the back of her hand as they watched the warlocks talking amongst themselves. **This could decide it all...**

Warlock Mables faced the courtroom again. “Mr. Scribner, are you amenable to letting the case be decided now?”

Scribner said a few words to Moony and Danger, then nodded. “That seems reasonable, Your Honor.”

“In that case, we will proceed to deliberation,” said Warlock Mables. “You may move around, talk amongst yourselves, but please go no farther than the restrooms. Court is still in session. We will return when a verdict has been decided upon.”

The warlocks rose and filed out. Hermione sagged against the back of the bench.

“Nice work out there,” said Letha, leaning forward and laying her hands on Hermione’s shoulders. “You didn’t let him get away with anything. And you’re stiff as a board. Hold still.”

Despite this injunction, Hermione scooted up a little in her seat to let Letha work on more of her shoulders. “Was I really good?” she asked Padfoot, turning her head to see him.

“You were excellent,” he told her, pressing his knuckles against her ear in a love-punch.

“What, my telling her isn’t enough?” Letha grumbled, her hands moving in circles on Hermione’s back.

“No, of course not,” Padfoot said. “You’re only one foot, after all.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, if Remus and I are hands, you and Danger get to be feet.”

“I’ll give you feet. Hold still.”

Padfoot yelped, and there was a resounding crash.

“Pushed him off the bench with her foot,” Harry announced, forestalling Hermione’s effort to turn around. “You all right, Padfoot?”

“Fine,” groaned Padfoot, sitting up. “Never marry a Healer. They know where to hit.” He rubbed at his side. “God, that hurt.”

“It’s your own silly fault,” Letha said. “You should know by now that when I say ‘Hold still,’ you ought to be running in the opposite direction as fast as you can.”

“But I’m not allowed to leave the courtroom. Do you want me to run into the wall? Don’t answer that,” Padfoot added quickly as Meghan and Hermione giggled. “What did I ever do to deserve this kind of family?”

“Ummm.” Draco seemed to be giving the question serious thought. “You made friends with Moony.”

“Agreed to be Harry’s godfather,” said Hermione, picking up her cue.

“Married Letha.”

“Went half-shares in me.”

“Adopted Danger as a sister.”

“Had Meghan.”

“And took me off my mother’s hands,” Draco finished.

“Are you saying you don’t want us anymore?” Harry asked. “We can always leave, you know. Moony and Danger can get their own place and we can spend summers with them. Or I could go back to my relatives. I’m sure they’d be thrilled to see me again.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom would probably take me in if Moony and Danger didn’t have enough room,” said Meghan thoughtfully. “I could have the guest bedroom down the hall from Neville’s. We’d have loads of fun.”

Padfoot sighed. “No rhetorical question is safe around you lot, is it?”

“No,” said everyone in semi-unison.

“Greetings, O Greater Pack,” said Danger, sitting down at the end of the bench and absorbing several hugs. “I’ve been sent as an emissary. Good work, Draco, and very good work, Hermione.”

Hermione sneaked a look at the defense table. Moony was sitting very still, his eyes shut and his hands folded.

“What’re you looking over there for?” Moony’s voice teased from beside her. Hermione jerked her head back. “I am so proud of you, Kitten. There just aren’t any words.”

Hermione smiled into blue-brown eyes. “I know,” she said. “Thank you.” She hugged Danger, knowing in her mind and heart that she was hugging Moony too, even if her body wasn’t convinced.

I’ll be able to hug him in his own body soon. As soon as the warlocks come back in. As soon as they tell us they’ve decided for us.

Her nose teased her, delivering faint wisps of Moony’s scent because Danger had been next to him all day. *I’ll have the real thing soon. Very soon.*

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But the warlocks took quite a long time about deciding. Shybrook and Scribner pulled their combined rank and got one of the officers to go and get some food for everyone when it became clear that there wouldn’t be a verdict before lunch time. Hermione dug out the work she’d had the teachers give her for that day and pestered Harry and Draco into doing the same. Meghan was ahead in most of her classes, but behind in Charms, which she found tricky, so Letha went off to a

corner to work with her on that. Padfoot went down to the defense table to chat with Moony and Danger.

It was around two in the afternoon when the door to the warlocks' room opened. Everyone looked up or around and started to bundle away books and papers, hurrying back to their seats. Hermione was sure that everyone could hear her heart pounding. *Please, oh please, oh please...*

Warlock Longwood stood up. "In a unanimous decision," she announced, "the law barring unsuitable people from adopting children or otherwise becoming their legal guardians... is upheld."

Draco swore under his breath. Meghan made a faint moaning noise in her throat. Hermione felt as if she, like Ron, had just fallen from Gryffindor Tower – only she had no wings to carry her to safety, and the ground was coming up fast...

"Don't panic," Harry whispered out the corner of his mouth. "I don't think she's done."

"However," Warlock Longwood continued, "the provision of the law which names werewolves as automatically 'unsuitable'..." She smiled. "...is overturned. Court is adjourned."

What... what...

Hermione screamed aloud as the meaning of the warlock's words got through to her mind.

We've won – we've won!

She was only vaguely aware of Harry flattening himself against the back of the bench, laughing, as she launched herself into the aisle. Padfoot and Letha's kiss barely registered, nor did Draco and Meghan's impromptu dance of joy. She had her own destination.

Moony met her halfway there and caught her up in his arms, swinging her around and around, then setting her back on her feet without ever letting go. "My Kitten," he murmured to her. "My own little Kitten, for all the world to see."

Hermione looked up at him. "Daddy," she said.

And burst into tears.

A flash of light startled them both. Moony said something very impolite.

"Don't worry," Danger said from behind him. "His film's already melted. Hermione, love, you were brilliant!"

She hugged them both, and Moony freed an arm to pull her in. Then Draco was beside them, and Harry, and Meghan squirmed her way into the very middle of the hug and demanded a kiss.

"One kiss," said Moony, bestowing it upon the uplifted nose. "And one smack." He rapped the

nose very lightly. “And now I want both my girls, and then both my boys, and then...”

“Yeah?” said Harry when Moony paused. “Then what?”

“Then I think we should go home,” said Moony. “You’re not due back at school until tomorrow, are you?”

Four heads shook. “Not even for any clubs,” said Draco. “No Quidditch either.”

“Now you see,” said Hermione, rubbing at her eyes. “Aren’t you glad there isn’t Quidditch this year?”

Harry and Draco looked at each other with an expression Hermione knew well, one they often shared with Ron. *Girls just don’t get it.* Normally, this irritated Hermione. At this moment, she didn’t care. The building could have fallen in, she thought, and as long as it didn’t crush her Pack, she wouldn’t have cared.

“Let’s go home,” she said, holding onto Moony, and seeing out the corner of her eye Padfoot and Letha both hugging Danger in celebration. “All of us.”

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But they ended up at Hogwarts after all.

First they had to stop by to tell Dumbledore how the case had gone. Dumbledore reminded them politely that the rest of the Pride was probably anxious to hear about it as well, and that certain teachers would also want to know. Professor McGonagall was in the Headmaster’s office in a moment, and Hagrid, summoned by Patronus, in a few minutes more, and there was another round of congratulations and hugging, with Hagrid leaving his victims rather breathless.

“Think we need a party,” said Ron when everything had settled down a little. “I mean, Professor, can we please celebrate this?”

Professor McGonagall sighed. “I’d be a fool to say no, when you’re obviously going to do it anyway,” she said. “But please hold it somewhere other than the common room, and remember you have classes tomorrow.”

“Kitchen’s the best place for parties,” said Padfoot. “No need to go anywhere else to get the food. Whaddaya say, Moony? Your game.”

“The kitchen sounds like a good idea,” said Moony, smiling at everyone. “And you’re all invited. Even you, Minerva. I know you don’t enjoy noisy get-togethers, but surely you can spare a few minutes for a special occasion like this.”

“Well...” Professor McGonagall looked torn. “I suppose for a few minutes...”

“Excellent,” said Letha, opening the door to the Headmaster’s office. “Shall we, then?”

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Harry sat cross-legged on the floor, watching Luna trounce the rest of the Pride at Gobstones. She lined up a shot and knocked Ron's last stone out of the circle. Ron screwed up his face to receive the blast. Nothing came.

People began to chuckle as Ron held still. Finally, he opened one eye. "What ha—"

The stone squirted him. Everyone laughed as he spit a mouthful of the stuff onto the floor. "Blah," he said as three house-elves scurried in to clean it up. "Thanks," he added as one of them handed him a washcloth to wipe his face, and another one a glass of water to rinse his mouth out. "That's nasty."

"They make it out of Stinksap, from the *Mimulus mibletonia* plant," said Neville. "The undiluted version is even worse."

"There's an undiluted version?" Ron shuddered. "Remind me never to play Gobstones with your set, Neville. I'm out anyway." He scooped up his Gobstones and stood up. "Think I need something to take that taste away."

Harry stood up and followed his friend to the buffet table. The adults, other than Moony who was sitting with Hermione, were chatting in a corner – Professor McGonagall's few minutes had stretched into a few hours.

"Congrats, Harry," Ron said, lifting his éclair in salute. "Glad you've got Mr. Moony back. I don't know what I'd do if someone wanted to take my Dad away. Why's the Ministry have to stick their big noses in everything anyway?"

"Maybe to give people like Percy something to do."

"Percy." Ron snorted. "Stupid git. Him and his boss. Crouch keeps promising to put in a good word for Percy with Fudge. Can't you just see it? Percy Weasley, Special Assistant to the Minister?"

"Bet Percy can see it," said Harry, grinning. "Bet he likes it, too."

"Never could understand him," said Ron thickly through a mouthful of éclair. "Either he's missing something or I am."

"I think it's him. And I think it's called a sense of humor."

"Think you're right." Ron swallowed. "Percy wouldn't recognize a joke if it flew up his backside. I can't even remember the last time I saw him laugh, unless somebody higher-ranked than him was laughing first."

Harry shook his head. "What kind of life is that? Never have any fun, never do anything you like, just work all day and hope people notice you?"

“I think that *is* what he likes,” said Ron, taking another bite of éclair. “Getting noticed, I mean. Always has. Even when we were kids, he always did his chores right on time and stood there until Mum or Dad noticed them. And he liked to rat us out if we didn’t do ours. Either that or do them himself and then announce it.”

“Glad I don’t have any older brothers,” said Harry, taking a chocolate chip cookie for himself.

“Yeah, you do. But he’s only five days older.”

“That’s not enough to really count.”

“True. Want to go sit by the fire?”

“Sure.” Harry picked up a plate of treats. “With this.”

“Can’t insult the house-elves.” Ron snagged two fresh bottles of butterbeer. Thus equipped, they crossed the kitchen to the enormous fireplace, where Winky sat staring disconsolately into the flames. “We were just talking about your old boss,” said Ron to the house-elf.

“Did you have to do that?” Harry muttered as Winky’s head slowly came up. “Now she’ll start crying.”

“Winky’s master?” said Winky, staring at them both with great bloodshot eyes. “You have been seeing him?”

“Well, he was here last week,” said Harry. “For the first task of the Triwizard Tournament.”

Winky sniffled. “Is Master... is he well?” she asked tearily.

“I didn’t get a good look at him,” said Harry truthfully. “Ron?”

“He looks okay, I guess,” said Ron. “Kind of tired, though. Like he hasn’t been sleeping well.”

“Ohhh...” Winky let out a great sob. “Winky is knowing it! Winky is knowing it! Master is not well because Winky is not there to help him! Not there to help with his biggest – with his greatest trouble – poor Master, poor Master, with no Winky there to help him...” She began to sob into her tiny blue skirt.

“Winky is being like this all the time, sirs,” said Dobby, coming up beside Winky. “She is missing Mr. Crouch terribly, and nothing Dobby nor anyone else can say can make her believe that she is a Hogwarts house-elf now.”

Winky wailed even louder. “Winky is a bad elf, a bad elf!” she cried. “Only bad elves is getting clothes from their families! Good elves has their families and stays with them – only bad elves is looking for work somewhere other than a good family!”

“Wait a second,” said Ron slowly. “Wait a second...”

Harry looked over at his friend and saw an idea dawning in the blue eyes. “Are you thinking?” he said incredulously.

“Don’t tell anyone, all right?” Ron knelt down. “Winky,” he said, tapping the elf on the shoulder. “Winky, come on, look at me. Right now.”

Winky lifted her head from her hands.

“Winky, would you like to have a family? A real wizarding family, and lots of work to do?”

Timidly, Winky nodded. “But no family is wanting a bad elf like Winky,” she said tremulously.

“Not true,” said Ron. “I know a family that would love to have you. They’d take you on tomorrow if you wanted.”

Harry cottoned on, and turned away for a second to get his face under control. *Ron should think more often. He’s actually pretty good at it.*

Winky sniffled. “A real wizarding family?” she asked.

“Magic through and through,” Ron promised.

“Winky would do all the work she wanted?”

Ron grinned. “I can guarantee it.”

“And Winky is not getting paid?”

“Well, not if you don’t want to,” said Ron, looking a bit confused.

Winky shook her head hard. “I is *not*. No good house-elf is getting paid.” This was directed straight at Dobby. “House-elves does their master’s work and they keeps their master’s secrets and they does *not* ask for anything more! Especially bad house-elves that is getting clothing!”

“You know, if you went into service with a family, you wouldn’t have to wear clothing anymore,” Harry said. “I’m sure Mrs... um, the lady you’d be working for... I’m sure she’d let you wear what you liked.”

Winky’s huge brown eyes were focused on some point over Harry’s left shoulder. “A family... a wizard family... but Winky is a bad elf, Winky should not have a family...”

“Winky, do you want to punish yourself for being a bad elf?” said Harry, seizing the moment, before Ron’s good idea fell apart.

Winky brought her eyes down to him. “Yes, sir, oh, yes, sir, Harry Potter, sir,” she said quickly, staring at him. “Does Harry Potter know how Winky can punish herself, sir?”

“I think so,” Harry said. “A good punishment takes away something you like, right? Something you want to do, or keep doing?”

Winky nodded.

“So your punishment for being a bad elf is that you have to stop crying,” Harry said. “And stop drinking so much butterbeer. And take care of yourself, wash up and such. All right?”

Winky’s lower lip trembled. “I is not wanting to take care of myself, sir,” she said. “I is wanting to remember my shame always...”

“That’s what makes it such a good punishment,” Ron said. “Because you do it even though you don’t want to. All right?”

Winky looked at the half-filled bottle of butterbeer by her side, then up at Ron again. “A real family?” she asked again.

“Real as you like,” Ron said. “Seven kids, though we’re all at Hogwarts now. But Percy’s back home since he works at the Ministry, and Mum and Dad are there, and you’d have us all during the summers.”

“Seven children?” Winky’s eyes were starting to light up. “Seven children is meaning lots of work... lots of laundry and cooking and dishes...”

“And they’ve got loads of friends, too,” said Harry. “Everybody here is their friend. And we’re at their house almost every day over the holidays. What d’you think?”

Winky picked up the butterbeer bottle, looked at it once more, then snapped the fingers of her other hand. The bottle vanished. “Winky is doing it, sir,” she said, lifting her head proudly. “Winky is bearing up with her disgrace, and finding a new home with a new family to serve.”

“Excellent,” said Ron. “Now, do you think you could stay here just one more month? Until Christmas? I won’t go back on it, don’t worry,” he said hastily as Winky looked frightened. “It’s just I think you’d make a great Christmas gift for Mum.”

Winky brightened immediately. “Master is a good son to his mother,” she said. “May I ask what is Master’s name?”

Harry fought back a laugh at the expression on Ron’s face as he realized just how seriously Winky was taking him. “Er, it’s Ron. Ron Weasley. My sister Ginny’s over there, the one with the red hair, and you’ve probably seen Fred and George, I know they come down here lots.”

“Is they the twins, sir? The twins with the red hair?”

“That’s them. The whole family’s got it, it’s like a curse.” Ron tugged on a hank of his hair. “And the older three are Bill and Charlie and Percy. Percy lives at home still, he’s got glasses. Charlie’s a dragon-keeper and Bill’s a curse-breaker for Gringotts. And my mum and dad, and

that's everyone."

Winky nodded, counting on her fingers. "Nine people," she said. "Three who lives at home most of the time, four at school, two who live... where?"

"Bill's in Egypt right now, but that could change," said Ron. "And Charlie's in Wales, but he comes around a lot. He's got a girlfriend named Tonks, she's a Metamorphmagus so she looks different every day."

"I'll leave you two alone," said Harry, edging away. He'd only gone a few steps, though, when he felt a tug on his robes. "What's up, Dobby?"

"Dobby is hoping to ask Harry Potter a question," said the house-elf, rubbing his hands together. "About Master Draco."

"You know, I really don't think he likes it when you call him that," said Harry. "But it's all right. What about him?"

Dobby winced. "Perhaps Dobby should not ask, then... perhaps Dobby's question is foolish..."

"No, it's all right. What is it?"

"Well, sir... Dobby knows that Master Draco and Harry Potter and their family are living very close to the Wheezies. And..." Dobby cast a glance over his shoulder. "Dobby was just wondering if Master Draco would consent to Dobby being his house-elf again, and going to Master Draco's family home. Dobby would not ask for pay from his master, nor days off, no, sir, because Dobby knows that Master Draco does not need a house-elf, and Dobby does not want to be a burden..." Again that odd backward glance.

"Dobby, do you like Winky?" Harry asked.

A darker shade of puce spread over Dobby's face. Harry had no trouble recognizing a house-elf blush. "You do, don't you?" he said. "And you're happy that she has a family again, but you're sad because it means she's going away. Dobby, do you like it at Hogwarts?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Dobby loves it at Hogwarts! Hogwarts is... it is an exciting place, sir! Dobby likes exciting places!" Dobby curbed himself sharply. "But Dobby would not mind if Master Draco's home was not exciting, because he knows his place, Dobby does. He knows where he belongs..."

"And that's at Hogwarts, where you want to be," said Harry firmly. "Listen, Dobby, if you like Winky, why don't you ask Dumbledore for an extra day or two off every month, and you can go and visit her? I'm sure Mrs. Weasley wouldn't mind. Or she can come and visit here."

Dobby shook his head. "Winky would not like that, sir," he said with certainty. "Winky believes that house-elves should not leave their masters' homes unless their masters orders them to go."

"Well, maybe Mrs. Weasley can order her to come and visit you every so often," said Harry.

“You’ll work something out. Trust me, you don’t want to go live at the Den. You and Danger would drive each other up the wall. Just stay here where you’re happy. All right?”

Dobby smiled. “All right, Harry Potter, sir.”

“Shake on it?” said Harry, offering his hand.

“Yes, sir.”

xXxXx

Mr. Charles Weasley and Miss Nymphadora Tonks (sorry, but it is your name)

Are cordially invited

To a dinner at the home of

Mr. Remus Lupin and Mrs. Gertrude “Danger” Granger-Lupin

And Mr. Sirius Black and Mrs. Aletha Freeman-Black

In celebration of

Mr. Lupin’s recent acquisition of custody of Miss Hermione Granger-Lupin

And the birthdays of various of the party (no gifts required)

Saturday, 3 December

Appetizers at 5:00 PM

R.S.V.P. The Marauders’ Den

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 41: Pairing Off (Year 4)

Chapter 41: Pairing Off

“Say, we seem to be short a guest,” said Sirius, looking at the empty chair Tonks had been occupying for most of the evening. “Any idea where she went?”

“The powder room,” said Danger with delicacy.

“That was ten minutes ago,” said Charlie, fidgeting with something in his pocket. “Think she’s all right? Maybe someone should go check.”

“Let the poor girl be,” said Remus. “I want to hear more about this Norwegian Ridgeback – why were you hand-raising it again?”

“Well, he came to us under some odd circumstances,” said Charlie, hand still in his pocket. “Tonks... found him. In a basement in Bath.”

Aletha chuckled, suddenly understanding. “It seems to me I’ve heard that story before,” she said, turning to Remus. “The night there’d be no need to feed Fang?”

“Ah,” said Remus, his face clearing. “So... the people in Bath hand-raised this dragon, so he’s semi-tolerant of humans, is that right?”

“Yes, and for some reason he seems to like me better than anyone else. So when I got my transfer, he went into a sulk and wouldn’t eat. Eventually they transferred him with me, and he perked right back up. He doesn’t like me to get too close, but if he doesn’t see me every so often, he gets grouchy.”

“I wonder how he’d react to... *Mummy*?” asked Danger, her eyes wicked.

“I’d rather not find out, if you don’t mind,” said Charlie hastily. “I mean, I like dragons quite a bit, but I’d rather not be too close if one got enthusiastic, if you understand me right.”

“More of what Diggory got at the first task?” said Sirius.

“Or worse. Did I tell you about the time—” Charlie pulled his hand from his pocket to gesture enthusiastically, and something small fell from it to land on the floor with a muffled thump. Aletha got a glance at it as it fell, and suddenly several things became clear.

“Excuse me,” she said, standing up. “I’ll go see what’s happened to Tonks.”

I wonder if she knows, and she’s hiding because she doesn’t think she’s ready?

She started towards the bathroom, but changed course when she heard the telltale sounds.

Someone was in the music room, crying, and unless one of the cubs had sneaked home from Hogwarts, there was only one candidate.

Though why Tonks was crying with one of the Pack's photograph albums on her lap, Aletha hadn't a clue.

Feeling like a traitor, she cleared her throat. Tonks jumped a foot and slammed the book shut, but not before Aletha got a glimpse of two types of brown hair very close together on the page the younger woman had been looking at.

"Is something wrong?" Aletha asked quietly. "We were starting to worry about you."

"No, nothing's wrong," said Tonks, putting the album aside. "I was just... looking at some of your old pictures here. Thinking of Mum... wishing she were here..." Her face crumpled. "No, I'm not, either," she wailed under her breath, dropping her face into her hands. "I'm bloody miserable and it's not because of Mum!"

Aletha flicked an Imperturbable Charm onto the doorway and crossed the room, pulling up a rocking chair to be near the big armchair where Tonks was sobbing. "Anything I can help with?" she asked.

"No. Maybe. I don't know." Tonks lifted her face, revealing her 'real' features, vaguely similar to Sirius' and not at all unattractive. "Do you understand love?"

"I can't say I understand it," said Aletha. "I've had some experience with it, certainly."

"Have you ever... no, you haven't, it's not normal, I'm just a freak, I should have known that..."

"Have I ever...?" Aletha repeated, prompting.

"Have you ever... ever been in love... with two people at the same time?"

"Two people at the same time?"

Tonks balled her fist and slammed it into the cushions of the armchair. "I knew it," she said in time with her punches. "I knew it, I knew it, I knew I was a freak... I should get my head examined, I hate myself..."

"Hold it," said Aletha, catching Tonks' fist as it traveled back for another blow. "Who are these people? Do they know? I need some more information if I'm going to help you."

Tonks shook her head. "You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

"No."

“Yes.” Aletha let out a small chuckle. “Don’t try this game with me. I’m a mother. And you know our lot. They don’t give up easily. We had to learn to outlast them, and I will outlast you, so why don’t you just tell me now and save us both some time.”

Tonks remained defiant for the space of three breaths, then began to sag. “They should hire you at the Office,” she said, her shoulders drooping. “Make you an interrogator.”

“Sirius says that every week. Now. Who are you in love with?”

“Charlie.”

“No problems so far.”

Tonks had sagged so far by this time that her mouth was pressed against the back of the armchair, and the name that emerged was distorted by the cushions just enough that Aletha thought she might have heard wrong. *Because if I didn’t, we really do have a problem.* “Say that again, please?”

Tonks sat up a little and swallowed hard. “Remus.”

All right, I wasn’t wrong. And we do have a problem.

Tonks sniffled hard. “See, there. You think I’m messed up now.”

“No, I’m just surprised.” *Control, Letha, control.* “*All right.* You’re in love with Remus. When did this happen?”

Tonks stared at her. “You mean you don’t hate me?”

“Why should I hate you?”

“Because I want to break up your best friends’ marriage!”

“Do you?”

Another sniffle. “No.”

Aletha Summoned the box of tissues from the bathroom and handed one to Tonks. “Blow. When did you... fall in love with Remus?”

Tonks wiped her eyes. “While the hearing was going on, while I was doing bodyguard duty. I never meant to, I swear I didn’t... but he was always so polite, even when people were being rude to him... even when there was nearly a riot and people threw things, he didn’t shout back at them. It was like they weren’t there at all, he just walked right on by, and I... I couldn’t help it. He’s amazing.”

“I agree,” said Aletha. “Anything else?”

“He’s great to be around, just as an everyday thing. I mean, he cracks these quiet little jokes that make you laugh when you get them, and then when you think of them, all day long, and the next day, and the next. And he laughs at other people’s jokes, too. Even mine. When I said you could tell the bigots were worthless, because they were just ‘big gits’? He actually laughed at that. Charlie never laughs when I make a dumb joke. He groans and tells me how dumb it is.”

“Maybe that’s how he shows appreciation for it,” Aletha suggested

Tonks didn’t seem to think much of this. “And – God, this sounds wrong – but I’m attracted to the way he’s in love with Danger. Isn’t that sick? I think it’s so gorgeous, the way he’s always near her, and the way they just kiss every so often like it’s nothing special, and the way they don’t seem to need to talk...” She looked pleadingly at Aletha. “How screwed up am I? Really?”

“I don’t think you’re screwed up at all,” said Aletha carefully. “I think your interest in Remus is... understandable. But I don’t think I’d call it love. Of course, I’m not you, and I don’t know your feelings, but what you’re describing sounds a lot like a crush.”

Tonks groaned. “Just shoot me now. A crush? Like some stupid teenager, falling in love with the drummer from the Weird Sisters?”

“No, not like a stupid teenager. Like a person who wants some security in a tumultuous life, and who sees people who have that security and mistakes wanting what they have for wanting one of them.”

Tonks nodded slowly. “I think I get what you’re saying,” she said. “But it isn’t like that. It’s him. It really is him. I can’t stop thinking about him – even when I’m with Charlie, I’m thinking about Remus... it’s not fair!” This rose to a volume that made Aletha glad she’d Imperturbed the room. “I want him, but I want him to be happy, and he’s happy barely knowing I exist! It’s not bloody *fair!*”

She punched the wall at full power before Aletha could stop her. Her fist went through the drywall and came back out bloody. “Shite, look what I did, I’m so sorry, your wall...”

“Is easy to fix,” said Aletha, waving her wand to do just that. “Sit still, I’ll get you something for those.” She nodded to Tonks’ knuckles. “My potions room is right there.”

Tonks nodded and curled back up.

In the potions room, wondering all the while if she was doing right, Aletha pulled a dusty flask off a shelf, opened it, and sniffed it. The fragrance of clean dog, clean laundry, and crisp sheet music reassured her that the potion hadn’t lost its strength since she’d brewed it six years ago.

A variant of a specialized Summoning Charm used to disinfect Healers netted her a pile of Charlie Weasley’s skin flakes. These she dumped into the potion, and watched it change color ever so slightly.

This is wrong, her conscience nagged her. You shouldn't be doing this. You're meddling.

But what was the alternative? Try to talk Tonks through it and make everyone worried because they didn't come back, or embarrass Remus and Tonks and Charlie by revealing the truth? Either way would spoil what Charlie had planned for tonight.

And I'm positive any feelings she has for Remus are a combination of a schoolgirl crush and sheer jealousy because of how well Remus and Danger work together. She's been with Charlie since Hogwarts, he helped her get through her mother's death, she loves him. I know she does. This is the best thing to do.

Even if her conscience was still grumbling in the background.

She handed the potion to Tonks and watched with misgivings as the younger witch downed it in a gulp. It barely made her smile as Tonks' hair shaded rapidly through every hue in the rainbow and settled finally on an exaggerated Weasley red.

"Charlie," Tonks breathed. "Why are we in here when Charlie's in there?"

"We'll go back in there right away," Aletha said, and took down the Imperturbable Charm, glad for the side effect that it kept her back to Tonks for a moment. She hadn't realized it would hit quite so hard. Would anyone else notice anything wrong?

There's nothing wrong, she tried to argue. You know she really loves Charlie, and she doesn't really love Remus. She'd make everyone miserable, including herself, if she tried to love Remus. And she'll make everyone happy, including herself, if she stays in love with Charlie. So this is about the greater good.

She hoped if she told herself that enough times, it would come true.

xXxXx

"You really think I should?"

Charlie's expression was embarrassingly familiar to Sirius. He'd seen himself parodied often enough to recognize the 'lovesick puppy' look. "Yes, we really think you should," he said. "Why shouldn't you?"

"Well, I don't know what she'll say..."

"Any woman with any sense would say yes," said Remus. "And Tonks has sense. Balance, not so much, but sense, yes."

Charlie laughed. "All right, that's true. But you're not mad that I'm doing it here?"

"We're flattered," said Danger. "Or we would be, if we had any indication that you actually intend to do it and not just talk about it."

“I’m going to do it.” Charlie squared his shoulders. “Just as soon as she comes back in...”

“Going to do what?” said Tonks, sweeping into the room. “Whatever it is, I’m up for it, lover boy.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and planted a kiss squarely on his mouth. Sirius averted his eyes decorously and spotted Aletha, standing in the doorway looking uncomfortable.

What’s wrong? he signed to her.

Nothing, she signed back, but there was a funny little edge to her scent, as if she’d done something she wasn’t sure about.

“Now I’m really sure,” said Charlie, emerging from the kiss breathless and flushed. “Let go a second, love? There’s something I need to ask you.”

Tonks released him and perched on her chair, leaning forward. “I’m listening.”

Charlie went to one knee and pulled the ring box from his pocket. “Will you marry me?”

The chair went over backwards. So did Charlie.

Twenty minutes of congratulations later, toasts having been duly drunk in champagne, the newly betrothed pair departed for the Burrow to break the news to Arthur and Molly.

“And we shouldn’t go to bed for a while, because Molly’s sure to wake us up when she screams for joy,” said Remus as the Floo flames faded back into their original color. “When do you think they’ll have the wedding?”

“Soon, I hope,” said Danger. “They’ve been living together for a year and a half, and they’ve been together for... what is it now, five years? Six?”

“Five,” said Sirius. “But I’ve never seen her quite like that. What did you tell her, Letha? Kissing him would make him more likely to propose?”

Aletha’s smile was almost entirely natural. If you didn’t know her through and through, Sirius thought, you’d never see the little lines that meant it was forced. “Something like that. She had a problem that I helped her work through quickly, because I knew Charlie was waiting with the ring in here.”

“Helped her work through it quickly? That looked like you dosed her with a love potion...” Sirius was laughing, until he got a look at Aletha’s face. “Er, Letha love, you do know I was joking, right?”

“You did, didn’t you,” said Remus quietly.

Aletha’s chin went up. “Yes, I did. I did what had to be done.”

“You call dosing her with a love potion ‘what had to be done’?” Danger sounded incredulous. “If

she doesn't really love him, why force her to marry him? They'll only be miserable in the long run..."

"You have no idea what's going on here, so don't try to figure out why I did it," Aletha said harshly. "And no, I won't tell you. It's between me and Tonks, and no one else. It's done, and I still say it was for the best. If you'll excuse me, I'm going to bed."

Sirius leaned against the wall, feeling the beat of Aletha's feet marking time up the stairs. "Maybe we just shouldn't have guests over," he said wearily.

"Maybe not." Remus was frowning. "But a love potion... why would she give Tonks a love potion, when she was already in love with Charlie? Unless she'd fallen out of love, and Letha thought it would be better to preserve the status quo..."

"But that doesn't make sense," objected Danger. "Love potions wear off. It takes a while, but they do. Unless she's planning to keep dosing Tonks, it's not going to help."

"You know, we never asked, but maybe Tonks wanted the potion," Sirius said, aware he was grasping at straws but doing it anyway. "Maybe she knew Charlie was going to propose and wanted to... give him a good show."

"Ugh!" Danger shuddered all over. "That's even more horrible – manufacturing love to give somebody a good show..."

"But the truth is, we don't know all the facts," said Remus firmly. "And we shouldn't judge Letha based on only a partial knowledge. Why don't we suspend judgment until more information arises, clean up from our entertaining, and listen for Molly's carols of joy before we go to bed?"

"See, this is why I'm not the alpha," said Sirius. "I couldn't say it like that."

"But you could say it."

"If I had to. It just wouldn't sound as good as it does when you say it."

"You like it because he's advocating not jumping to conclusions about the woman you married," said Danger, starting the dishes to stacking themselves with a wave of her wand.

"That too." Sirius gathered the silverware and sent it sailing into the kitchen.

xXxXx

"So you know what you're doing, right?" Hermione said, straightening Ron's collar.

"Yes, I know. You've only told me about a thousand times." Ron picked some lint off his blanket. "Don't admit anything, get her to admit something – you know, she makes her living getting people to admit things. How am I going to get her to do it?"

“Because she thinks you’re just a dumb kid,” said Harry.

Ron muttered something under his breath that sounded like, “Bet she’s right.”

“Besides, you’ve got another witness,” said Draco. “One she doesn’t know about.”

“As long as I can maintain it,” said Neville. “I’ve been practicing – I can hold the form with no trouble, but it’s harder to stay invisible reliably, especially if I get surprised.”

“So stay somewhere she can’t see you, even if you lose it,” said Ginny. “You’re smaller than a human anyway, so you can hide places a human couldn’t. You just have to be close enough to hear.”

Harry checked the clock. “It’s almost five-thirty,” he said. “You’d better hurry.”

Ron nodded and sat down on his bed. “Ready, Neville?”

“I think so. Hang on a tic.” Neville shut his eyes and muttered to himself, but instead of making everyone’s eyes veer away from him, this muttering produced a rapid decrease in his size, the sprouting of silvery fur, and various other changes. Moments later, a silvery demiguise climbed onto Ron’s back, shut its black eyes, and vanished.

Ron stood up and wobbled a little. Harry steadied him until he regained his balance. “Got it now,” he said. “Wish me luck.”

“Break a leg,” said Draco. “Preferably hers.”

“You’re so violent,” said Meghan, making a face. “Be careful, Neville. Don’t let her see you too.”

The demiguise’s head reappeared for a moment, long enough for it to shake back and forth vigorously.

xXxXx

Rita Skeeter walked down the steps of the little hut by the Forest, humming to herself. She’d thought there was no way anyone of pure human blood could be so large, and she’d been right. This would make juicy copy... Dumbledore’s pet gamekeeper, foolishly promoted to a teaching position, a good friend of Harry Potter and his family, actually half-giant...

And then there was her next interview – here he came now, walking slowly across the lawns. The red hair made him easy to spot. Harry Potter’s best friend, an illegal Animagus. Which meant Harry himself must be as well, mustn’t he? It just wouldn’t make sense otherwise. No one talked about whatever-his-name-was Weasley.

Rita frowned. The boy’s cloak seemed to be moving oddly, as if something held it down on his back... no, it was just that he was holding it shut in the front, to guard against the cold wind. That

was all. She was getting paranoid.

But that was how one got good copy, after all, by keeping one's eyes and ears – *and antennae* – open.

The boy nodded to her sulkily as he stopped. “Here I am,” he said bluntly. “What do you want?”

“Just to talk to you, Mr. Weasley – I'm afraid I've forgotten your first name...”

“Ron.”

“May I call you Ron? Lovely.” She seized his arm and started leading him around the cabin. “I saw some tables back here – we can sit and talk, be very comfortable...” She deposited him in a chair, then slipped back around the corner just in time to see Hagrid depart by the front door, headed for the castle, just as he'd told her. *Perfect.*

The boy had seated himself in one of the chairs, his cloak hanging over the back. “How'd you see me?” he asked as Rita sat down across from him. “There wasn't anyone around.”

“Trade secret, I'm afraid.” Rita was arranging her tools on the table before her. “Now, if we could just start...”

“Wait a second.” The boy sat up. “There weren't any people around... but there was this big bug, and it looked funny...” He stared closely at her. “I read somewhere that...” He waved to himself. “...you know... can spot other ones. You're not...”

Rita suppressed a feeling of alarm – it wasn't as if he could harm her with the knowledge – and permitted herself a smirk instead.

“You are! You're an–”

“Ah-ah,” said Rita quickly, waving her hand.

The boy subsided. “But you are,” he said. “Aren't you?”

Rita lifted her Quick-Quotes Quill away from the paper and leaned in. “Yes,” she said, smiling toothily. “Yes, I am. And do you know what you can do about it?”

“Nothing,” grumbled the boy, staring at the table.

“That's right. Nothing. Because if you tell anyone, anyone at all – why, then I'll have no choice but to tell everyone what I saw. And you don't want that. They might let you off Azkaban, but you'd probably be suspended, maybe even expelled from school. It'd be on your record for life. And anyone who helped you, if they were adults, they could go to Azkaban for it.” Ah-ha – a flash of alarm in the boy's eyes. Rita filed the information carefully away and set her quill down on the parchment again. “Now, why don't you tell me all about Harry Potter? What's he really like? Proud? Officious? Overbearing?”

“Best friend I’ve ever had.”

“No, no, you’re not understanding me. I know you have to say that when he’s listening, but there’s no one else here. We’re alone. You can be honest with me. Tell me about the real Harry.”

“Are you deaf, or stupid? He’s my friend.”

Rita smiled to herself as her quill rearranged those sentences into a more pleasing form. “Careful, now, Ron,” she urged. “Insults won’t get us anywhere. I just want the truth.”

“And I’m telling you the truth, and you won’t listen to it. Asking me more times won’t change the answers.” The boy scowled. “Why do you want to talk to me anyway? Why don’t you just make things up, like you did with Harry, and with his dad?”

“Harry’s father?” Rita frowned. “You must be mistaken. I don’t recall ever interviewing the late James Potter.”

“You know who I’m talking about. Mr. Lupin.”

Rita smiled. “Ah, yes. But you don’t understand, Ron. I didn’t have to make anything up. I just happened to hear about his rather shady financial dealings while I was... *buzzing* around Gringotts.”

The boy launched into a tirade about how the scheme Lupin had used wasn’t shady, how it had been the only way to keep Death Eaters from getting at the money. Rita polished her nails and let her quill do its work.

“...nothing but a *spy*,” the boy wound up, and added a few lines of description that nearly made the quill smoke. “Who’s next? Me? Hermione? Draco?”

Rita chuckled. “No, not Mr. Black. There’s no need. His face alone does the job nicely. Did he enjoy his little sojourn at the Notts’ this summer?”

The boy scowled. “Bet you had something to do with that,” he muttered.

Rita kept her smile placid, but a flash of alarm raced through her. How could he have known –

No. He doesn’t know. He’s casting in the dark. I can’t let him know he’s hit. Move on. “You didn’t answer me,” she said. “How did he like it?”

The interview lasted another fifteen minutes, but the boy was more and more uncooperative until the very end, when he flatly refused to answer anything else. “Have enough for another one of your articles yet?” he asked.

“Just one more question,” purred Rita. “Who will Harry be taking to the Yule Ball?”

“The what?”

“The Yule Ball. On Christmas Day. He’ll have to open the dancing, as a champion. I wondered if you could tell me who he’s thought of asking?”

The boy looked dumbfounded. “There’s a *dance* ?”

“First you’ve heard of it?” said Rita in surprise. “I thought it would be all over the school by now.”

The boy shook his head. “They haven’t told us anything,” he said. “A dance with partners?”

“Most dances require partners,” said Rita, suddenly tired of this young fool. “Well, if you can’t tell me anything, I’ll just, as you put it, make something up. Thank you so much, Ron, it was a pleasure talking with you, really a pleasure. And don’t forget, because I haven’t...”

The boy glared at her. “If you call, I come?”

“Like a hawk to its master’s glove,” said Rita sweetly. “Good-bye, Ron. Have a happy Christmas.”

She changed forms and started for the gate – after all, he couldn’t tell anyone about her, and she shouldn’t be on the grounds in human form any longer than she had to be...

xXxXx

“I should have brought a jar,” said Ron in disgust, kicking at clods of dirt.

“Some other time, maybe,” said Neville philosophically. “She did have something to do with sending Draco to the Notts’, though. Her smell went over funny when you said it. And she’s been around Gringotts – the goblins wouldn’t like that.”

“But we can’t use any of it, or she’ll tell about me, and get Mr. Moony and them into trouble.” Ron kicked a pebble and watched it go sailing into the Forest. “Why didn’t I bring a jar?”

“We can write it down and save it, and maybe tell someone about it,” said Neville, fastening his cloak. “Someone who won’t get you in trouble for it. Or anyone else. Come on, it’s getting toward dinnertime, and everyone will want to hear about the Yule Ball.”

xXxXx

“...and champions have to open the dancing,” said Ron, waving his fork for emphasis. “So Harry’s going to need a partner.”

Harry looked down at his half-finished dinner and felt suddenly unable to eat anything else. “I have to dance all by myself?” he said.

“No, you have to dance with a girl,” said Luna.

“I knew that. But without anyone else on the floor? I mean, besides the other champions?”

“That is what ‘open the dancing’ usually means,” said Hermione. “But I don’t think you have to do a whole song. It’s not like a wedding.”

“Oh, good.” Harry shoved his plate away. “I never would have known that if you hadn’t told me.”

“So who’re you going to ask?” said Draco.

“Why’s it any of your business?”

“Merlin, I was just asking.”

“Who’s allowed to go?” Neville asked. “I mean, is there an age you have to be?”

Ron shrugged. “I don’t think they’d let the really little kids go,” he said.

“Thanks a lot,” said Meghan.

“Didn’t mean you specifically.”

“Well, if there’s a student at Hogwarts littler than Meghan, I’ve never seen her,” said Ginny. “Or him.”

“There will be,” said Meghan with dignity. “Mama Letha says I’m just slow to grow.”

“And she would know, because she’s just so,” said Draco. “Dinner table poetry. Thank you very much.”

Ron dropped an ice cube down Draco’s back. Draco yelped and knocked his pumpkin juice over into Ron’s lap. Harry ignored the ensuing ruckus in favor of his own thoughts.

Could I ask Cho? Would she go with me? She’s older than me, she’s pretty, she’s popular, she’s really good at Quidditch...

“She’ll never go with you if you don’t ask her,” said Luna from across the table.

“Huh?” Harry looked up. “Who?”

“Whoever you’re thinking about. She won’t go to the Ball with you if you don’t ask her to go. And you’d better ask her soon, or someone else might.”

“Fine.” Tomorrow, Harry decided. He’d ask her tomorrow.

xXxXx

But the next day was the official announcement of the Yule Ball to students, and every girl in the castle got so incredibly giggly when Harry came near that he didn’t dare approach Cho. What if

she giggled too? What if she thought he was funny for even asking?

Neville had been relieved to hear that younger students than fourth year could go to the ball if invited, and was looking forward to the dancing lessons that the eligible students would be getting over the next weeks. “I asked Professor McGonagall if Meghan could come to those, because she’s my partner,” he said in the common room that night. “She said yes, as long as it doesn’t interfere with her homework.”

“But is she your date?” said Draco. “I mean, have you asked her yet?”

“I asked her at dinner. Didn’t you hear me?”

“No. I think I was thinking about the homework. I really don’t get it. I mean, why should switching things between species be any different than switching them within species?”

Neville shrugged. “Just is, I guess. How about you?”

“How about me?”

“Have you asked Luna yet?”

“No. Thanks for reminding me.” Draco shut his book. “Luna, got a minute?”

Luna looked up from her work. “Yes. Why?”

“I want to talk to you. Somewhere private.”

Hermione and Ginny giggled. Luna looked oddly sad. “All right,” she said, and headed for the portrait hole.

“No, here,” said Draco, heading for the fireplace. “Down here.” While Luna opened the entrance, he looked over her shoulder back at the other boys. *Here goes nothing*, he mouthed.

Ron made a rude gesture. “As if he doesn’t know what’s going to happen,” he said under his breath to Harry. “Lucky little snot. Why can’t we have girls like that?”

Hermione murmured something under her breath. Harry frowned. “What’d you say, Neenie?”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Hermione said coolly. “Keep going with your essay if you want me to check it tonight.”

xXxXx

By the time Draco got into the main room of the Hogwarts Den, Luna had already reconfigured it into the pirate ship, and was standing in the crow’s nest, looking into the distance, where murals across wall and ceiling made it look like the ocean and star-filled sky went on forever. Draco clambered up himself and leaned on the railing beside her. “So,” he said after a moment of

silence. “Will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Will you go to the ball with me?”

Luna looked away, then back at him. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t.”

Draco nearly took a step back, but the railing stopped him. “What do you mean, you can’t?”

“I can’t. I’m not going to be here for Christmas.”

“What?”

“Draco, I spent last Christmas here with you, and Dad was away working. We promised then that we’d spend this Christmas together. I can’t break my promise.” She turned her head away, but not before Draco had seen the unusual brightness in her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Draco’s half-formed dreams of dancing all night with Luna in his arms crumbled into dry sand. “It’s all right,” he said in a voice that sounded as if it had been scoured with that same sand. “I’ll find somebody else.”

“I’ll help you.” Luna turned back to him. “I really am sorry, Draco. I wish I could go to the ball with you.”

“I wish you could go to the ball with me too.” Draco put one arm around Luna, then added the other one, and suddenly things multiplied.

“For luck for your vacation,” he said when they parted.

She smiled tearily. “For luck for your date.”

“I’ll need a lot for that. How am I supposed to go up to some random girl and just ask her?”

“Because it doesn’t have to be a random girl.” Luna pulled his ear down to her mouth and whispered a name.

Draco pulled away, surprised. “No.”

“Yes.”

“But she won’t go with me.”

“She will.”

“But she wants to go with—”

“She’ll like it just fine if she can tell him someone else asked her first.” A hint of Luna’s usual

smile appeared on her face. “She’s trying to make him jealous.”

Draco swallowed. “Fine, but why does she have to get me involved? I’ll do it, I’ll do it,” he added hastily. “But if he tries hitting me over it, I’m hitting back.”

“I’ll give you more luck so he misses.”

They were quite a time returning to the common room.

xXxXx

Dear Colleen,

I am using the last of the invisible ink you sent me to write this, because I hope that after this we will not need to use invisible ink anymore. Are you surprised to find out that we have been corresponding for nearly nine months? I know I am.

I feel it is time to make a confession; I never expected anything like this to develop from my gifts to you. I discovered that you feared my House, and thought it was a pity. I decided to become a benefactor from afar, to raise your opinion of Slytherins in a general way. I see now that I was trying to buy your good opinion, which cannot be bought. I hope you will forgive me.

When your letters started arriving, I realized my other great mistake. I had failed to see you as an individual person. Oh, I had found out what you liked and disliked, but I had not realized that attached to that simple list was a human being as complex as myself, and as worthy of interest and respect. I had assumed that your being a girl, and a Gryffindor, made you somehow less than I. For this, too, I beg your forgiveness.

But none of this is the real point of this letter. By now, of course, you know about the Yule Ball, which is open to all students of fourth year and above. I am in the fourth year, as you know, and I would like to attend the ball, but the more I think about the Slytherin girls, the less interested I become. I know little about most of them, and what I do know I do not like. Most of them have no sense of humor, do not like to read or write, and cannot talk intelligently about any subject except clothing for any period of time.

So, having rambled quite a bit more, I come to the point – Colleen, will you go to the ball with me? I want you to know my face, as I know yours. I want to dance with you, and sit out some dances to talk. I want to be your friend face-to-face, rather than by letter alone. Please write back quickly with your answer, because if you turn me down I doubt if I will go at all.

Distractedly,

Your Secret Admirer

(soon, I hope, no longer secret)

xXxXx

“Why do girls move in herds?” Harry asked Ginny after a frustrating day watching Cho go everywhere with an escort of at least four.

“To make boys afraid, of course. Is it working?”

“Yeah. Is that why they giggle so much too?”

“Are you afraid of giggling?” Ginny grinned. “I can giggle, you know. Be afraid. Be very afraid.” She demonstrated.

“Ow, ow!” Harry protested, clapping his hands over his ears. “It hurts! It hurts! Stop, you evil fiend, stop!”

Ginny really was giggling now. “I’ll stop if you will,” she said, getting herself under control. “Truce?”

“Truce.” Harry shook the extended hand. “You know, I think that’s the second task,” he said. “Getting past a load of giggling girls. That’s what the sound in the egg is. Giggling.”

“It doesn’t sound like any giggling I’ve ever heard.”

“Maybe I have to change it somehow. Muffle it or put it under something.” Harry leaned back in his chair. “But I’ve got loads of time to figure it out, and not that much to get a partner for the ball...”

“Ron’s not doing so well, either,” said Ginny. “At least you have someone in mind. He doesn’t even have that. Maybe you could give him one of the ones who keep coming up and asking you.”

“I don’t think he’d want any of them,” Harry said. “Though maybe he could go with that fifth year who was a foot taller than me. He’d fit with her better.”

“No, she looked too tough for him. What about that little Hufflepuff third year?”

“Too baby-faced. Remember, he said last night he wants a pretty girl.”

Ginny snorted. “Sure he does. And yet he never notices the one closest to home.”

“Huh?”

“She’s his year,” said Ginny, ticking off points on her fingers. “She’s his House. She’s his *friend*. And he’s been looking straight past her for a week. Coming to mind yet?”

“Er, Hermione?”

“No, he’s suddenly become really good friends with Lavender Brown when you weren’t looking. Yes, Hermione. Hold still.” Ginny tapped on Harry’s head with her knuckles. “Doesn’t sound hollow, but there’s nothing there...”

“Bug off,” Harry said, pushing her away. “You really think Ron would go to the ball with Hermione?”

“Well, she’s hoping – but if you say anything to him, she’ll skin you alive,” Ginny added, correctly interpreting Harry’s speculative look. “She wants him to ask, not to have to be pushed into it.”

“But he’ll never ask her on his own,” Harry protested.

“Exactly why she wants him to.”

Harry frowned. “Wait. She wants him to do something she knows he’ll never do?”

Ginny shrugged. “I don’t understand it myself.”

xXxXx

Hermione stood in the middle of the Quidditch pitch, staff in her hands. The wind blew about the few strands of her hair she hadn’t confined in a band and chilled the tears on her cheeks.

Damn Ron anyway. Why doesn’t he want me? Am I that ugly? I know I’m not beautiful, but am I that repulsive?

She set her feet and brought the staff up, then whirled into a pattern, strike, parry, block, letting the sharp moves work the anger out of her body. No, I’m not repulsive. I’m probably not even ugly. But all he sees in me is good old Hermione, who helps him with his homework. Well, let him. Maybe one of these days, somebody will see me for who I really am...

“Hello,” said a gruff voice from behind her.

She whirled. Viktor Krum stood at one of the entrances to the pitch, looking in at her. Her heart seized up for an instant, then took off at double speed. “Hello,” she said, aware of every drop of sweat on her face and untidy tendril of hair on her head.

“I realized I had not giffen you vot I promised,” Krum said, nodding towards her staff. “The chance to try our staffs, and see how they are different. Would you like to come now, or must you be somevere else?”

“No, I can come now.” Hermione lifted her staff and tapped both ends twice with her wand, one after the other. The staff shrank to pocket-size, and she slid it away with her wand. If only her breathing would slow down... “Thank you.”

“The pleasure is mine.” Krum bowed to her as she joined him at the entrance. “I see you in the library often. Do you like to read?”

“Very much. It’s one of my favorite things. You?”

“I haff been known to enjoy a book,” Krum said, then smiled. “Though the newspapers would tell you no. No, no, Viktor Krum does not read. Viktor Krum plays Quidditch, and only that. But I think it is not fair that von should be known for only von thing in life. Vot do you think?”

Heat rushed to Hermione’s face. “I agree,” she said quickly, noticing that Krum was looking at her oddly. “I think you’re absolutely right. Even if you love something, why should that be the only thing people think you do? No one’s that one-dimensional. Everyone has something different to them, something new.”

“But sometimes those who are closest to it cannot see it clearly.” Krum nodded. They were crossing the lawn now, headed for the lake. “I see you often with your friends. They are all boys?”

“Well, all the ones in my year.” Hermione giggled, and became aware that it was a shrill and annoying sound. She tried to modulate it downwards, and her voice caught, making her cough. Krum quickly drew his wand and conjured a glass of water for her. “Thank you,” she choked out when she could speak again, her face still burning.

Krum nodded and vanished the remainder of the water. “You are all right now?”

“Yes, yes, fine.”

Krum frowned. “Your cheeks... they are marked. Haff you been crying?”

“It was just the wind, it made my eyes water.” Hermione wiped her cheeks quickly. “Look, here we are!”

“Yes. Be velcome, lady.” Krum bowed and handed Hermione onto the gangplank. “After you try the staffs, I hope you vill stay for a few moments,” he said as he followed her up. “There is something I vish to ask you.”

Hermione’s heart speeded up still more.

xXxXx

“I’ll tell you what I don’t think is fair,” said Graham Pritchard in Charms. “Why should only the fourth year students and up get to go to this ball?”

“Why, would you want to go?” asked Natalie.

“Why not? There aren’t often dances at Hogwarts. It would be a chance to meet people, to have some fun. But it’s only for the older students, and there’s not likely to be another one before our class leaves.”

“You’re so lucky,” Natalie said to Meghan. “Neville Longbottom asking you to go with him. He really likes you, doesn’t he?”

Meghan nodded. “We’ve been friends a long time,” she said. “I wrote him letters his first year here, and then my parents taught during his second year, so I could come and stay at the school. Third year too.”

“Your parents taught here two years?” Graham asked.

“Well, different parents. My birth parents the first year, and my godparents the second year. And I was Madam Pomfrey’s apprentice for the second year as well.”

“You are lucky,” said Graham. “You know what you want to do when you grow up, and who you want to be with. I don’t.”

“Well, you’ve got a lot of time to think about it,” Meghan said. “Can you show me how this one is supposed to go again? I keep mixing it up with the one we learned last week.”

Meghan got the arm movement right just after the bell rang, while the rest of the class was streaming out of the room. “So twist first, then pull,” she said, hugging Graham gratefully. “I thought it was at the same time.”

“No, it’s different, but only by a hair...” Graham pulled away quickly. “Good afternoon,” he said coolly over Meghan’s shoulder.

“Hello,” said Neville’s voice. “I’m just here to get Meghan for dancing lessons. How was class?”

“Fine, thank you.” Graham was still talking in that odd, chilly voice.

Neville frowned. “Pearl, would you go on without me?” he said. “I’ll catch up.”

“Think Natalie can come along?”

“Well, can you dance?” Neville asked Natalie.

“I don’t know. I never tried.”

“I don’t think Professor McGonagall will mind. It’s in the big room on the fourth floor, you know where, Meghan. See you there.”

“See you,” Meghan called over her shoulder as she scooped up her books and started off with Natalie. “Bye, Graham. Wonder what’s going on?” she asked Natalie when they were out of earshot.

“Graham knows you were unhappy when you and Neville were fighting, and he doesn’t want that to happen again, so he’s pretending he doesn’t like you,” said Natalie. “But Neville knows he’s pretending, and he isn’t going to be unhappy about Graham liking you any more, is he?”

Meghan shook her head. “He knows Graham’s just my friend.” She waved Natalie closer. “And I think I’m in love with Neville,” she said quietly. “I think I always have been.”

“Always?” Natalie looked at her wide-eyed. “How did you know?”

Meghan rubbed her left elbow, thinking. “I don’t know how I knew,” she confessed finally. “But it was always fun to be with him. More fun than with anyone else, except everyone, the whole Pride. He was always willing to listen to me, to see me as me and not just the little sister or the tagalong.”

“So, if it’s fun to be with someone, and it’s not as much fun to be with other people, and that person makes you feel really special and better all over – maybe you’re in love?”

“Maybe. How come?”

Natalie leaned in and whispered something.

“Really?” Meghan clapped her hands excitedly. “Natalie, that’s great! But – does he know?”

“I don’t know – but I hope he does, and then I hope he doesn’t, all at once…” Natalie shook her head. “I’m all confused. But he has to like *somebody*, or why would he want to go to the dance? It can’t just be because he wants to meet people.”

“Maybe if you learn to dance now, there’ll be another dance when you’re old enough to go,” Meghan said as they rounded the last corner. “My mum and dad taught me how to dance, and my Aunt Amy – well, she’s my mum’s aunt, but we call her our aunt – she taught me some more. And there’ll be dancing at my cousin’s wedding in May.” She jumped up and down a few times for joy. “Do you know anything about dancing?”

Natalie shook her head. “I never have,” she said. “Except a couple times in primary school, but all we ever did was jump around to the music. This is the kind of dancing where there’s actual steps, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but it’s not hard. Come on, you can dance with Harry. He’s good, and he hardly ever steps on your feet. He’ll teach you how.”

Natalie let herself be pulled into the room after Meghan.

xXxXx

The castle fairly shimmered with Christmas as the end of term and the day itself drew nearer. Harry nearly impaled his hand on a misplaced icicle going down to breakfast one morning; Hedwig, Morpheus, and Pigwidgeon mobbed one of the golden owls from the Christmas trees in the Great Hall after it tried to cadge food out of Draco and Ginny; and Filch gave Ron detention when he caught Ron taking notes on Peeves’ altered lyrics to the Christmas carols sung by the suits of armor.

“Shoveling paths, Muggle-style,” Ron groaned that night. “How do Muggles *do* it?”

But the castle wasn’t the only thing shimmering. Couples were appearing everywhere together;

people seemed to be pairing off like mad. “Suppose I’ll set a record,” said Harry gloomily the morning of the last day of term. “The only Triwizard champion ever to open a Yule Ball dancing by himself.”

“No, you can’t,” said Ron. “Look, I’ll make you a deal. When we get back to the common room tonight, we’ll both have partners. Agreed?”

“Fine,” said Harry.

They shook on it.

“You could always go with each other,” Hermione suggested tartly. “That’d be unusual.”

“Oh, right,” said Ron. “Like we’re really going to do that. Say, did you ever finish with my dress robes?”

Draco sucked in a breath through his teeth as Hermione swelled visibly. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I did,” she said in a careful, crisp enunciation, all the more amazing for being done through gritted teeth. “I’ll bring them ‘round to your room tonight, if that’s all right with you, Your Highness?”

Ron stared at her. “What’s got into you?”

Hermione’s mouth opened, then shut again, and she slammed her goblet down onto the table, swiveled in place, and stalked out of the Great Hall.

“Ron, a word of advice,” said Draco, watching her go. “Don’t treat Hermione like your personal seamstress unless you’re actually paying her to fix up your robes. You might end up looking worse than before.”

“Doubt it.” But Ron looked unsure. “Should I apologize?”

“Only if you want to,” said Ginny.

“Only if I want to what?”

Ginny grinned. “You’re learning. Only if you want to see your dress robes in a wearable state again, never mind looking better than they used to.”

“’Scuse me,” Ron said, grabbing a last piece of toast and swinging his legs over the bench.

“Do you think he’ll ask her?” Harry asked Ginny quietly.

“Don’t know. Ron does have a genius for picking bad times to do things, but this would be a new high.”

xXxXx

“What?” Ron stared at Hermione. “Look, I said I was sorry...”

“I know you did, but this isn’t about you!” Hermione stopped, seeming surprised to hear her voice echo around the entrance hall. “Ron, I’m not saying no because I’m mad,” she said in a quieter tone. “I’m saying no because I’m already going with someone else.”

“You’re *what?*”

“Going with someone else. Someone else asked me to the ball, and I said yes.”

The world did a backflip with a half twist around Ron. This couldn’t be happening. “Who?” Whoever it was, he was going to find him, and he was going to hit him so hard...

Hermione shook her head. “Not now. I’ll tell you later, maybe. Look, Ron, I’m sorry. I might have liked to go with you, but... he asked me first, and I said yes.” She looked up at him, eyes perfectly frank. “Next time, ask me first.”

Next time, ask me first. Ron repeated it like a mantra as he watched Hermione walk away. *Next time, ask me first.*

xXxXx

“Why didn’t you tell me Hermione’s going with someone?” Harry asked Draco that night in the common room.

“I assumed you knew. Why? What does it matter?”

“Well, it means she can’t go with Ron.”

“My heart bleeds for Ron. Let him find his own girl, Harry, why should you take care of him all the time?”

Harry pointed to where a grey-faced Ron was being talked at soothingly by Ginny.

“Well, he does look pretty pitiful right now,” Draco conceded. “But he asked Fleur Delacour to the ball in front of half the school. At least you got turned down in private.”

“Yeah.” Harry thumped the table moodily. “Beaten to the punch by Cedric bloody Diggory. Why the hell didn’t I ask her last week?”

“Because you were too busy agonizing over it. Harry, you missed out this time. There’ll be other things. Other times.”

“But I need a partner right now.”

“You have a point.”

Harry looked again at Ron and Ginny, and something clicked in his mind. “How dumb am I?” he said under his breath.

“Do you want me to answer that?”

“No.” Harry stood up and crossed to his friends. “Ginny,” he said. “Will you go to the ball with me?”

“Hey, yeah,” said Ron, recovering enough to sit up. “That’s a good idea. Meghan’s taken, Luna’s taken, Hermione’s going with someone else – do you know who it is?” he demanded of Draco.

“Yes, and it’s none of your business. Besides, you wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

Harry bared his teeth. “Check your bed tonight,” he said under his breath.

“But you’re not going with anyone yet, Ginny,” said Ron, turning to her. “You can go with Harry, and I’ll just—”

“Who said I wasn’t going with anyone?” said Ginny. “As it happens, I am going with someone.”

Harry experienced very strong déjà vu, as his insides gave one tortured writhe and vanished.

“Oh, not you, too,” said Ron. “Who is it this time? Nott? Dursley?”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m going with Draco.”

Draco became very interested in his Ancient Runes text. Harry’s guts filled once more with lead.

“You’re what?” demanded Ron. “Since when? What happened to Luna?”

“Luna’s going home this vacation, to be with her father. She promised. So Draco asked me to the ball instead, and I said yes.” Ginny leveled a glare at her brother. “Are you going to tell me he’s not suitable?”

“No, of course not – but Harry needs a partner more!” Ron appealed to Draco. “You could go stag, there’s not a problem with that!”

Draco turned around. “Why don’t you sod off and let Harry solve his own problems?” he suggested. “What do you think, Harry?”

“I think...” Harry didn’t quite know what to say. Several alternatives seemed to be presenting themselves, some of which involved violence to his brother’s person, none of which seemed particularly good. “I think...”

Movement off to one side caught his eye. Parvati and Lavender had just climbed through the portrait hole.

“I think you should all wait here,” he said, and walked over to the girls. “Parvati?” he said, fingers crossed in the pocket of his robe. “Will you go to the ball with me?”

Parvati giggled madly for a few moments, her face growing redder every second. “All right, if you like,” she said finally.

“And Lavender? Would you go with Ron?”

Lavender looked over Harry’s shoulder at Ron, a sizing-up sort of glance. “Okay,” she said when she was finished.

“Great,” said Harry. “Thanks a lot.”

He rejoined the Pride. “There,” he said. “Problem solved. You’re going with Lavender, Ron.”

“Oh. Okay.” Ron sat up to look around at Lavender. “She’s not too bad-looking.”

“Don’t say that where she can hear you,” Draco recommended.

Ron returned Draco’s earlier suggestion via hand gesture.

Harry dropped into an armchair. Ginny came over to sit next to him. He looked at her. “Why didn’t you ever tell me you were going with Draco?” he said.

“You never asked.”

“And why didn’t you tell me you were going with Ginny?” Harry said a bit louder, disrupting Ron and Draco’s friendly war of vulgarity.

Draco nodded at Ginny. “Same answer as her.”

I never asked. Harry slumped in his chair. *I never asked.*

Why didn’t I ask?

He had a feeling the ball was going to be far too long for his taste.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 42: The Yule Ball (Year 4)

Chapter 42: The Yule Ball

Colleen sat on the bottom step of the marble staircase. She was waiting.

Her first impulse, when she had received the letter from her Secret Admirer asking her to the ball, had been to say yes immediately. Her second impulse had been to say no just as immediately. She had taken a middle course, and returned a note asking for some time to think it over. He had agreed to grant her as much time as she wanted.

Finally, this morning, she had made up her mind, and sent him a note by way of a house-elf.

Dear Friend,

First of all, I want to thank you one more time for the lovely presents you have sent me, and the even lovelier letters. I've come to care about you quite a bit while we've been writing, and I would like to believe that you are everything you've said you are. But I have never seen your face, and I have no name to put with you. It might be romantic to meet my partner for the ball for the first time on that night, but it would also be very frightening.

So I am asking for one last gift – the gift of yourself. Meet me in the entrance hall between ten and eleven today, and ask me to the ball in person. I'll give you my answer then.

Colleen

So here she was, and some of her nervous energy seemed to have gone directly into her heart, considering the way it was jumping around her body. It had soared up into her throat and mouth when a pair of boys had walked out of the dungeon stairwell, and sunk to her feet when they had walked by her without even looking down. At the moment, it was in its usual place in her chest, but its beat was much louder and more persistent than usual, thumping inside her ears like the wireless Parvati sometimes played in the afternoons...

“Excuse me. Miss Lamb?”

Colleen looked up and caught her breath. A boy was standing over her, the light from the door silhouetting him, so that all she could tell about him was that he was quite tall, and had a soft, melodious voice...

“We met at the Quidditch World Cup this summer,” the boy continued, stepping aside to let the light fall on his face. He was black, with slanted eyes and high cheekbones, and Colleen suddenly recognized him.

“Of course, you're... Blaise, that was it. Blaise Zabini. Hermione Granger-Lupin introduced us.” She stood up, feeling her cheeks warm. “You kissed my hand.”

“So I did. May I make bold to do so again?”

Colleen smiled shyly and held out her right hand. Blaise took it in his and brushed her knuckles with his lips. “*Enchante*,” he murmured, as he had done then. “May I sit down?”

“Oh – yes. Of course.” Colleen sat down again quickly, careful of the icicles which threatened to poke into her back. A tiny hope was beginning to bud within her – why would a Slytherin boy be talking to her, unless...

Blaise took a quill from his pocket and wrote something on a slip of parchment. “My card,” he said, handing it to her.

The hopeful bud blossomed, and the warmth that had been in her cheeks spread over her entire body as Colleen read the two sentences in the well-known handwriting of her Secret Admirer.

I am at your command, my lady. Will you favor me with your company at the Yule Ball?

She raised her eyes to his and smiled. “Yes,” she said simply. “Yes, I will.”

His answering smile was warm and just a trifle hesitant, as if he didn’t smile often. “Thank you,” he said. “I know no one with whom I would rather go.”

Colleen looked down at her robes. “Thank you,” she said. “I should go, I was going to work on Professor Flitwick’s essay today, the one about the Banishing Charm...”

“Do you work better alone, or might you like some company?”

“I... don’t know,” Colleen confessed. “I usually work alone.”

“Would you be willing to try working with someone else?”

“Why not.”

xXxXx

In the library, Hermione looked up from her Transfiguration homework as loud voices sounded in the hall.

“...related to the Summoning Charm, then?”

“It’s not, not in any genetic way. They just happen to be opposites.”

“I don’t think so. Things don’t just happen to be opposites. They have to be related somehow.”

“No, they don’t. I think it’s more likely related to the Reductor Curse. A watered-down version, maybe...”

“Hush!” Madam Pince’s voice. “People are trying to work here!”

“Sorry,” said a boy’s voice.

“Sorry,” a girl echoed quietly.

Hermione frowned. *Is that Colleen? And she’s not alone...*

She peered around the end of the bookshelf she sat behind, and her eyes widened. Quickly, she pulled her head back in.

I don’t think I’ll be telling anyone about this.

For one thing, who’d believe me?

xXxXx

Draco stood at the window in the boys’ dorm, staring off towards Hogsmeade. Luna had left for home that morning. He couldn’t believe he missed her already.

The door creaked open behind him. The footsteps were Harry’s. “Bored?” he said without turning around.

“I guess.” A cushioned whump, like something heavy falling onto a bed. “You?”

“Mmm.”

Silence.

“So when did you ask Ginny to the ball?”

“Couple weeks ago. When Luna told me she couldn’t go.”

A creak, and rustling, as Harry turned over. “Why Ginny?”

“Why not?”

“Well, why not someone else?”

“What other good girl friends do I have?” Draco looked over at his brother. “I’m not about to go asking my own sister to the ball, even if she wasn’t going with someone else. So with Luna gone home, Ginny’s it.”

“So did you ever stop to think about me?”

“Why should I stop to think about you?”

Harry sat up. “Maybe because I need a partner more than you do?”

“Really? Since when?”

“Since I’ll be opening the damned dancing and I don’t even know if Parvati knows the box step!”

“Weren’t looking, huh?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that we have been having House-wide dancing practices for the last couple of weeks, and if you’d been looking, you would have seen that Parvati dances just fine.”

Harry snorted. “Why were you looking at her, then?”

“Boredom. Since apparently I’m not special enough that Meghan asks me to teach her friend how to dance.”

“Oh, come off it. You think I was jumping up and down because she asked me to do it?”

Draco raised a skeptical eyebrow. “You didn’t seem to mind all that much.”

“It’s called being polite. You should really try it sometime.”

“That’s rich, coming from you.”

“Excuse me? What did I do?”

“Nothing – nothing at all. You’re just harassing me for asking a girl to the ball, which I was totally within my rights to do, but apparently I should have used my amazing psychic powers and figured out that you wanted to ask her, which, let me point out, you could have done any time this month, if you weren’t busy mooning over a Ravenclaw who’s not only too old for you but probably wouldn’t even care about you if you weren’t famous, whereas Ginny’s your friend and you might have had a good time at the ball with her, but now you’re stuck with half of the giggle brigade and it serves you bloody right!”

Harry was staring at him. “Finished?” he asked after a moment.

“Yeah. I guess.”

“Good. Since when does one year’s difference make somebody too old for somebody else? Padfoot’s a year older than Letha, and Moony’s more than that for Danger.”

“It’s different when the girl’s older than the guy. Don’t ask me how. It just is.”

“And how do you know Cho wouldn’t care about me if I weren’t famous?”

“Why do you think she would?”

Harry got to his feet. “I don’t have to sit here and listen to you insult me.”

“I wasn’t insulting you!”

“You’re doing a damn good job for not doing it!”

“You call that a good job? I’ll show you a good job! You’re too stupid to see what’s right in front of your nose, you and Ron both! I hope you have a miserable time and trip over your own feet right in front of everyone! In fact, I might take a second and arrange that for you...”

Harry’s wand was in his hand. “Just try it.”

“If you insist.” Draco grabbed for his own wand, dodged Harry’s spell, and came up with a jinx already on his lips.

The magical portion of the duel lasted about a minute and a half, ending when Harry ricocheted a Disarmer off the mirror and caught Draco in the back with it. Draco turned the blow into a forward shoulder roll, thus both avoiding Harry’s Body-Bind and catching Harry off guard, forcing him to retreat a few steps, off-balance for the moment. An upward thrust of the elbow sent Harry’s wand flying, and the battle became purely a physical one.

Something settled over Draco as they grappled – a cool, calculating feeling, which seemed to slow time by just a fraction, so that he could see Harry’s moves and react to them properly. It was as easy as a first year spell to catch Harry’s arm as it went by, easy to grasp it between his two hands and pull to bring the other boy off balance, easy to maintain his grip as Harry went down, letting the other’s weight do the work for him –

A sharp snap, Harry’s yell of pain, and the crash of the opening door all flooded his ears at once as the world snapped into real time again. Ron, Seamus, Neville, and Dean charged into the room, talking over each other.

“–quintapeds fighting up here–”

“–the hell you’re doing–”

“–place is a bloody mess–”

“–broken wrist, what happened–”

“Nothing,” Harry said, very pale and holding his left arm against his chest with his right.

“Nothing, we were just roughhousing, and I fell on my arm wrong. It’s not too bad, I’ll go to the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey’s seen worse...”

“Yeah, always on you,” said Ron, then shot Draco a curious look. “You all right?”

“Fine.” Draco met Ron’s eyes for one moment, then looked away. “I’m fine.”

“Then you get to clean the place up,” said Seamus, bending down to pick up one of the books that had fallen from his bed in the course of Harry and Draco’s fight. “I had these all organized, too...”

“Organized in piles, mate,” Dean said. “And you shifted them every night so you could go to bed.”

“So? At least I knew where they were.”

“Yeah, right under all the other ones...” Their voices faded as they went down the stairs after Harry and Ron. Neville was still standing in the doorway, looking at the mess in the room.

“What?” Draco said curtly, bending to pick up Seamus’ books.

Neville shrugged. “Nothing,” he said. “You know where I live.”

“Yeah, I know where you live. Same place I live. Right here. Summer, too, for a while.” Draco dropped an armload of books on Seamus’ bed. “I’m not stupid.”

“I didn’t say you were. Do you want help with this?”

“No.”

“Fine.” Neville turned to go.

“Wait.” Draco bit down hard on his pride and swallowed as Neville turned around again. “Can you find my wand for me? I don’t know where it went.”

Neville nodded and drew his own. “*Accio wand,*” he said, and caught the two which hurtled from different corners of the room.

“That one’s mine,” said Draco, pointing to the one on the left. “The other one’s Harry’s.”

Neville tossed over the designated wand. “I’ll get it back to him.”

“Thanks.”

The door closed behind Neville. Draco stared at it for a moment, then went back to work, straightening and tidying mechanically.

His mind was spinning in smaller and smaller circles. *What did I do... what did I do...*

Well, what did you do?

He let a small smile come to his lips. *Great, now I have an inner Luna. That’s just the kind of question she’d ask. All right, let’s ask it. What did I do?*

I fought with Harry. Not so bad, in and of itself. Not as if it hasn’t happened before.

We made a mess. Again, not like it's so unusual.

But when we got close... when it turned into a physical fight...

It was like I forgot who he was, or who I was. It didn't even matter who he was – just that he was my enemy. And I hurt him without meaning to. It didn't bother me. It was just... what I had to do to win the fight. So I did it.

He stared down at his hands. Could I do that to someone else? Someone who can't defend himself, or doesn't want to fight with me? Could I become that uncaring all the time?

He didn't know.

When everything was picked up, he climbed onto his own bed, carefully placing his wand on his nightstand. Pulling the curtains shut around himself, he curled up into a ball around his lion and closed his eyes.

I am not a bad person, he tried to tell himself. I made a mistake. That doesn't make me a bad person.

But he couldn't forget the pleasure that defeating Harry had given him. He had seemed to know by instinct the angle which would snap the bone – and when it had snapped, his whole body had thrilled for one second, a physical rush like that which overtook him when he kissed Luna –

No! God, no, no, that's so wrong... Draco rubbed his hands back and forth on the bedspread, wishing he could scrape the skin off them, could scrape off every part of him which had enjoyed hurting Harry...

His mind jumped back in time, back to his second year, to the Quidditch match at which Harry had almost died. I felt this way then too. When Ron attacked me. And I didn't just want him to stop hurting me – I wanted to hurt him. And I wanted to hurt him badly. Moony had to stop me.

His Pack-father's words came back to him now. He said that everyone has parts of themselves they don't like. The trick is controlling yourself.

But how am I supposed to control myself when Harry comes in here looking for a fight, then disarms me so we have to go hand-to-hand – he should've known, he shouldn't have started it...

He growled under his breath. That's right. It's all Harry's fault. He made me break his wrist.

Then he couldn't keep from laughing at the absurdity of that statement.

Can I be truthful to myself at least, please? Harry didn't make me do anything. He provoked me, but I didn't have to rise to it. And he covered for me. He could just as easily have told them all the truth, and then they'd hate me or think I'm a mad delinquent. As it is, it's down to an accident.

But Harry knows. He saw. He felt it. I have to talk to him, I have to apologize...

But how can I, when I'm not even sure I won't do it again? His mind seized the thought and flew with it. I might be dangerous. It might not be safe for me to be here. What if I start hurting people every time they say something rude to me, or do something I don't like? What if I can't control myself anymore? What if... what if...

He pressed his face against his lion's fur. What if a pig sprouts wings and pisses on my head? I can control myself. I just need not to get into any fights. Nothing like this has ever happened when we spar – maybe because I know it's just a practice then? This was for real, a real fight, and I lost it. So I'll have to be more careful, and not let myself lose my temper over anything. Especially not over stupid little things like this.

And I do have to apologize.

Maybe tonight at den.

xXxXx

“So Hermione, who're you going to the ball with?” Ron asked casually at dinner on Christmas Eve.

Hermione shook her head. “Sorry, Ron, not telling. You'd only laugh and say I was making it up.”

“Would not!”

“Then wait till tomorrow and see for yourself.”

“Will I be the only first year there?” Meghan asked, taking a roll from the basket in the middle of the table.

“Probably,” said Harry. “Do you mind?”

“Not really. Just wondering. Natalie said she would have liked to go, but I think she's just as happy to go home, really. She missed her family.”

“And what about Graham?” said Ginny.

“He said he'd spend the holidays finding out if there was any way to organize a ball for the students again in a few years.” Meghan grinned. “I think he really likes Natalie.”

“He seems awfully old for eleven,” said Neville, serving himself some turnips and passing the bowl to Meghan.

“His parents expect a lot out of him. He's their only son. Pass the sugar, please?”

“Well, whoever he is, will he share?” Ron was asking Hermione.

“Share?”

“Will he let you dance with other blokes?”

“I don’t know. Probably, if I want to. Why?”

“Because I might maybe like to dance with you?”

Harry winced. *And of course, he says it good and loud into a dead silence...*

Ron went crimson. “Just forget it,” he muttered as the rest of the Hall resumed talking. “Never mind.”

Hermione frowned. “Do you not want to, then?”

“I... just forget it, all right?”

“No, it’s not all right. Do you want to dance with me or not?”

Staring at the table, Ron nodded.

“Then I’ll make sure to save one for you. Was that so hard?”

“Ask his ears,” said Ginny. “If they get much hotter, we could use him as a broom defroster.”

“Oh, bugger off,” Ron grumbled. “Where’s your boyfriend, anyway?”

“We’re going to the ball together. That doesn’t make him my boyfriend. And I don’t know where Draco’s got to. Harry?”

“Haven’t seen him. He’s been really quiet lately.”

“You think he misses Luna?” said Neville. “It seems kind of odd he’d take it so hard, but that’s all I can think of.”

“He’s unhappy about something, but I don’t think it’s Luna,” said Meghan. “He didn’t want to spar at den-night, and he hasn’t come out to play in the snow at all. Hermione, do you know?”

Hermione shook her head. “He hasn’t said anything to me.”

But Harry caught the waft of unease in her scent, and saw her hand move quickly to her lap, where he was sure she’d crossed her fingers. Hermione knew something, but why make her tell? He knew something himself, and was keeping it to himself. Draco deserved some time to work out whatever was bothering him alone.

xXxXx

Draco sat on his bed, rereading the letter he’d received that morning.

Dear Fox,

We'll start with the usual things. Yes, we love you, no, you're not a bad person, and no, you're not in trouble. You make enough trouble for yourself.

You seem to have a pretty decent hold on the situation already, Draco. You know what happened – you were in a fight and you lost control. You know what you're going to do about it – avoid fighting. All well and good. But sometimes you have to fight. What then?

Padfoot says, "Make sure the person you're fighting deserves it." I have smacked him, but he has a good point. I trust you not to get into any unnecessary fights. Remember, too, that fights may look necessary from where you are, and not from where someone else is.

For the time being, I think this should be enough. Though it isn't much – reading back through this, we don't seem to have given you any advice you couldn't have worked out on your own. I hope that our good wishes, and our love, help as much as we want them to. And may I reiterate: You are not a bad person. Harry's obviously forgiven you, so please try to forgive yourself, and we'll see you at the second task. Much love.

Danger

Moony

Padfoot

Letha

Draco smiled, then folded the letter, tucked it into his pocket, and got up to go downstairs for some dinner. He had a ball to go to tomorrow.

xXxXx

“Hermione’s been inside since five o’clock,” Ron said as he shut the dormitory door. “Five o’clock! What the hell takes that long? Combing out each hair by hand?”

“Well, she does have a lot of hair,” said Draco. “Where’s your dress robes?”

“Right there.” Ron nodded at the parcel on the end of his bed. “She wrapped them up for me. I haven’t had a chance to look at them.”

“Now might be a good time,” said Harry, opening his wardrobe.

Ron, nothing loath, attacked the parcel and shook out the robes, then gaped. “I don’t believe it,” he said, holding them up at arm’s length. “They look... they look...”

“Yes?” prompted Neville.

“They look normal!” Ron shook out the robes, black and white like everyone else’s, with the neat pleats in the white front and the bow tie at the neck. “I don’t know how she did it – she’s a genius!”

Harry turned away to hide his smile.

xXxXx

Parvati and Lavender were waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Parvati wore pink, with gold bangles on her wrists and a matching gold thread twisted through her hair. Lavender’s robes were light purple, as was the huge butterfly posed in her coiffure.

“You look very nice,” said Harry, giving Parvati a slight bow.

She giggled a bit. “Thank you. So do you.”

“Er, nice robes,” said Ron awkwardly to Lavender. “And I like the thing. In your hair.”

“Oh, do you? My mum made it for me, it took her ages to match the material...”

“Have you seen Hermione?” Ron interrupted.

Lavender looked piqued, but answered. “No, she left a while ago.”

“I think whoever she’s going with is from another House,” Parvati added. “She wouldn’t tell us anything.”

“Wow,” said Lavender, looking over Ron’s shoulder. “Your sister’s really pretty tonight, Ron.”

Harry turned to look. Ginny was descending the stairs, the skirts of her navy blue robes held up in front of her so that she didn’t trip on them. Three lines of ivory-colored lace traced her collar and her waistline, and more lace fell at her wrists. Her hair was coiled on top of her head and held there with carved ornaments of white wood, and she wore a torque and earrings to match them.

“You’re staring at my partner,” Draco muttered from beside him.

“Aren’t you?”

“Yes. I didn’t know she was going to look like that.” A slight sigh. “I wonder what Luna would have looked like.”

“You’ll see Luna in dress robes sometime.”

“Hope so. You look beautiful,” said Draco as Ginny reached them. “I may have to fight off other boys who want to dance with you.”

“You’d better not fight them all off,” said Ginny. “I might want to dance with a few of them.”

“Well, if you want to, then I won’t. Are we waiting for anyone?”

“If Hermione already left, then there’s just Meghan,” said Harry.

“She’s over there,” said Ginny, nodding in the right direction. “She’s waiting for Neville.”

“Huh?” Ron looked around. “Didn’t he come down with us?”

“No, he had something he had to finish,” said Draco. “Her corsage, I think...”

“Shouldn’t we go down?” Parvati said. “Don’t you have to open the dance, Harry?”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “Let’s go. They’ll catch up.”

His leaving seemed to be the signal for everyone else to go as well.

xXxXx

Neville came out of the boys’ dorm and closed the door behind him. The common room was empty...

No, not quite empty. She was there, waiting for him off to one side. He couldn’t see much in the dim light, but he knew it had to be her.

He descended the stairs, heart pounding unaccountably. It was only a dance, and he knew how to do that. And this was Meghan. His friend Meghan. There was nothing for him to be nervous about.

Then she stepped into the firelight, and took his breath away.

Her robes seemed to be cloth-of-gold, for they shimmered with every step she took, every breath. Her braids were beaded, not with her usual bright colors, but with mother-of-pearl orbs, and she wore a pearl pendant and earrings. When she’d said she was dressing in white and gold, he hadn’t thought of this...

“For you,” he said, holding out the corsage.

Meghan beamed. “It’s perfect,” she said, then frowned. “No, not quite. Not yet.”

Neville felt his stomach sink. What had he done, or not done, that made it wrong?

Meghan accepted the tiny bouquet of white sweetheart rosebuds, tied about with gold ribbon, and gently teased one out of its place, bunching the others so that no one would know any had been removed. “Come here,” she said, and tucked the rosebud into Neville’s buttonhole. “There. Now it’s perfect.”

Neville’s smile seemed to stretch beyond his face as Meghan pressed the corsage to her robes,

where it clung.

It was time to go to the ball.

xXxXx

Blaise waited nervously in the entrance hall, watching the marble staircase. The Ravenclaws had come down already, and the Hufflepuffs were here... where were the Gryffindors?

Oh, here they come. Harry Potter, predictably, was in the lead, with one of the Patil twins (Blaise could never keep them straight) on his arm. Ron Weasley was just behind him with Lavender Brown, and Draco Black with Ginny Weasley. The rest of the House followed, in pairs and singles, pouring down the stairs to meet friends or partners...

And suddenly, the marble staircase was clear, all save for one slim figure at the top.

“Excuse me,” Blaise muttered, pushing his way forward, to be at the bottom of the stairs where she could see him. “Excuse me, pardon me, sorry...”

She’s shy, she’ll be scared to death, I have to help her...

He wormed his way between a Ravenclaw couple and an indignant Hufflepuff girl and looked up again, and felt his mouth go dry. Colleen might have been carved from the same marble as the staircase. Her robes, a rich green, were cut simply to emphasize her height and figure. Her nut-brown hair was dressed very simply, leaving much of it free to flow down her back. Tigers’ eyes gleamed in her ears and at her throat.

Her eyes moved, falling on him, and for the first time she smiled. It looked stiff, but he knew that wasn’t because of him. He beckoned her closer, and she gathered her skirts in one hand and descended the stairs carefully. “These shoes are horrid,” she whispered when she was close enough. “I keep thinking I’m going to fall.”

“Here.” Blaise offered her his arm. “Now you won’t. Oh, this is for you.” He drew the corsage box from his pocket and opened it.

“You remembered,” Colleen breathed, staring in wonder at the miniature white lily.

“How could I forget?”

xXxXx

I will murder you and hide the body, Harry signed to Draco. *Why didn’t you tell me she was going with Krum?*

Would you have believed me?

“What are you doing?” Parvati asked curiously.

“Um, just asking Draco something. We have a sort of sign language we made up.”

“Wow. What are you asking him?”

“Nothing important.” Harry regarded his sister, who was laughing at something Krum had said to her. Her hair was shiny and straighter than he had ever seen it, except when they were little and in hiding in Devon. He’d seen her robes before, but not on her – they were a pale periwinkle blue, and seemed to involve a lot of layers, all of which were diaphanous by themselves, but put together became opaque. She was also holding herself differently than usual, and after a moment Harry placed it. It was the stance she took when they were sparring, hand to hand or with the staffs.

I guess she sees this as a battle...

Many of the other girls in the school certainly seemed to think so. As people passed by on their way into the Great Hall, girls gave Hermione looks of hatred, then looked again in surprise as they recognized her, then glared over their shoulders as they entered the hall with their partners.

Hope she doesn't get fallout from this.

On Professor McGonagall’s order, the champions and their partners lined up in pairs – Harry’s heart did a loop-the-loop as he watched Cho take Cedric’s arm – and processed into the Great Hall to the sound of everyone else’s applause. Harry could have done without this, but he supposed it was part of being a champion, like asking a girl to the ball.

The Hall certainly looked Christmasy. The ice sculptures and rosebushes out front were impressive, but the walls here were covered in silver frost, in which lovely pictures had been melted (though Harry could see one that wasn’t so lovely, and he suspected Peeves had been at it), and garlands of ivy and mistletoe were woven from the rafters, so that he could only barely see the starry ceiling above.

Looking around, he spotted the rest of the Pride, who had taken over one of the small round tables which had replaced the House tables. Draco, Ginny, Neville, and Meghan all waved as he looked at them. Ron’s eyes were narrowed as he watched Hermione pass, and Lavender was looking from one to the other of them suspiciously. Harry swallowed. He wasn’t looking forward to after the ball.

The top table, where they were headed, already had several people sitting at it – Dumbledore in his holiday best, Ludo Bagman in bright purple robes emblazoned with yellow stars, Professor Karkaroff looking rather sullen in white robes and fur, Madame Maxime in flowing lavender silk and opals, and –

“Percy?” he said in surprise.

“Hello, Harry,” said Percy Weasley in as close to a friendly tone as he ever got. “Sit with me? Hello, Parvati.”

“Hello,” said Parvati, hurrying up the steps to the dais. “What are you doing here? I thought you worked at the Ministry now.”

“I do. I’m Mr. Crouch’s personal assistant.”

“Since when?” said Harry, pulling out a chair for Parvati – he’d been tempted to give her the one next to Percy, but thought that would probably be rude.

“I was promoted a few weeks ago. Mr. Crouch has been ill, so most of the work in the office devolves on me.” Percy sighed. “It’s a heavy burden, but one I’m glad to bear...”

Dumbledore, at the head of the table, cleared his throat gently, and Percy fell silent.

The house-elves must be going crazy downstairs, Harry thought, getting everyone’s meals together as they ordered them. Fleetinglly he wondered when Ron would be giving Mrs. Weasley her Christmas gift...

“Viktor, you must introduce me to your friend,” Karkaroff was saying.

“Gladly, sir. Professor, Miss...” Krum frowned. “Herm-own-ninny... no, that is not correct.”

“It’s fine,” said Hermione, blushing a bit. “Hermione Granger-Lupin, Professor. Pleased to meet you.”

“Granger-Lupin... ah, of course.” Karkaroff held onto Hermione’s hand for a long moment, looking into her eyes. “Your picture was never published in the newspaper, I believe.”

“I... my guardians didn’t want it.”

“And yet your face is enchantingly familiar.” Karkaroff peered closely at Hermione. “Did I know your mother, perhaps?”

“I don’t think so, sir. She was a Muggle.”

“Was? Oh, I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t know. But there, I should have, if the trouble in your family was about guardians – I’m so glad that came out happily for you.”

“Perhaps you haff seen her sister, Professor,” suggested Krum. “Herm-own-ninny has an older sister, enough older that she is sometimes taken for her mother.”

“Yes, that could be it.” Karkaroff shrugged it off. “So how did you meet Miss Granger-Lupin, Viktor?”

Krum smiled. “She has great skill with a staff, sir. She can handle our staffs, and when we haff sparred, I do not find it easy to beat her.”

Karkaroff’s eyes opened. “My dear, what a great compliment – Viktor is one of our best staffmen,

you know. He wouldn't tell you that lightly."

"Thank you," said Hermione, blushing and looking down at her chicken and roast potatoes.

Dumbledore entertained everyone with an anecdote about taking a wrong turn on his way to the bathroom and finding a room filled with chamber pots. Percy seemed disapproving, but Harry was almost certain Dumbledore had winked at him.

"What do you do at the Ministry?" Parvati asked Percy over Harry's head.

"Well, as I said, I'm Mr. Crouch's personal assistant. He's the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, so you can imagine it's a very big job. Coordinating events like this, making sure imports and exports are properly handled, dealing with immigration and tourism..."

Percy continued for several minutes in this vein. Harry tuned him out to listen to Fleur Delacour, who seemed less than happy with the contents of her plate.

"Zis 'Ogwarts food is all too 'eavy," she said, pushing away her half-finished baked fish. "And ze decorations are primitive. At ze Palace of Beauxbatons, zere are sculptures of ice everywhere at Chreestmas. Zey glitter and catch ze light, and it is like eating inside a palace of diamond. We 'ave no ugly armor, and all ze portraits are pleasant and 'elpful. And we 'ave no poltergeist as you 'ave 'ere." She frowned. "It would not be allowed."

"Yeah," said Roger Davies, Fleur's partner and the captain of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team. He hadn't eaten much, mostly because he'd been too busy staring at Fleur to remember where his fork went. "Not allowed. Shouldn't be."

When dinner was over, Dumbledore cleared the floor of tables and conjured up a stage for the band. The lanterns on the tables went out as the Weird Sisters entered the hall (to raucous applause), and Harry realized the moment of truth had come.

"Would you like to dance?" he said to Parvati.

She smiled. "Yes, please."

Luckily, Draco's estimation had been correct – Parvati was a good dancer, and Harry found himself able to lead her around the floor without much trouble. Silently, he blessed all those hours Moony had spent firmly planting his hands and feet in the right positions relative to Hermione.

Hermione, meanwhile, was revolving in Krum's arms as if she hadn't a care in the world. Ron kept looking over Lavender's shoulder at her. Lavender seemed to sense this, as she was trying to keep Ron's back to Hermione and Krum at all times. Since Ron wanted to see them at all times, this led to some interesting dance maneuvers.

Draco and Ginny were moving well enough together, though Harry could tell from the way

Draco's hands kept moving out of their proper positions that he was thinking of a differently-proportioned girl. Ginny was patiently correcting him every time.

And Neville and Meghan... well, Harry had his first mishap of the night when Parvati stopped abruptly as they danced by, causing Harry to step on her toes. She didn't seem to notice. "Is that Neville Longbottom?" she said in amazement.

"Yes."

"And Meghan Black – why did he ask her, anyway?" Parvati resumed dancing in response to Harry's lead. "Couldn't he get anyone else?"

Now Harry stopped in surprise. He had never thought that Neville's asking Meghan to the ball would be seen that way. "No, it wasn't that. He just didn't want to ask anyone else. He's been friends with Meghan for years. They like each other a lot."

"I can tell." Parvati nudged Harry, and they started moving again. "I was wondering why she was coming to the dance lessons; it's not like she needs them. Your guardians taught you how, didn't they?"

Harry nodded. "It was part of our school time when we were little. I learned to dance with Hermione, and Draco learned with Meghan..."

Cho revolved by, laughing at something Cedric was saying, and Harry missed Parvati's toe by a hair. "Sorry," he muttered, and paid better attention to the dance.

When the song was over, Harry started for the tables at the side of the room, but Parvati looked at him in amazement. "You're not tired already, are you?"

"I... well..." Harry gritted his teeth briefly, then smiled. "No, but how about after one more we sit one out?"

"All right." Parvati smiled brightly as the Weird Sisters struck up a faster song, and held out her hand for Harry to take. Luckily (from Harry's perspective), they were nearly run over by Hagrid and Madame Maxime, who were doing a surprisingly graceful two-step for their size, and they only avoided being clobbered by Fred and Angelina by crashing into George and Alicia, so Parvati was just as happy to sit down at the end of the second song.

Harry took advantage of getting drinks to check his watch, and groaned. It was only nine-thirty. They had two and a half more hours of this.

Grin and bear it, Harry, grin and bear it.

Lavender was steering Ron firmly around the floor, chattering non-stop to keep his eyes on her and not Hermione. Harry's eyes followed Cho and Cedric along their graceful route, in and out of the other couples – Cedric danced well, he had to admit, and Cho was just as graceful on the floor as she was on a broom. He spent a few moments imagining that he, and not Cedric, was out there

twirling Cho, in her black and white satin...

Draco and Ginny crossed his view, and he watched them for a little while. He'd danced with Ginny before, in lessons and at parties, but never at a ball. Suddenly he made up his mind. He was going to dance with every girl in the Pride who was present at least once tonight. That would give Parvati a chance at some other partners, and let him talk to his friends for a little while.

And I might just have some fun tonight.

Accordingly, he caught Neville's eye as the music ended and beckoned him over. "May I steal your lovely partner for the next dance?" he asked when Neville and Meghan had joined him and Parvati. "If you don't mind, of course," he added to Parvati.

"May I dance with you if he does?" Neville asked her promptly.

"Um... well... sure!" Parvati looked a bit flustered. Meghan had a hand over her mouth, stifling giggles. Harry grinned. Parvati would learn how the Pride handled things eventually.

The band played the introduction to *Magic Circle* as Harry led Meghan onto the floor. "Remember this one, Pearl?" he said.

"How could I forget? When Draco busked and I danced at the World Cup."

"Ron!" Harry called, waving at his friend. "Over here!"

"Thanks a lot," Ron muttered in his ear as the figure began. "I was going to go sit down."

"You'll be fine for one more," Harry answered before the pattern took them apart.

In and out, around and through, bow and curtsy, the dance swirled. The bagpipe played the special high trills that meant the circles should break up and reform, and to Harry's surprise, he discovered Cho in front of him. "Having a good time?" he said as he bowed.

"Oh, it's lovely." Cho's cheeks were flushed as she straightened from her curtsy. "I love dancing, don't you?"

"Sometimes." The figure separated them for a moment.

"When do you like it best?" Cho asked when they were together again.

Harry decided to take a chance. "Times like right now."

They separated again, and came back together. "Why now?"

"Because of my partner."

The high trills sounded again, and Harry caught Meghan's hand and moved on to the next circle,

hoping Cho hadn't seen the blush staining his face, knowing she probably had.

I think I just made a fool of myself...

"Cedric said I was a good dancer," Meghan said proudly. "And he admired my robes."

"Good," Harry mumbled as the music began to wind down. "Great."

He checked his watch again. Nine-forty.

All right, I was wrong. This night is going to be really long.

Harry returned to his seat, where Parvati was waiting for him, looking rather hot. "I've never done it that fast before," she said, taking a large gulp of her butterbeer. "Can we sit another one out?"

"Fine with me," Harry said, sitting down. "Here's your partner back, Cap'n."

"Thank you, matey." Neville grinned.

Ron came out of the crowd, trailing Lavender by one hand. "Look, you go dance with someone else if you want," he said, sitting down firmly. "I'm not dancing any more right now. I might not dance any more the rest of the night."

Lavender swelled with indignation.

"Lavender, may I have this dance?" Neville said quickly.

Lavender deflated so rapidly it looked like she'd been pricked with a pin. "Of course." She cast a poisonous glance at Ron as Neville led her away.

Harry checked over his shoulder to make sure Parvati was all right – she was chatting with Meghan about something or other – then scooted over next to Ron. "What is wrong with you?" he hissed.

"Wrong with me? Harry, look at that!" Ron pointed at the floor, where Hermione and Krum were taking their positions for another dance. "Look at her! She's... she's fraternizing with the enemy!"

"The enemy?"

"He's from Durmstrang! He's another champion! He's probably trying to use her to get to you – you watch and see if he doesn't try to talk to you tonight, ask you questions – he has to know she's your sister, or at least your friend, you go everywhere with her, that has to be why he asked her..."

"Or maybe," said Harry firmly, cutting off Ron's tirade, "he asked her because he saw her practicing her staffwork and was really impressed."

Ron stared at him. “What?”

“That’s what he said over dinner. I think they practice with staffs as part of the classes there, like flying lessons here. He said Hermione’s tried out those special staffs that they used the first night here, and they’ve sparred some.”

Ron glowered at the distant couple. “That’s even worse,” he said darkly. “That means she’s probably been aboard their ship – in the heart of enemy territory...”

“Spying for our side, if you want to put it like that,” said Harry. He was beginning to lose patience with his friend. “Look, Lavender’s your partner. I know she wasn’t your first choice, or your second, but she’s your partner. You don’t have to dance every dance with her, but maybe you shouldn’t be rude.”

“And maybe you should keep out of my business.”

“You keep on like this, I don’t think Hermione’s going to want to dance with you.”

“Well, fine. Maybe I don’t want to dance with her either.”

“Ha. You haven’t stopped looking at her since we got in here...” Harry stopped. “Look, I don’t want to row with you,” he said. “Not on Christmas. Can we at least try to stay friends until the ball’s over?”

Ron sagged in his chair. “Fine,” he muttered. “She keeps laughing at what he’s saying...”

“Stop looking at them,” said Harry. “You’re just going to drive yourself mad. Do you want to dance with Parvati once? I’ll take Lavender if you do.”

“Nah... Lavender’s not so bad, really.” Ron flexed his feet. “She talks a lot, but she can really move, you know? I don’t mind her. She just wanted to keep going, and my feet hurt.”

“So next time, tell her that, instead of dragging her off the floor,” Harry said. “Or come find me or Neville, or Draco. We’d take her for one dance if you were too tired.”

“I get the point, already.” Ron punched Harry’s shoulder. “You can shut up now.”

xXxXx

Around ten o’clock, Blaise led Colleen off the floor. “Wait here,” he said, and slipped up the Hall toward the stage.

Colleen sipped at the butterbeer he’d brought her when they’d stopped a bit earlier. *Oh, Mum, I wish you could see me, she thought dizzily. Dad, I wish you knew... you will, soon enough, but I wish you knew right now...*

Her sister Maggie went by in the arms of another Ravenclaw, both of them eyeing her coolly. She

waved and smiled – tonight, she didn't care what her sister thought was proper or improper. She was at a ball, with a boy who thought she was wonderful, and she was having the time of her life.

And here he comes again. Colleen patted her hair, making sure it was in place, and eased her feet in their shoes. They were a little sore, but luckily Blaise had been able to show her a spell to make sure they would stay on her feet.

“Feel up to dancing again?” he asked her as he drew near.

“Of course.” Colleen set her butterbeer aside and stood up. “Were you asking them if the next song will be fast or slow?”

“You could say that.” Blaise smiled. “It's a funny one. It feels fast, but it's best for slow dancing...”

“Now here's a little import from across the pond,” said the lead singer into his microphone as the Weird Sisters got ready around him. “Any Irish ladies in the house ought to appreciate this one.”

The guitarist played a little riff, and the song began. Colleen felt Blaise's hand at her waist, his other hand around hers, and began to sway with him in the rhythms of the slow two-step.

But then the lyrics began, and she missed a beat.

Colleen was sitting all alone

Over by the steel stove

Waiting in the corner of a smoky bar...

“You asked for this,” Colleen breathed, looking up at Blaise. “Didn't you?”

Blaise nodded, his smile a bit uncertain. “Do you like it?”

“Oh, it's perfect. It's beautiful.”

They danced without speaking until the singer came to the bridge.

Hang on Colleen

Things are not what they seem to be

You're not alone

Someone cares...

“I know,” Colleen whispered. “I know someone cares.”

She leaned forward and laid her lips gently against Blaise's.

xXxXx

Draco checked his watch over Ginny's shoulder. Ten-thirty.

"Bored?" she said without missing a step.

"No. Not really. Just wondering."

"Okay. Just asking."

The singer on stage curled his face into a mask of sorrow.

Christmas without you, it's hitting home, I'm all alone

Christmas without you, so unfamiliar

"How uplifting," Draco muttered.

Christmas without the love we shared, a little much to bear,

This Christmas

"I'm sorry," said Ginny. "Do you want to go sit down?"

"No, I'm fine."

At least you left the lights, okay, half, probably the ones that blink

Where are you tonight?

The singer's voice soared in a stylized wail on the last word. Draco clenched his teeth and told himself that there was absolutely no way the song had been chosen to bother him – he wasn't nearly that important...

"Draco." Ginny's voice cut into his thoughts. She was smiling. "Turn around."

Puzzled, he started to turn in the steps of the dance, but she let him go and stepped back, twirling her finger to indicate how he should turn.

Why would she want me to... oh no. It can't be...

Heart pounding louder than the drums, he turned.

A princess stood in the doorway of the Great Hall. Her robes seemed to float on the breeze coming in through the doors. Her hair was a river of sunlight spilling down her back. The silvery stuff of her dress could have been woven from the waning moon, and the stones in her tiara and necklace sparkled like stars.

He took one enchanted step forward, then remembered his duty and looked back over his shoulder, torn.

“Go on,” Ginny said, and enforced it with a gentle shove in the small of his back. Draco stumbled forward, then found his feet and wove automatically through the dancers, his eyes fixed on the vision by the door. She saw him coming, she was smiling – he was almost there, just two more lines of couples to pass – one more –

And then he stood at the edge of the floor, staring at the most beautiful girl in the room, and lost for words.

“Happy Christmas,” said Luna, beaming at him. “I have something for you.”

Draco shook his head. “You don’t have to give me anything,” he said breathlessly, taking the last few steps to her side. “You’re *here* – I thought you weren’t coming...”

“I had my Christmas with Dad. And I’ll go home again tomorrow. But I thought you’d like it if I came. Here.” She handed him a sprig of greenery. “Guaranteed nargle-free.”

Draco looked down at it, then up at Luna. *One of these days I am going to have to teach you about subtlety...*

But what the hell, it’s Christmas.

He twined the mistletoe sprig into her tiara and took full advantage.

xXxXx

Ginny made her way off the floor, watching Draco and Luna. They seemed unaware of anything except each other.

I wonder if anyone will ever look at me like that...

“You’ve been abandoned,” said a voice by her ear.

Ginny jumped and spun. “Harry! You scared me, don’t *do* that!”

“Sorry. Butterbeer?” Harry offered her a bottle.

“Thanks. Where’s Parvati?”

“Her sister introduced her to this boy from Beauxbatons, and they’ve really hit it off.” Harry grinned. “So we’re in the same boat.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “As if you’ll be abandoned for long. Why aren’t girls begging you to dance?”

Harry looked alarmed. “They probably will, won’t they? I’d better hurry and get a partner for the next song before they start queuing up. Would you like to dance?”

Ginny sat on her first reaction – *Yesyesyesyesyesyesyes !* – and made a face at him. “Well, if you’re sure you can’t find anyone better...”

“Not on short notice,” said Harry, matching her face.

They both laughed. “Yes, I’ll dance with you,” Ginny said, arching her back to stretch it. “But at the song after this. My feet hurt.”

“I could use a rest myself. The song after this, then.”

“That sounds good to me.”

xXxXx

At eleven o’clock, Ron waved Harry over. “Would you dance with Lavender once?” he asked. “Please?”

“You’re going for Hermione?”

“She did promise.”

“All right. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” Ron plucked up his courage and started across the room.

“Hello, Ron,” said Hermione as he got close. She turned to her partner. “Viktor, I want you to meet a good friend of mine, Ron Weasley. Ron, this is Viktor Krum.”

Ron found himself in a dilemma. On the one hand, this was *Viktor Krum*, one of the greatest Quidditch players in the world. On the other hand, this was one of Harry’s competitors in the tournament, and the bloke who had asked Hermione to the ball...

I said I’d be polite. “Pleased to meet you,” he said, shaking Krum’s hand. Part of his mind went wild with excitement, while the other part wanted to try to squash Krum’s fingers.

“I am pleased to meet any friend of Herm-own-ninny,” said Krum solemnly.

Ron snorted before he could help himself. Krum frowned.

“I think Ron wants to ask me to dance, Viktor,” said Hermione hastily. “I did promise him one dance tonight, you don’t mind, do you?”

“No, not at all,” said Krum, sitting down with a suspicious look at Ron.

“What was that for?” Hermione hissed as she seized Ron’s hand and led him onto the dance floor.

“Is that how he says your name?”

“Don’t laugh at him – I’m sure you’d sound stupid speaking Bulgarian, you certainly manage well enough with English...”

Ron bit his lip before he shot back at her. “It’s Christmas,” he said. “Let’s not row, all right?”

Hermione stared at him as the music began. “All right,” she said, taking his hand. “We won’t.”

It might have been his imagination, Ron thought, but she seemed to have just a trace of admiration in her eyes as she looked at him. Imagination or not, he rather liked it.

xXxXx

Harry slipped outside for a breath of air at eleven-thirty, and caught the sound of explosions and raised voices in the rose garden. Curious, he hurried that way.

“Do not lie to me, Longbottom!” bellowed Snape’s voice. “You and Black were not in that bush to *examine its roots!*”

“Yes we were too!” shouted Meghan angrily. “What *else* would we be doing?”

Harry rounded the corner just in time to see Snape turn brick red. “Twenty points from Gryffindor,” he said finally, and stalked away.

Harry stared at Neville and Meghan. “What *were* you doing in the rosebush?” he said.

“Looking at its roots,” said Neville, who was a close approximation of Snape’s color.

“Uh-huh.”

“Not you, too,” said Meghan with a groan.

“Okay, I believe you,” said Harry, holding up his hands. “You were looking at its roots. I believe you. I really do.”

Neville was rubbing his cheeks, trying to get his color down. “You looking for someone?” he said. “Cedric and Cho went that way.” He pointed.

“And I don’t think they’re looking at roots,” said Meghan, grinning.

Harry’s mood plummeted fifty feet, and it had only been thirty off the ground to begin with.

This night is starting to feel like riding a runaway broomstick...

xXxXx

The cool night air felt good on Neville's cheeks. He scooped up a handful of snow to cool them further as Meghan watched Harry go back around the corner towards the castle. "I don't think we should have said that," she said. "It made him feel bad. Why does he like Cho so much when he barely even knows her?"

Neville shrugged, taking a bite of the snow to cool his mouth off. "Falling in love is a funny thing. Nobody really knows how it happens, or why. It just... happens."

"Do you think Harry's in love with Cho?" Meghan scooped up some snow of her own.

"I think Harry thinks he's in love with Cho."

"That's not what I asked."

"I don't know. I'm not an expert on love."

"Why not?"

"Well... I'm just not."

Meghan dropped the rest of her snow and dusted her hands. "Would you like to be?"

Something in her tone made Neville look at her again. She was standing a little differently than she had been... yes, one hip was thrust out. And her eyes were half-closed, and her smile was definitely teasing...

One part of him wanted to crawl into the nearest rosebush and start doing what Snape had thought they'd been doing. Meghan certainly seemed willing...

Are you crazy? screamed a larger part of him. *She's eleven!*

"Um, I don't think so. Not like that."

Meghan pouted. "Why not?"

"Because... Snape might come back."

"So we'll find somewhere else. Like the common room. Or a classroom – no one's going to be there now. Everyone's at the ball."

"Don't you want to go and dance some more?"

"Not right now." Meghan moved closer. "I want to do something else. Something I've never done before." She was tilting her head back, her eyes were closed, her lips pursed...

Before he knew what he was doing, Neville had bent his head forward and touched his lips to hers.

She pulled back with a jump, nearly banging her head into his nose. “Oh!”

“What?”

“It... it felt strange.” She ran her hands up and down her sides. “But good. Do it again?” She moved in closer, tipped her head back, eyes drifting shut...

“No,” Neville said, stepping away. “No. We can’t.”

Meghan’s head came down. “Why not?”

“Because...” He couldn’t think of anything. The truth was going to have to do. “Because you’re eleven years old, and I don’t think we should be doing that yet.”

Meghan stared at him, her mouth dropping open. “Why, you... you...”

He waited.

“You traitor! You liar! I thought you *liked* me!” She stamped her foot, hands balled into fists. “I thought you were my *friend!* ”

“I am your friend. That’s why I’m saying no.”

Meghan called him something that made his eyebrows shoot up – she must have been listening more closely to her fathers than they knew. “*That’s* what you are! *Not* my friend! I don’t ever want to *see* you again! I’m going to *bed!* ”

She stomped away, the sound of her sniffles coming back to him clearly.

Neville slumped onto the convenient bench, feeling like everything she’d called him and more.

But what was I supposed to do?

xXxXx

Harry danced with Ginny again for the last song of the night, trying to ignore Cho rotating so nearby, obviously so happy in Cedric’s arms. Ron spun by with Lavender, flicking envious glances towards Krum and Hermione. Draco and Luna danced together near the center of the floor, oblivious to everyone else. Neville sat off to one side with a butterbeer, and upstairs Meghan cried herself to sleep.

For reasons as varied as the people themselves, no one who had attended the Hogwarts Yule Ball would ever forget it.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 43: Gifts, Giants, and Gruntlement (Year 4)

Chapter 43: Gifts, Giants, and Gruntlement

Harry rolled over, yawning, and pushed his bedcurtains aside. The blast of chilly air from the dorm room woke him quite thoroughly.

Boxing Day. Which means Christmas is over, which means it's time to do homework. Gah.

He stuck his feet into his slippers, walked over to his wardrobe, removed his day clothes, and started down the stairs towards the bathrooms. Hardly anyone else was awake, judging by the lack of noise, and a hot shower would help him warm up.

“Morning, Neville,” he said to the one occupant of the common room.

Neville made a sound that could have been a greeting. Harry frowned, but didn't pursue the matter.

But he's still in his dress robes from last night. Did he go to bed at all?

When Harry came out of the bathroom twenty minutes later, Neville was still in the same position, slouched in an armchair, staring at the opposite wall.

Harry finger-combed his wet fringe out of his eyes. “What's wrong with you?”

Neville sighed. “I had a row,” he said. “And found out something.”

“At the same time?”

“No, different.”

“Who'd you row with?”

“Meghan.”

“What about?”

Neville didn't answer.

“All right, none of my business. What about the other thing?”

“I heard Hagrid talking to Madame Maxime.” Neville was fiddling with his bow tie, spinning it one way, then the other. “He told her... he told her why he's so big. Why he's not quite like everyone else.”

“Is it something bad?”

“Yeah. It’s pretty bad.” Neville looked up at Harry. “You knew him before Hogwarts, right?”

“Right.”

“Did you ever know about his mum?”

“His mum?” Harry shook his head. “He never talks about his family. What about his mum?”

“She wasn’t human.”

“Not human? What was she, then?”

“Giantess.”

The information trickled through Harry’s mind, setting other thoughts and ideas spinning. Hagrid, half-giant... it made sense, considering his size... strange, giants liked to kill things, but Hagrid never hurt anything if he could help it... but why would he tell Madame Maxime? Other than his obvious interest in her... but of course, she must be another one, another giant-human cross... no one could be that big and still be pure human blood...

“Did she say anything?” he asked, looking across at Neville.

“Yelled out that he was insulting her, she just had big bones, and stomped away.”

“Big bones.” Harry sat down on the arm of another chair. “Right. Big like a dinosaur.”

“Do you think we should tell anyone?” Neville asked doubtfully.

“No one but the rest of the Pride,” Harry said. “I’m sure Dumbledore knows already, and most of the rest of the teachers too. But it could mean a lot of trouble if it got any farther than that.”

Neville nodded. “People don’t like giants.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Harry said. “So we won’t tell anyone, and it won’t get out.”

xXxXx

“Mr. Weasley, I’d like to see you in my office before lunch, please,” said Professor McGonagall, catching Ron by the arm in the entrance hall. “You’re in no trouble,” she added at the expression on his face.

Fred and George, halfway up the marble stairs, sighed in unison as McGonagall walked away. “Poor ickle Ronniekins,” said Fred.

“Asked to McGonagall’s office, and not in trouble,” said George.

“Looks like all that trouble we went to was wasted.”

“Our little brother will never follow in our noble footsteps.”

McGonagall reappeared at the bottom of the stairs. “I’d like to see you two as well,” she said to them. “And your sister, if you don’t mind. Eleven o’clock, shall we say?”

xXxXx

“What did she want?” Harry asked when Ron and Ginny had found seats for lunch.

Ginny smiled. “It’s the first time I’ve ever seen Fred and George both speechless at the same time,” she said. “And Ron was even nice to them about it.”

“I just asked if they wanted in,” Ron protested. “How is that being nice?”

“Never mind,” said Hermione. “Wanted in on what?”

“His present for Mum,” said Ginny. “He’s giving her – we’re giving her, now – a house-elf.”

“Quite a Christmas gift,” said Draco. “Difficult to wrap, though.”

“McGonagall wanted to know when we wanted to go home to give it to Mum,” said Ron. “We settled on New Year’s.” Movement from down the table caught his eye. “What, Hermione?”

Hermione was bristling perceptibly. “House-elves are not ‘it,’” she said sternly. “House-elves are ‘he’ or ‘she.’”

“Fine, she. It’s Winky. Crouch’s old elf, the one he sacked for running off at the Quidditch World Cup. Remember?”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Ron, that’s wonderful! She was so sad about not having a family – and now she does! You thought of it, didn’t you?”

Ron nodded. “Mum’s always said she wanted a house-elf,” he said. “And Winky wanted a family. It wasn’t too hard.”

“Have you thought about what Percy’s going to do when he finds out?” Harry asked. “Since he likes Mr. Crouch so much?”

Ron groaned. “Oh, no. He’ll probably worship at its feet – *her* feet,” he corrected himself quickly with a glance at Hermione. “Either that or say we shouldn’t hire a disgraced elf.”

“But it’s not like she did anything all that wrong,” said Draco. “She ran away from a load of maniacs blasting tents and levitating people around. Even Percy can’t make that sound too bad.”

“You don’t know Percy very well, do you?” said Ginny.

xXxXx

Hedwig rapped at the window that night, and dropped a package on the table addressed to all four cubs when Hermione opened the window for her.

“Not that big,” said Harry, brushing snow off the box. “Does it rattle?” He shook it. “It does.”

“Don’t shake it, you’ll break whatever it is,” said Hermione, stroking Hedwig’s feathers. “Just open it.”

“Is there a card?” asked Draco.

“Probably inside.” Harry slit the tape with a *Diffindo* and pulled the flaps of the box open. “Here it is.” He tore the envelope open, pulled the card out, and read it aloud. “‘Sorry these are late, but we only got them yesterday ourselves. Happy Christmas, and don’t forget you’re coming home for New Year’s Day.’ And everyone’s signed it.” He handed the card to Draco.

“You missed the P.S.,” Draco said, flipping the card over. “‘One to a customer, and don’t use them too much – we don’t know how to recharge them yet.’”

“Recharge?” said Ron. “That sounds like something Muggle.”

“But Muggle things don’t work at Hogwarts,” said Ginny. “Unless they’ve been changed to run off magic, and then they don’t need recharging.”

“Only one way to find out,” said Harry, and stuck his hand into the box, fishing around until he found the first of four smaller boxes. “Here we are.” Pulling it out, he looked at its tag.

“Meghan. Put it aside for now, if she ever comes out we can give it to her then. Hermione.” He tossed the box to her. “Draco. And me.”

“On three, then?” said Draco, holding his hand poised to rip. “One, two...”

Three boxes were torn into eagerly.

“It’s... a lighter,” said Harry, holding his up. “A heavy lighter. All metal, I think.”

“There’s an instruction card,” said Hermione, producing it from within the box. “Made in America, the genuine Zippophone. Accept no substitutes.”

“Zippophone?” Ron said. “What does it do?”

Hermione was still reading the card, and her face was growing more and more excited. “It’s a portable Floo!” she said, looking up. “Like a Muggle mobile phone! Here, watch!”

She flipped open the lid of hers, and a green flame sprang up. “Gryffindor common room,” she said clearly into the flame. The flames in the common room fireplace roared and flickered green for an instant.

“Now listen,” said Hermione into the lighter. An instant later, her voice, saying, “Now listen,” echoed out of the fireplace. Several people turned to look at it in confusion, but seeing no one there, went back to their conversations.

Harry rubbed his ears. “Don’t do that,” he said. “It sounds so strange.”

Hermione shut the lighter. “Sorry,” she said. “But don’t you see? We can make a firecall from anywhere with these.”

“And they’d need recharging after a while, because they’d run out of Floo powder,” said Draco. “Or the stuff inside the lighter that burns.”

“Or both,” said Ron. “It probably uses it up at about the same rate.”

“Can you get calls on them too?” asked Ginny.

Hermione scooped up the card again. “Yes, you can,” she said, perusing it. “You have to set it up with your name first, so it knows who you are – here, let me do that now.” She held the closed lighter up to her mouth. “Hermione Granger-Lupin,” she said clearly, then lowered it. “Harry, Draco, do yours, and then one of you call me. We can see if they work.”

“Draco Black,” Draco said into the small metal box. Then he flicked the top open. “Hermione Granger-Lupin,” he said into the flame.

Hermione’s Zippophone emitted a chiming sound not unlike the Pack’s Floo. She opened the top. “Hello?” she said into the flame, her voice repeated out of Draco’s lighter.

“Hold on,” said Harry. “Draco, go up to the dorm and ring back. We can’t tell if they really work from here.”

“Just a second, then.” Draco disappeared up the stairs, and a moment later Hermione’s lighter chimed again.

She flipped it open. “Hello?”

“Hello,” said Draco’s voice, a bit higher-pitched than usual but recognizable. “How are things down there?”

“The same as they were thirty seconds ago,” said Harry. “How are things up there?”

“Oh, about the same as usual. Neville says hello.”

“Hello, Neville,” said Ron absently, staring at Hermione’s lighter. “These things are really cool. Do you think Meghan will want hers?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Ginny.

“I wasn’t asking you.”

“Then maybe you should make it a little clearer who you’re talking to.”

“I’m coming back down,” said Draco. “It’s obvious they work. Harry, have you set yours yet?”

“I’ll do that now.” Harry said his name into the side of the lighter as the flame went out on Hermione’s with a little snapping sound. “They must be from Aunt Amy,” he said, weighing the Zippo in his hand. “She always sends us the best gifts.”

“Lucky you,” said Ron. “All we ever get from our aunts are big sloppy kisses and books full of useful spells.”

xXxXx

Neville watched the door shut behind Draco, then returned to looking at the book on his lap.

I don’t know what to do with this. It’s not mine – Professor Moody gave it to me – but he wasn’t the real Professor Moody. I don’t know if it belongs to the real Professor or not. And with what the fake one said about killing me...

But it’s not possessing me like that diary did Percy, or poisoned like Draco’s lion. It’s just a book.

I’ll write to Mum and Dad and ask them. They’ll know what to do.

That settled in his mind, Neville set *Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean* on his nightstand and picked up *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade Four*. He knew he’d eventually have to do something about Meghan, but he wasn’t up to it tonight.

xXxXx

Meghan sat on her bed, nursing her bad temper.

Everyone thinks I’m a baby. Well, fine. I don’t need them. I don’t need anyone. I’ll do fine on my own. Just fine.

She pulled open her schoolbag, yanked out writing materials, and started scribbling fiercely on a piece of parchment. She’d show them all. She didn’t need help from anyone, for anything. And she didn’t want to be around anyone either.

If anyone gets near me, I’ll just kick them. That’ll show them how I’m feeling.

xXxXx

“Excuse me, you’re Ginny Weasley?”

Ginny looked up at the tall, brown-haired girl. "That's me."

"Colleen Lamb. I'm a year ahead of you."

"Yes, of course. Hermione introduced us once." Ginny scooted down on the bench. "Sit down."

"Thank you." Colleen took a seat. "I owe you an apology," she said. "And a few Sickles. You do calligraphy, right?"

"Yes..."

"I'm afraid I took some of your invisible ink at the start of the year," Colleen said quickly. "I'm terribly sorry, but I saw it on your bed when I made a wrong turn in the dorms, and I needed some, and I was afraid to buy it... it sounds ridiculous, I know, but I was there and it was there and I just took it. How much did it cost you?"

"Don't worry about it, the kit was a gift."

"No, please. I'd feel much better if I knew I'd done something in return..."

"I think two Sickles ought to cover what you took," Ginny said. "It wasn't much. I wasn't even sure if it was gone or not."

"Thank you, you're very kind." Colleen counted two silvery coins into Ginny's hand. "I know I should have just gone and bought my own, but I was afraid someone would see me... doesn't that sound silly?"

"I've done some silly things because I was afraid of people seeing me," said Ginny. "Like running off to the bathroom to write in a diary."

Colleen smiled faintly. "You do understand. I hoped you would."

"Yes, I understand. Good luck with him," Ginny added as Colleen stood up.

The older girl lost her balance and nearly fell over. "Good... good luck? With who?"

"The boy you went to the ball with. I assume that's who you used the ink to write to."

"Actually, he used it to write to me..." Colleen's smile returned. "Thank you," she said. "I hope we will have good luck."

xXxXx

And I don't need to worry about what people will say now. Colleen felt buoyant as she walked out of the Great Hall. I'm allowed to have a friend from another House. I'm even allowed to have a boyfriend...

She broke into a running dance step, and didn't notice the narrowed eyes which followed her across the entrance hall and up the marble stairs.

xXxXx

He went to one knee, bowing his head not in any real sign of deference but because it was easier than looking at the thing in the chair. "I am at your service, my lord," he said almost under his breath.

"As it should be." A satisfied chuckle. "And yet you were not always so..."

"I could not serve you dead, my lord. Or losing my mind in Azkaban. I can bring you valuable information, and new recruits, already partly trained. One in particular has contacts close to certain people. You know who I mean."

"I do. But this does not mean that you will be welcomed back with open arms. Those who betray ought by rights to receive that which they dealt out to their former comrades..."

He bit back panic and kept his voice level. "My lord, let me live only until your plan is accomplished, and then weigh my worth again. I will succeed, I swear it on my life, for I need no disguise, no false identity to walk freely at Hogwarts..."

"Yet you are already under suspicion," said a different voice, sullen and cold, from the shadows behind the chair. "Dumbledore told me as much himself."

"Do you mean that I do not have Dumbledore's confidence?" He allowed himself a small laugh. "Dumbledore trusts anyone and everyone. He trusted *you*, did he not?"

The man in the shadows growled, but the thing in the chair raised a hand, stilling him. "There will be no dissension here," it said softly. "Are we not comrades in arms, working towards a common goal? The light side must not steal all the teamwork for itself. Now. You will continue with the original plan – with a few adaptations, I believe it can still work – but you will also strike at morale, in certain vital places. Begin undermining Dumbledore's credibility, start the rumors spreading that he cannot be trusted, that his spells, and perhaps his mind, are not what they once were..."

He smiled triumphantly. "I have just the thing, my lord. You will not be disappointed."

"I trust not."

xXxXx

"Am I the only girl in a good mood around here?" Hermione asked Sirius on New Year's Day.

"So it seems. What's the matter with Meghan?"

"She had a row with Neville at the Yule Ball, I think. They've both been staying out of the way a

lot, and they're not speaking."

"Grand. And around here, Letha's been mopey, and Danger's being touchy."

"Why?"

"I don't know about Letha. She just doesn't seem to be enjoying anything this year."

Hermione grinned. "Maybe she's pregnant again."

Sirius sat up straighter. "No. But... I guess... No, she can't be..."

Hermione laughed. "Padfoot, I was joking. I don't think she is."

"But you might be right. She did act a little like this back with Meghan... I suppose... but wouldn't she have told me by now?"

"Told you what?" asked Aletha, coming in.

Sirius turned to his wife. "Letha, love, you're not pregnant, are you?"

Aletha took a large step back, almost running into the wall. "Not that I know of," she said when she'd recovered her voice. "Why do you ask?"

"You've just been... droopy lately. You don't seem to be enjoying anything."

"And the first thing you think of is that I might be pregnant?"

"Hermione suggested it."

"Oh, sure, blame everything on me," said Hermione, hands on her hips.

Aletha laughed. "Don't say that," she told Hermione. "He will." She looked back at Sirius. "No, I am not pregnant. And I'm sorry I've been acting oddly. I'm just worried about finishing up my training. It's getting more and more difficult, and I know that's the point, but I'm afraid that something will come up that I can't handle, that I'll have to make a quick decision and make the wrong one..."

Hermione got up to hug her Pack-mother. "You used to tell me when I was little," she said, "not to let myself live in the future, because we don't know anything about it, so that makes it a very scary place to live. You told me to live right now, and only worry about tomorrow when I had to."

Aletha hugged Hermione back, her mouth curving into a reluctant smile. "Do all parents have to listen to their own words coming back at them?"

"Probably," Sirius said, standing up to join the embrace from the other side. "I trust you, Letha. You'll make the right decisions when it's time."

He thought he heard a faint sigh escape her lips, and on it the words, *Want to bet?*

But he could have been imagining things. It happened often enough.

xXxXx

Draco leaned on the top of the piano. “We haven’t heard from Rita Skeeter in a while,” he said. “Do you think she just took Christmas off?”

“Are you really eager to have her back?” Letha rippled her left hand through a tricky modulation. “She might decide you’re the next big thing to write about.”

“Nah, she said she’d already done her part with me.”

“I beg your pardon?” Letha shut the piano and sat up straighter. “When has Rita Skeeter been talking to you?”

“It wasn’t to me, it was to Ron... oh, you don’t know about that, do you.”

“No. But I think I should know about it. What was Ron doing talking to her?”

“Me and my big mouth,” Draco muttered, but he explained the circumstances of Rita Skeeter’s interview with Ron, went through the details of what the reporter had pried out of his friend, and finished up with the *Pride*’s speculations.

“How very interesting,” Letha said blandly. “And we never heard about this, why?”

“Er... we didn’t want to get you in trouble?”

“So you’re willing to let Ron stay in trouble to keep us out of it? I’m touched by your family feeling, Draco, but there are better solutions.”

“Like what?”

Letha smiled faintly. “Why don’t you let me worry about that. Trust me, Rita Skeeter will never know what hit her.”

xXxXx

“So you’re all home for New Year’s Day,” said Molly Weasley, surveying her four youngest children. “Should I be worried?”

“Of course not,” said Fred.

“We’d never do anything to worry you,” said George.

“We’re just here to give you a present.”

“A token of our filial esteem.”

“As if you thought of it,” said Ginny, shaking her head at her brothers. “It’s Ron’s present mostly, Mum. He’s letting us have shares in it, but he had the idea.”

Molly frowned, looking warily at the large basket Ron was holding. “If it bites, whatever it is, I will not be pleased,” she warned.

Ron shook his head. “Happy Christmas,” he said, set the basket down, and opened the top.

Molly peered inside, then gasped. “Good heavens – hello, what’s your name?”

“My name is Winky,” said a timid voice. “Winky is being the house-elf to the Crouch family, until Master is sacking her for... for a mistake she is making, but she is not making that mistake any more, and she is wanting very much to be a house-elf to a good wizarding family...”

“Well,” said Molly, sounding flabbergasted. “I don’t know if we precisely count as a *good* wizarding family, but you are very welcome here, Winky. Will you excuse me for just one moment?” She stood up, stepped around the basket, and hugged Ron so tightly he couldn’t get his breath back for several seconds after she let go.

“You are the most unpredictable child I have, Ronald Bilius,” she told him. “And the most thoughtful. Thank you, thank you all, she’s perfect.” She hugged Ginny, then both twins at once, then returned to Winky’s basket, giving the house-elf a hand to help her climb out. “All right, Winky, I’ll show you the house – we call it the Burrow, in case you didn’t know – and you can decide where you’d like to sleep, and then we’ll talk about your duties... go and find something to do for a little while,” she added over her shoulder to the children. “We’ll have dinner around twelve-thirty.”

xXxXx

Harry found Remus in the study, reading. “I haven’t done anything, have I?”

Remus set his book aside. “I’m always a little worried when you open a conversation that way. Why do you ask?”

“Danger’s stamping around the kitchen and banging things, and she says she’s not angry with me, but she sometimes says that when she actually is.”

Remus shook his head. “She’s not angry with you,” he said. “Or with anyone, really. She’s glad to have me home, and thankful Hermione’s custody case came out the way it did, and exhibiting those feelings by snapping at everyone in sight.”

Harry sat down in the chair opposite Remus. “I’m glad I’m not a girl,” he said. “It must be a lot of hard work feeling things for no reason.”

“Oh, she has a reason,” Remus said. “She wants everything to be perfect now that we’re together

again, and she's conveniently forgotten that every holiday up to now, and probably every one we will ever have, has been less than perfect in some way, usually in quite a few."

Harry grinned. "Like the year Padfoot was chasing us around and knocked over the Christmas tree?"

"Or the year Hermione turned off the oven by mistake and the goose never cooked."

"Or the year Draco and I stole everything out of the girls' stockings and filled them up with coal."

"Yes – where did you get the coal, by the way? I've always wondered."

"Owl order."

"I should have known."

xXxXx

Meghan was lying under her bed, reading by wandlight, when she heard the bedroom door open. She extinguished her wand immediately and held her breath. *I'm not here*, she willed upward. *I'm not here, you don't know I'm here, go away, I don't want to talk to anyone...*

"I know you're in here, Pearl," said Danger's voice.

Meghan let out her breath in disgust. *I should have known. That only ever works for him.* She hissed under her breath at even the thought of *him*, that horrible boy who had pretended to like her, pretended to be her friend, and then destroyed her happiness and pretended it was for her own good...

"You can come out, or I can drag you out. Your choice. Ten seconds."

Meghan counted a slow five, then emerged from under the bed with dignity as intact as it could be considering the dust all over her robes and the strings that come off box springs caught in her braids.

Danger sighed. "No matter how often I clean, it's just always dirty under there. Hold still." She flicked a Cleaning Charm across Meghan. "There. Now. What has got into you lately?"

Meghan sat down on her bed, arms crossed, and stared at the wall beside her. "Not telling."

"Not telling. I see. I don't suppose 'not telling' has anything to do with the Yule Ball?"

Meghan whipped her head around in surprise, then remembered, too late, that she wasn't supposed to react at all.

"Alice Longbottom was over for tea yesterday," said Danger. "She had an interesting story to tell about Neville's time at the ball. It seems his partner called him names and went off to bed when

he wouldn't kiss her more than once. True?"

"Yes," said Meghan sullenly.

"And he told his partner that the reason he wouldn't kiss her more than once was her age. Also true?"

"Yes."

"Will you hate me if I tell you that I think what he did was right?"

"Yes."

"As long as we have that cleared up." Danger sat down on Hermione's bed. "Meghan, I know you hate being younger than all your friends, but it's only the truth. You're eleven years old. But you can be eleven and get treated like you're fourteen, or you can be eleven and get treated like you're seven. Most of the time it's your choice."

Meghan was still staring at the wall, willing the spot her eyes bored into to develop a hole. "Is not. People treat me like I'm seven no matter what."

"No, that's not true. Some people may always treat you like you're seven, and some people may always treat you like you're eleven. *Act* like you're fourteen, or older, and you might be surprised how many people will treat you that way. But if you act like you're seven, or younger – throwing fits, calling names, hiding under the bed – then people will treat you that way. End of lecture." Danger stood up. "Dinner in about an hour and a half, and I'll want you downstairs before that to help."

Meghan grunted. Danger turned to leave, then turned back. "And just so you know, I personally see no problems with a little kissing," she said, and smiled at the open-mouthed look of shock on Meghan's face. "Letha feels the same."

"What about Dadfoot and Moony?" Meghan blurted.

"They don't know about this yet. Which is probably good, since we want Neville to stay alive, don't you think?"

A giggle escaped Meghan before she could stop it.

"No father ever wants his little girl to grow up, Pearl," Danger said, coming across the room to hug her. "And I'm afraid you have a double dose of that, with two fathers. But we'll do our best to keep them under control, if you'll try not to do anything too outrageous. Deal?"

Meghan reached up to hug Danger back. "Deal."

xXxXx

Rita Skeeter sat at her desk, humming to herself as she put the finishing touches on her newest story. She'd had it almost ready to go to the *Prophet* back in December, but she'd had a hunch that holding onto it would do well, and a good reporter learned to play hunches. So she'd filed it and headed out for her Christmas holiday – three weeks when she didn't touch a quill.

Except that she'd taken a little time off to attend the Hogwarts Yule Ball, and her hunch had paid off in Galleons. She'd heard Rubeus Hagrid confirm, while sober, what he'd hinted at when she'd given him some alcoholic incentive earlier in the month; she'd witnessed Sirius Black's daughter screaming at the Longbottoms' son after their first deliciously scandalous kiss; and she'd watched the dancing carefully, noting how often Hermione Granger-Lupin danced, and with whom.

Stories really were everywhere. You just had to know how to spin them, and how to space them out.

And although she had one ready for press right now, it might do well to get started on one or two of the others she had in her head.

Dipping her quill, she set to work.

xXxXx

On the first day of term, Harry was experimenting with sprinkling brown sugar on top of bacon (very good) when he heard a muffled, furious curse. He looked around.

Hermione was glaring at an open page of the *Daily Prophet*, her teeth set. "Why doesn't someone just *swat* that woman?" she hissed, and folded the page back so that everyone could see.

"Oh, no," said Ginny as she caught sight of the headline.

"How did she know?" Neville asked.

"I didn't say anything," Ron said immediately.

"How could you have?" said Harry. "You didn't know when she talked to you, it was before Christmas. She found this one out on her own."

"She was probably there when Neville heard it," said Luna, who had come back the day before on the train. "As the bug. Neville, you didn't see a beetle around, did you?"

"Not to remember it. She wouldn't have been in the open anyway, would she?"

"She might," said Ginny. "If she thinks Ron hasn't told anyone, or that we haven't."

"She's not getting away with this one," said Harry, baring his teeth briefly at the picture of Rita simpering and preening at the bottom of the column. "Hagrid's a Pack-friend. He deserves better than this."

“So do you,” said Hermione. “And I, and Ron, and all of us.”

“For once, maybe my big mouth will do some good,” said Draco. “Letha knows now, and she’s not going to keep it to herself, not with something like this.”

xXxXx

Draco didn’t know it, but Aletha was considering just that.

Why should I bother? Whether I do things or don’t do things, it’s wrong. So why should I try?

“Problem?” said a voice nearby.

Aletha looked up and tried to smile. “Hello, Remus. Just considering the futility of life.”

“That sounds like fun. May I join you?”

“Be my guest.”

Remus pulled up a chair and sat down. “Futility in general, or something in particular?”

“This article by Skeeter in the paper this morning. I know something about her that might have stopped it, if I’d just acted in time – Draco told me over New Year’s – but I’ve been so busy worrying about...” She stopped.

“About...” Remus prompted.

“Other things.”

“Anything you can tell me?”

“Not now.” Aletha sighed, staring out the window. “I just feel terrible, because if I hadn’t been so wrapped up in my own problems, I might have been able to spare Hagrid all this...”

“And if I hadn’t let Danger bite Lucius Malfoy, we would never have gone through the custody hearing, and I might still be teaching at Hogwarts,” said Remus.

“Don’t be ridiculous. How could you have known?”

“My point exactly.”

Aletha took a breath, then let it out as she realized she’d been outmaneuvered. “You’re too good at that.”

“Thank you. Letha, there’s nothing we can do about Hagrid now, except continue to be his friends. What we can do, if you have something on Skeeter, is stop her before she hits someone else we care about. Now, what is it you have?”

“Dirt. But dirt with a proviso. She has equivalent dirt on Ron, and provisionally on us, and she’ll have no compunction using it if she feels threatened in any way.”

“Ron, and us... Animagus?”

“Yes. And believe it or not, that’s hers as well.” Aletha smiled grimly. “But I think we have something else on her, something she doesn’t know we have. Something to do with Draco...”

xXxXx

The four adults of the Pack stood in the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic, wizards and witches frozen all around them. They were inside a memory of Sirius’, of the day he’d taken Draco to the Ministry that summer, the day the abuse allegation had begun.

“They think Skeeter was there?” Sirius asked again. “Listening to me, hoping I’d say something she could twist?”

“She’d probably been following us for a while,” said Danger. “Seems like the kind of thing she’d do. All right, let’s go bug hunting.”

Lion and horse shook back their manes, wolf and dog stretched and yawned, and Sirius set his memory in motion. The four animals surrounded the memory-figures of Sirius and Draco, and it was Sirius himself who froze the memory and stood up human. “There,” he said, pointing at a speck on the wall. “One bug.”

The others closed in. “Sure enough,” said Remus, peering at it. “Let’s see where she goes...”

The memory reactivated. Sirius shook Draco gently by the shoulder and told him what to do. As they started for the lift, the beetle took off from the wall, flying past Sirius’ ear, and did a twirl in the middle of the air, disappearing with a very small pop.

“We’ll have to Anti-Disapparate anything we catch her in,” said Aletha. “And make it Unbreakable, so she can’t turn human and break it that way.”

Danger was frowning. “Sirius, back it up a second?” she said. “I want to see her again.”

Sirius returned them to the moment with the beetle perched on the wall. Danger looked closely at it, then pantomimed swinging something at it. “No way,” she muttered. “No way...”

“No way what?” Aletha asked.

“After Sirius’ trial,” Danger said slowly. “That night. I was in the kitchen, I was setting up my loom, and I heard a bug flying around... I spotted it on the wall, rolled up a newspaper and swatted it, then tossed it out the window...”

“And Rita Skeeter never showed up for our interviews the next morning,” said Remus. “And one of the house-elves told us she was in the hospital...”

Sirius burst out laughing. The other three weren't far behind.

"Pre-emptive revenge," said Aletha when she could speak again. "It might catch on."

"Well, I'd like a little post-emptive myself," said Danger. "A Venus Fly Trap, say."

"And they say men are violent," Sirius said. "Let's get back to reality before we start getting bloodthirsty, all right? My mind's messed up enough as it is."

xXxXx

"...and she feels terrible about it, but she can't find the right place or time to apologize to him, and that's why she looks frazzled and unhappy about everything. But she had a lovely time before that, even if she won't admit it."

Graham laughed with Natalie. "Meghan can be odd sometimes," he agreed. "But she's a lot of fun to be around. What do you think of the real Professor Moody?"

Natalie looked around to make sure they were alone. "It's awful," she said, "but I don't think I would ever have known the difference."

"Nor would I. But we never knew him before this." Graham looked at his watch. "I should get back to the common room, I have plenty of homework already..."

"Me too. I'll see you tomorrow, I hope."

"Of course."

They squeezed hands, then Natalie hurried off up the corridor. Graham watched her go for a few steps, then turned to start down the stairs.

Three tall third year Slytherins were blocking his way. "Hello, Pritchard," said one of them.

Graham stood very still, his hand going surreptitiously towards his wand pocket. "Carrow," he acknowledged the speaker. "Giorno. Henderson." The other two. "I was just on my way back to the common room."

"We heard," said Carrow. "When you told the Gryffindor." The House name dripped contempt. "Honestly, Pritchard, you couldn't find friends in your own House?"

"No one tells me who to be friends with," said Graham evenly. "Get out of my way. Please." He used the word deliberately – he didn't want to fight, and a little propitiation might work...

But it seemed the three were in no mood to be placated. "This is your warning, Pritchard," said Carrow. "You're a disgrace to your House, and we don't take well to disgraces. Unless you want your life to get hard pretty fast, lay off the Gryffindor girls."

“Three to one?” said a soft voice from behind the boys. “Stacking the odds a bit, aren’t you, Carrow? Against the dangerous scary first year?”

“Not your business, Zabini,” said Giorno, speaking for the first time. “Get lost.”

“I think it is my business.” The fourth year pushed between Carrow and Henderson and faced the three third years. “I think any time that Slytherins are harassing their own is my business. This is the kind of thing that gets our House a bad name, not being friends with Gryffindors.”

“Yeah, well, you know all about being friends with Gryffindors, don’t you, Zabini?” sneered Carrow. “Regular plague of defectors around here. What’s the matter, Slytherin girls not good enough for you?”

“Now that’s none of your business,” said Zabini, his hand at his side. “Now, are you going to leave, or do I have to make you?”

“I think we’re…” began Carrow.

“*Expelliarmus!*” shouted Henderson, sweeping his wand across Graham and Zabini.

Graham felt his wand ripped from his hand before he hit the wall hard, and Zabini only missed crashing into him by forcing his fall to one side. “Sorry about this,” the fourth year whispered as he pulled himself up.

“Not your fault,” Graham hissed back. He got to his feet and stared at the third years. “So what are you going to do now? Hex us until we promise to change our lives so you like them better? Put us under Imperius so you can do what you want with us?”

“No, I think we’ll just have your word for it,” said Carrow, twirling Graham’s wand between his fingers, a nasty smile on his face. “How about some Unbreakable Vows?”

“Over my dead body,” said Zabini bluntly.

“That could be arranged.”

“*Expelliarmus!*” shouted a voice from behind the third years. They all staggered forward a step, cursing as the wands were torn from their hands.

Graham peered past Giorno and kept his mouth shut with an effort.

What is he doing helping us?

“Thanks, Potter,” said Zabini laconically.

“You’re welcome,” said Harry Potter from the other side of the boys. “Sod off, you three,” he added to them.

“Five points from Gryffindor, Potter, for profanity in the hallways,” said a familiar chill voice, and Professor Snape stepped around the corner. “And another five for doing magic, as I assume that was your voice I heard shouting a Disarming Charm only a moment ago...”

“They took their wands first!” Potter made his meaning clear by pointing. “They were saying they were going to make them take Unbreakable Vows about something!”

“It’s true, sir,” said Zabini. “They ganged up on Pritchard here, and took me by surprise when I stopped to see what was going on.” He gave the third years a nasty glare.

“You’ll know better next time, then.” Snape looked at the third years as he might a potion with the consistency of cottage cheese. “And what do you have to say for yourselves?”

“We were just joking,” said Carrow, cringing under Snape’s eyes. “Just having some fun.”

“Cursing and threatening your Housemates is scarcely a proper definition of fun, Mr. Carrow. Detention, all three of you. Two detentions,” Snape amended as Henderson opened his mouth to protest. “And I can make it three.”

Giorno elbowed Henderson, who shut his mouth. Meanwhile, Potter had edged over to Graham and Zabini. “Better get yours now,” he said, spreading the five wands he held in an arc. “Stop them taking one of yours and doing something to it.”

Graham pulled his own from the center of the arc, while Zabini took the one farthest left.

“Wands, Potter,” said Snape, holding out his hand, and Potter handed over the three remaining. “I am very disappointed in you all,” he said, shoving the wands into Carrow’s hand. “I shall inform you of the time and manner of your detentions.”

Carrow muttered something and disappeared, Giorno and Henderson only a few steps behind him.

“Ten points to Slytherin, Mr. Zabini, for stopping to help Mr. Pritchard,” Snape said. “And...” He eyed Potter for a moment. “Ten points to Gryffindor for Mr. Potter’s actions.” He spun on his heel and stalked off in the same direction the three third years had taken.

The three boys looked at each other for a moment. Finally Zabini voiced the common opinion.

“We should make sure the sky isn’t falling.”

“He didn’t actually *give* Gryffindor any points, though,” said Graham thoughtfully. “He just reversed what he took away.”

“So the sky should still be up where it belongs,” said Potter. “See you in class, Zabini. See you around, Pritchard.” He put his wand away and hurried off towards Gryffindor Tower.

Graham looked at Zabini. “Thanks,” he said.

“Don’t bother thanking me. I made it worse.”

“You tried. It’s more than most people would have done.”

Zabini shrugged. “I was on my way to the library,” he said. “You?”

“I was going back to the common room, but I think I’d better hold off. The library’s as good as any.”

Zabini started walking. “Where are you in your classes?”

Graham had to move a bit faster than usual to keep up, but he didn’t mind. “We’ve just covered the ninth and tenth uses of dragon’s blood in Potions, and Professor Flitwick says we start Lighting Charms next class...”

xXxXx

Meghan crossed the common room quietly, listening to the Pride.

“...have to get in there and talk to him,” Ron was saying. “We have to tell him we don’t care.”

“But he won’t open the door,” said Draco. “That could be a problem.”

“That’s what magic’s good for! We can get in there easy!”

“But that’s wrong,” said Harry firmly. “That’s Hagrid’s house, and we’re not breaking in. If he won’t let us in, we’ll just have to be persistent.”

“We’ve been persistent for a week,” said Hermione. “He must be letting Fang out at night, or when no one’s watching, because I haven’t seen the door open at all...”

“How is he eating?” asked Ginny. “House-elves?”

“Probably,” said Harry. “Speaking of which, how’s Winky working out?”

“Oh, fantastic. Mum’s over the moon about not having to do the laundry any more.”

“She had to be pretty firm about the cooking,” Ron added, “but Winky was so happy to have a family again she would have said yes to almost anything.”

“That’s good,” said Neville. “The way your mum cooks, she shouldn’t ever give it up.”

“Hello, Meghan,” said Luna, looking her way. “I haven’t seen you much this week.”

“I know.” Meghan gulped as everyone turned to look at her. “Neville, can I talk to you? Please?”

Neville started to get up, but then settled back into his chair. “You can talk right here,” he said.

“It’s private.”

“Anything you want to say to me, you can say here.” Neville pointed at a spot in front of his chair.

Meghan clenched her teeth. “It’s *private*,” she repeated harshly.

“And it will be. As soon as you come over here.”

“Oh.” Meghan picked her way around the table in the middle of the circle of chairs until she stood in front of Neville, whose lips were already moving. A moment later, they stood inside a shell of translucent air – Neville’s own version of a Privacy Spell.

“I’m sorry,” Meghan said, deciding to get it over with quickly. “I shouldn’t have called you names. But I was really mad. And there isn’t anything wrong with a little kissing!” She looked at him pleadingly. “Didn’t you like kissing me?”

Neville squirmed in his chair. “I liked it,” he said. “I was just worried that... Meghan, please don’t get mad, but you are eleven. You’re not... you know... growing up. Yet.”

“Am too.” Meghan stuck out her chest. “Look.”

Neville looked. And looked. And pulled his eyes away. “Okay, you are. But you’re still eleven. The problem isn’t that I didn’t like kissing you, the problem is that I liked kissing you too much. And kissing turns into other stuff, and we shouldn’t do any of the other stuff. It isn’t right. Not now.”

Meghan stared at him. “You liked it too much?”

Neville seemed fascinated by the carpet. “I didn’t want to stop,” he admitted quietly. “But I didn’t want to do anything that wasn’t right for you. So I had to stop.”

Meghan sighed and lay down on the floor, sticking her face into Neville’s line of sight and making a silly face at him. “I trust you,” she said when they were both upright again. “You’re my friend. You won’t do anything that would hurt me. And Danger said there wasn’t anything wrong with a little kissing.”

“But I don’t know if I’ll stop with a little. That’s the problem.” Neville looked terribly torn. “It would be safer just not to start at all...”

“Why don’t we set a timetable?” Meghan suggested. “One kiss per day, or something like that?”

“That might work. If you don’t mind.”

“It was my idea.”

“All right. One kiss per day.”

“First one now?” Meghan turned her face up and batted her eyelashes.

“Only if you stop doing that,” Neville said. “It would tickle.”

Meghan stopped immediately.

xXxXx

“I’ll keep trying with Hagrid while you’re in Hogsmeade,” Meghan said to the Pride as they crunched through the snow the next morning. “Come find me when you get back.”

“I’m surprised you’re going to Hogsmeade, Harry,” said Hermione, waving to Meghan as the girl veered away from their path. “I thought you’d be working on that egg.”

“Would you lay off on the egg, Hermione? I’ve got five weeks still.”

“And you probably haven’t been doing anything all through Christmas, have you?”

“No, he has,” said Draco. “Asking it questions, trying to figure out what the sound is...”

“Throwing it across the room...” added Ron.

“I didn’t really expect that to help,” said Harry. “But I had to do something.”

“You said something about muffling it before Christmas,” Ginny recalled. “Have you tried that?”

“I wrapped it up in my bedspread, but it didn’t sound any different,” Harry said as they passed through the gates of Hogwarts. “Just quieter. I have no idea what it could be, other than a whole orchestra full of musical saws.”

“Take a little time off,” Luna advised. “A Wrackspurt’s probably got you, they make your brain go fuzzy, and you get rid of them by resting and eating sweet things.”

“I think we can handle that,” said Harry, speeding up his pace a little. “Honeydukes, anyone?”

xXxXx

Meghan was not surprised to find Hagrid’s door shut. After a few knocks, she swept the stoop clean with her foot and sat down on it.

“I remember another time I was here,” she said, supposedly to herself, but loudly enough that she knew she’d be heard inside the house. “I was scared, because half my family was gone and the other half had been turned into animals, and because I knew something that could help them, but nobody was going to listen to me. I was just a little girl. I needed a grownup to help me. And I only knew one grownup who could.”

There were footsteps inside the house – they didn’t sound like Hagrid’s, but his tiptoeing would

sound like an ordinary person walking...

“When I got here, and Hagrid opened the door and hugged me, I knew everything would be all right,” Meghan went on. “Because he wouldn’t let it not be. And it was. My Dadfoot got free, and Wormtail got caught, and everything went back to the way it should be. And that was because of Hagrid.”

The door opened. Meghan turned, and stood up in surprise. “Hello, Professor.”

“Meghan,” Professor Dumbledore acknowledged her. “Would you care to come inside? It is rather chilly to sit out there.”

“Thank you.” Meghan stepped in, and Dumbledore shut the door behind her.

xXxXx

“What did Bagman want?” Ron asked as Harry rejoined the Pride at their table.

“And what was with all those goblins?” Draco added.

“It was a little funny,” said Harry, nodding to Hermione as she passed him a butterbeer. “He was offering to help me with my egg... but he’s a Triwizard judge, he shouldn’t be trying to help me... he said he wants a Hogwarts victory, but I don’t know.”

“Is he helping Diggory, then?” Neville asked.

“No, he’s not.” Harry sipped at his butterbeer. “He said the goblins were looking for Mr. Crouch. I guess he hasn’t been coming to work, just owling instructions to Percy...”

“Percy was talking about that on New Year’s,” said Ginny. “He said Mr. Crouch had written him a letter saying he’d come down with something, and that he wouldn’t be in for a few weeks, but just to carry on...”

“He didn’t look well at the first task,” said Harry. “I wonder what he’s got?”

“Well, look who it is,” said Hermione venomously, looking over Harry’s shoulder. “Rita bloody Skeeter.”

The Pride all turned. Rita Skeeter had indeed just come into the pub, dressed in banana-yellow which clashed with her shocking pink nails, nibbling at the end of an acid-green quill, and chattering to her paunchy photographer.

“I’m going to go over there,” said Hermione, starting to get up. “And I’m going to tell her what I think of her...”

“Don’t,” said Luna.

Hermione whirled on her friend. “Why not?”

“Because I think someone else is about to do something.” Luna pointed into a shadowy corner of the pub.

Harry squinted. It was too dark to be sure, but he thought he could see a pair of familiar outlines back there...

“No!” shouted a familiar voice, and the sound of shattering glass got everyone’s attention. Letha stormed out of the dark corner, whirling back to confront Padfoot as he too emerged into the light. “It’s bad enough you *did* that, Sirius, but now you’re *bragging* about it to me? I don’t ever want to see you again!” She slapped him across the face, then turned and stormed out.

“Letha, wait! I can explain!” Padfoot followed her, stopping only to toss a Galleon onto the bar. “Keep the change, Rosmerta,” he said hastily, and shoved through the door. “Letha, wait!”

Rita Skeeter was on her feet, as was most of the rest of the pub, but Rita contrived to be the first one out the door. The Pride looked at each other in dismay.

“What was that about?” Ginny asked.

“Don’t know,” said Draco worriedly. “But it didn’t sound good...”

Hermione snorted. “Didn’t sound good?” she repeated. “No, it didn’t. But Letha’s not much of an actress.”

“Actress?” said Neville.

“Did you really think that was real?” Hermione demanded. “Since when do Padfoot and Letha fight in public like that? And what could he possibly have said to her that would make her that mad, all at once? It was staged!”

“But why would they stage a fight?” Ron asked.

“Probably to get Rita Skeeter to follow them,” said Luna. “They started fighting as soon as she came in.”

“And she did follow them,” said Harry. “And... Draco, you told Letha about her?”

“I did.” Draco was grinning now.

“Everything about her.”

“Yes indeed.”

Harry felt an answering grin come to his face. “Then I think I know who’s out there right now. One person in Animagus form, to spot her, and one person in human form with a wand and a jar...”

xXxXx

Got her. Dead ahead.

I see her. Here we go. Remus drew his wand, keeping his eyes fixed on the beetle flying towards Sirius and Aletha, who were standing in the road near the outskirts of Hogsmeade, shouting at each other about Sirius' supposed infidelity. **It had to be that, didn't it?**

We wanted something sensational. Besides, she's not going to be telling anyone, is she?

No, I suppose she's not. Remus aimed his wand directly at the insect. "*Accio Beetle,*" he whispered, and licked his lips in satisfaction as the charm worked perfectly. The beetle, buzzing in surprise, zoomed backwards towards him, and Danger, once again in human form, sprang up and clapped the precharmed jar and lid together around it, screwing them together tightly before the Animagus-reporter could take any action.

Remus took the jar from Danger and held it up to his face. "Rita Skeeter, I presume," he said.

He'd never known a beetle could look disgruntled before.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 44: The Second Task (Year 4)

Chapter 44: The Second Task

“What did I tell you,” said Harry under his breath, pointing down the street. “Moony! Danger!”

“Hello, everyone,” Moony called back as the Pride swarmed towards him. “How are things here?”

“Fine, thanks,” said Hermione. She hugged him, then looked at the glass jar in his hand. Her smile made Harry think of empty bird cages. “What’s that?”

“Remus has taken up insect collecting,” said Danger, ruffling Draco’s hair as he passed. “He thought he’d start here in Hogsmeade, since there are so many interesting magical insects around.”

Ron grinned as Moony handed him the jar. “It’s so big,” he said in his best stupid-and-amazed tone, staring at the beetle. “And shiny. What kind of bug is it, Mr. Moony?”

“I believe this is what’s known as *Skeetera Annoyensa*. Very rare, possibly even unique. I was lucky to find this specimen.”

The beetle fanned its wings in short spurts. *Buzz buzz buzzzzz buzz. Buzz buzz buzzzzz.*

“Funny how the buzzing has a pattern to it,” said Ginny. “Almost like it was trying to tell us something.”

Buzz buzz buzzzzz buzz. Buzz buzz buzzzzz.

“Will you send some pictures to Daddy?” Luna asked. “He’d love to write an article about it.”

“We could get them now,” Neville said. “I just saw Colin Creevey going into the post office, and he always has his camera with him.”

Buzz buzz buzzzzz buzz. Buzz buzz buzzzzz.

“I think that’s a good idea,” said Danger. “Someone go and get him, please?”

Ginny sped off.

Buzz buzz buzzzzz buzz. Buzz buzz buzzzzz.

As Moony took the jar back from Ron, Harry noticed that only one of the fingers on his right hand was extended.

The buzzing stopped.

xXxXx

“Hmm,” said Professor Dumbledore, peering out the window of Hagrid’s house. “Either Hogwarts has just been invaded by a very small army, or there are quite a number of people who wish to see you, Hagrid.”

“You see,” said Meghan fiercely, “we don’t hate you. Nobody who really knows you hates you. And everyone who does is just being stupid.” She punched Hagrid in the arm, as hard as she could.

Hagrid turned to look at her, wiping his swollen eyes. “Here now, tha’ hurt,” he said, and picked her up easily by grasping her around the waist with one hand. Meghan squealed happily as she rose above the floor. “Yeh always were a troublesome mite,” Hagrid said, shaking her gently. “Think I should drop her in the rain barrel, Professor?”

“I doubt her parents would approve, Hagrid, and they are on your doorstep as we speak.” Dumbledore went to the door as several fists pounded on it. “Along with the rest of the family.”

Fang charged into the Pride as the door opened, barking hoarsely and licking faces and ears indiscriminately. Hermione hissed and slapped him across the nose when he nearly knocked her down, and he recoiled in surprise, whining.

Hagrid stood up and absently set Meghan in the rafters. “’Lo,” he said in response to the shouted greetings.

Dadfoot looked up at Meghan. “Good place for her,” he said. “Can we leave her there for a while, Albus? Give her teachers a rest?”

Meghan stuck out her tongue.

“*Wingardium Leviosa* ,” said Mama Letha, pointing her wand at Meghan.

“Aww,” said Meghan as she floated to the ground. “That was fun up there.”

“This is more fun down here,” said Draco. “Look what Moony’s got.”

“I don’t know how interested you are in insects, either of you,” said Moony to Dumbledore and Hagrid, taking a glass jar from his pocket, “but this one I think you might want to get to know.”

“So you can smash it if you ever see it near you again,” said Danger. “It’s a *Skeetera Annoyensa* . Converts sound waves into venom. Very toxic creature.”

Hagrid’s big eyebrows drew up. Dumbledore took the jar from Moony and held it up to the light. “Fascinating,” he said as if to himself. “It validates several personal theories of mine.”

A slow smile was beginning on Hagrid’s face. “Bin on the grounds, has it? Sneakin’ around where it shouldn’ta bin?”

“I suppose there just aren’t enough brains in that glittery head to know when to leave things alone,” said Mama Letha. “But we’ll take care of it, don’t worry. It won’t be around here again.”

Hagrid’s smile widened, though it was a bit shaky still. “Thanks,” he said feelingly. “Thanks a lot.”

“I believe this is where I leave you,” said Dumbledore, handing the jar back to Moony. “Breakfast in the Great Hall at eight-thirty on Monday, Hagrid. I expect you there.”

“I’ll be there, Professor Dumbledore, sir.” Hagrid wiped his eyes on the back of his hand as the door closed. Dadfoot conjured him a handkerchief. “Thanks, Sirius.” He blew his nose and wiped his eyes. “Anyone fer some tea? Dumbledore left plenty, an’ this seems ter call fer a bit o’ celebration...”

xXxXx

The den room was the most easily secured in the house, so the adults of the Pack chose to conduct their negotiations with Rita Skeeter there. After they had sealed it as they once had to tell Harry a prophecy, Danger unscrewed the lid of the jar, and the beetle flew out and retransformed.

“If you’re planning on killing me, it won’t get you anywhere,” were Rita’s first words. “I have articles in time-sealed envelopes, ready to be released if I give no other instructions.”

“Then you’ll give other instructions,” said Remus, seating himself in one of the chairs they’d brought in from the kitchen. “Because we have no intention of killing you. Please, sit down.”

“Move, then,” said Rita, looking at him warily. “I want that chair.”

“Paranoia, much?” Sirius muttered as Remus stood up.

“It’s how I stay alive,” Rita said, seating herself. “How I keep myself fed. I don’t have any security, you know, nothing except what I’ve been able to save, which isn’t much. The *Prophet* won’t keep me on staff, it’s too dangerous to them. So I charge as much as I think I can get away with, and they offer to pay what they think I’ll take, and neither of us is happy.”

“Why do you write so sensationally, then?” Danger asked. “Why not just stick to real reporting?”

“Real reporting?” Rita laughed brittly. “This went here, and that went there, and this person said this or that? I’d die of boredom. I need spice in my life. Excitement.”

“You’re going to be finding it somewhere else for a while,” said Aletha levelly. “You see, we know several things about you that the Ministry would be interested in. Not only are you an illegal Animagus, but you were involved in a plot to accuse an innocent man of child abuse, a plot which also involved a convicted Death Eater.”

Rita’s eyes bulged behind her glasses. “You can’t,” she said feebly. “I never was, it’s a lie.”

“I don’t think so,” said Sirius. “Maybe we can’t prove it, but we could get an investigation going. And who knows what else they’d find while they were looking?”

The reporter slumped in her chair, glaring around the room. “What do you want, then?” she asked grudgingly. “What do you want from me?”

Remus smiled. “That’s more like it,” he said in the same tone he used when a refractory cub started to behave.

Rita’s glare intensified.

xXxXx

Everyone had more energy than usual at the Pride’s den-night, since they were celebrating both the capture of Rita Skeeter and the announcement by Moony that Animagus lessons would resume next week. A game of pirates was the obvious way to enjoy themselves.

Ron drew the short straw and played the villainous Black Snake, who tried to sink the ship of the virtuous pirate Captain Greenleaf. Harry, Meghan, and Draco were Black Snake’s crew, and Hermione, Ginny, and Luna crewed for Greenleaf.

The game began as the bad pirates clambered onto the ship of the good pirates and tried to take over. It ended half an hour later, when Ginny and Luna together hurled Ron off the ship into the “sea,” where he “drowned” while shouting horrible curses at them.

“Come on back aboard, maties,” Neville said when Ron and the rest of his crew reemerged from the blue cushions. “We can play again.”

“No thanks, need the loo.” Ron disappeared through the almost-invisible door.

“I think we’re all getting tired,” said Hermione, climbing down the mast. “Why don’t we have our snack now, and tell stories?”

After three large chocolate chip cookies and a mug of mulled butterbeer, Harry slipped away into the red bedroom and retrieved the item he’d stashed behind the dresser when he’d come through.

The music room was soundproof. If he could get it to himself, he might be able to work with the egg a little without anyone knowing. Maybe the special magic of the Den would help to unlock the secret of the egg, he thought. It certainly couldn’t hurt.

He tucked the egg under his arm and tied his dressing gown around his waist, holding the egg to his side. A casual look wouldn’t show anything wrong. Tonight would be a good night to work it out, he was sure...

But after I go to the loo.

He gave a short laugh. He’d rather not do *that* on the egg, no matter how tension-relieving it

might be.

But Ron hasn't come out yet...

Frowning, Harry crossed the main room, now back in its original configuration, and knocked on the bathroom door. "Come in!" Ron's voice called.

Harry opened the door. "You're not... busy?"

"No. You need it?"

"I could use it. What are you doing?" Harry stepped inside and closed the door.

"Nothing much." Ron had his wand out. "Messing around with the mirror, actually. Seeing if I can bounce spells off it."

"Twitchy Ears?"

Ron grinned shamefacedly. "How can you tell?"

"You never were good at canceling." Harry drew his own wand from the pocket of his dressing gown and ended the hex. "So that one bounces. What other ones have you been trying?"

"Just some general ones. Jelly-Legs, Leg-Locker, that sort, and one Fred taught me when I was little. This one really works," Ron added on seeing Harry's expression. "If you hit something living, it starts throwing up slugs, and keeps on doing it until the spell wears off. It's supposed to last an hour, but it can go longer if it was cast really hard."

Harry shuddered. "Even for your brothers, that's gross."

"This from the bloke whose mother invented the worst smelling potion in the world."

Harry ignored this. "What's it do on things that aren't alive?"

"Covers them in slime, and it keeps coming back. If you don't scrub it off, it gets thicker and thicker until you can't even see what it used to be. Fred used to do it on rocks in the garden, and Mum wouldn't know what they were. Watch, I'll show you." Ron drew his wand.

"Ron, no, don't," Harry began, but it was too late.

"*Mucinno!*" Ron said aloud, pointing his wand at the mirror. A jet of green light shot out the end of the wand, ricocheted off the mirror, and headed straight for Harry – Harry dived to the floor, but the spell was coming down too, it was going to get him anyway – his dressing gown had come undone, the egg was falling with him –

Almost without conscious thought, he seized the egg and held it directly in the path of the spell, which impacted with a slushy *splat*.

The outsides of the egg were suddenly slippery, and Harry dropped it to the floor.

“Sorry,” said Ron, looking contrite. “I didn’t know that would happen.”

Harry rolled onto his stomach. “Obviously.”

“Want a hand up?”

“No, I think it’s safer down here.”

Ron winced, and put his wand away. “No more spells,” he said. “Here, let me wash it off. It doesn’t take that long to wear off, really it doesn’t.” He picked up the egg. “Why’d you bring it down here anyway?”

“I was hoping to work it out some.” Harry stood up as Ron turned on the water in the basin and set the egg under it. “I guess not.”

“I’m really sorry, Harry, that was a dumb thing to do.” Ron picked up a bar of soap from the counter and lathered his hands. “I’ll try and keep it cleaned off for you, make sure it doesn’t build up...”

As he started to scrub the egg, Harry noticed something. The crack around the outside was directly under the main force of the water, and it was widening; the egg was about to open and deafen them both. “Ron, look out for—”

The egg popped wide open. Harry slapped his hands over his ears.

But to his amazement, the sound that emerged was only half as loud as usual, and different. He could still hear the usual wailing noise, but underneath it and inside it there was a sound of something else, a sound like singing and gargling mixed together...

Ron snapped the egg shut and turned the water off. “Did you hear that?”

“Yeah. Try it again.”

Water on, egg open, and the odd mixed sound resumed. The rest of the Pride had their heads in the door now, or were pushing for a spot.

Harry found the drain plug and pushed it in, letting the basin fill. As water lapped over the sides of the egg, the screeching qualities in the sound grew less and the singing qualities more, until, with the egg entirely underwater, a gurgling song filled the bathroom, with no trace of the earlier screeching.

“But it still doesn’t make sense,” said Hermione.

Harry took off his glasses and leaned over the basin, then stopped. “Not here,” he said. “Not like this.” He shut the egg and pulled the plug out of the basin.

“Where, then?” Draco asked. “And how?”

“Well, yes, here. But not exactly here. Does this place get bigger?” Harry asked the ceiling.

The bathroom rippled, and was suddenly about three times the size it had been.

“And what about that?” Harry pointed at the standard bathtub.

Another ripple, with an excited quality to it, and the middle of the floor sank, until Harry was standing in a small, empty swimming pool. He looked up at the Pride. “Anyone for a pool party?”

Neville had already summoned a house-elf and sent for the Pride’s swimming things by the time Harry climbed out of the pool. He took care of his own business before joining everyone else in the main room, where Hermione had just canceled the slime spell on the egg. “We really shouldn’t stay up too late doing this,” she said from the doorway of the blue bedroom as the other girls filed past her, swimsuits in hand. “We all have homework to do...”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday, Hermione, give it a break,” said Ron. “You want to go sleep in the dorm, nobody’s stopping you.”

“I never said that.” Hermione shut the door of the blue bedroom firmly.

“You’re getting good at that,” said Draco as he closed the red bedroom door.

“What?”

“Knowing how to get around Hermione’s moods. Maybe someday she’ll lighten up, but until then we have to know how to handle her.”

Neville frowned. “I don’t think she wants to lighten up,” he said. “At least not much. She seems happy being the way she is.”

“It’s not the way she is that’s the problem,” Harry said, pulling his swimming trunks on. “It’s the way she wants everyone else to be. Ready?”

“Sort of,” said Ron, wrestling his own trunks up his legs. “I think I grew since the last time I went swimming.”

“What was your first clue?” said Draco. “Here, let me see them.”

Ron pulled them off and handed them over. Draco tapped them with his wand, then gave them back. “They’re a little bigger now,” he said. “You might want to be careful, I don’t know if the waistband will hold.”

“Great.”

But the trunks fit, and the boys trooped out of the red bedroom in time to meet the girls in the main room. “Luna was done first,” said Hermione, wrestling her hair into a ponytail. “She’s in there already, doing something.”

Draco looked slightly alarmed and hurried into the bathroom. Harry heard a low whistle of astonishment, then his brother reappeared in the doorway. “You *have* to see this,” he said.

Harry followed Draco back into the bathroom and whistled himself. The room was now made entirely of white marble, with a sparkling chandelier hanging from the ceiling. A hundred jeweled golden taps were evenly spaced around the edge of the pool, except where the diving board was. A blonde mermaid slept in a portrait on the wall. Luna sat on a large pile of fluffy white towels, looking smug.

“You just have to know what to ask for,” she said.

xXxXx

Filling the tub took nearly half an hour on its own, since no one wanted to leave a tap untried, and each tap had a different kind of bubble bath mixed in. When everyone was finally in the water, paddling around and splashing each other took up another forty-five minutes. It was nearly midnight before Harry whistled through his pruned fingers to get everyone’s attention.

“Here it goes,” he announced, plunging the egg into the water. “Ready?”

He pulled it open. The gurgling song echoed through the room. Eight breaths were sucked in and held, and the Pride dived under the surface of the bath.

After a few watery minutes, everyone had the song committed to memory, and they could recline on the seats the tub had thoughtfully provided and talk it out.

“Cannot sing above the ground,” said Meghan. “What can’t sing above the ground?”

“This,” said Ron, tapping the egg, which was now closed again and resting on the bathroom floor. “It only sings underwater.”

“So whatever Harry’s looking for probably sings underwater too,” said Ginny.

“But what sings underwater?” said Harry. “Humans can’t breathe water, not unless they’re fish Animagi, and I don’t think that’s what I’m after. Squid don’t sing, do they?”

“No, it wouldn’t be that,” said Hermione. “It said we. That means more than one. Whatever it is – they are – they have human voices, because that’s them singing in the egg, or a recording of them.”

“Breathes water, human voice,” Neville said. “It can’t be a person who ate gillyweed, because they can’t talk at all. The gills bypass the vocal cords.”

“Oh, gillyweed,” said Luna. “Father bought some of that two summers ago, when he went to study the merpeople of the North Sea.”

Harry sat up straighter. “Merpeople?” he said.

“You’ve heard of them,” said Draco, pointing at the picture on the wall. “Right, Luna?”

“Well, that doesn’t look anything like a real mermaid,” said Luna critically, looking at the picture. “Their hair is green, and their skin is sort of gray, and they don’t like humans much, because Muggles have polluted their water a lot, and they don’t make distinctions between magical and Muggle, so they just try to hurt any human they find.”

“But where are they going to find merpeople around here?” Harry asked. “We’re not on the ocean or anything, and they’re not going to take us anywhere else to do our tasks…” He trailed off. “I’m so stupid.”

“We knew that,” said Draco. “The lake?”

“The lake.” Harry flicked water at his brother, then swept the egg back into the bath and opened it again, bending until one ear was under the surface. “*Come seek us where our voices sound* – I’ve got to go under the lake, find the merpeople, and get back whatever they took.”

“But they can’t take anything of yours,” said Meghan. “They can’t come out of the water.”

“It’s a task, Pearl,” said Hermione. “Someone will take it from the castle and give it to them.”

“Wonder what they’ll take?” said Ron. “Have to be something important, if you’re going to go under the water to look for it.”

“And I’ll only have an hour.” Harry closed the egg and drummed his fingers on it.

“Only an hour?” said Draco. “Only a minute, if you’re holding your breath. How are you going to stay down there that long?”

Harry looked across the pool. “Neville, what were you saying a minute ago?” he said. “Something about people growing gills?”

xXxXx

“Who’s the lucky lady, then, Harry?” said Seamus Finnegan at breakfast.

“What?”

“The Whisperer! Who’s it from?”

Harry looked up. Hedwig was perched in front of him, eyeing him critically, with a sky-blue envelope held in her beak. “I don’t know,” he said, accepting it and turning it over. “I wasn’t

expecting anything.”

“Don’t open it in here,” said Hermione. “It’s too noisy, you’d never hear it.”

“Good point, but I don’t want to go back to the common room, it’s too far.”

“Just use a classroom,” said Ron. “No one ever looks in there.”

Harry nodded and got up, grabbing a last piece of toast on his way out.

In classroom eleven, he set a chair out of the direct line of sight from the door, then sat down and opened the envelope. The Whisperer fit itself around his ear, and a male voice began to speak.

“Harry, this is Cedric Diggory. I owed you for telling me about the dragons, so I wanted to give you some help with your egg. If you don’t want it, just stop listening now.” A pause of a few seconds. “If you do want it, here it is. Try water. Lots of water. You can use the prefects’ bathroom...”

Harry was too busy laughing to hear the rest of the message.

“Ask me what I do for a living,” he said when he got back to the Great Hall. “And then ask me what my biggest problem is.”

“What do you do for a living?” said Neville.

“I’m a comedian.”

“What’s your biggest—”

“Timing.”

People groaned up and down the table.

“Dadfoot does that better,” said Meghan, pouring herself more milk.

xXxXx

Harry spent most of his time over the next few weeks smiling, his mood coming down from the clouds only when he thought too long about what he’d actually have to do during the second task or when he saw Cedric and Cho walking places hand in hand. As much as he hated it, he had to admit that he had only himself to blame for missing the chance to take Cho to the Yule Ball. Besides, people broke up all the time. Cedric and Cho were bound to, sooner or later.

Maybe if I do really well on the second task... better than Cedric, better than anyone...

Other than that, he really didn’t see what he could ask for. He knew what the second task was, he knew what he was going to do –

Wonder what I would have done if I didn't know Neville?

As well, Rita Skeeter wouldn't be bothering them anymore. The champions had been informed by owl that there would be an interview the day after the second task, but that they didn't have to answer any questions they didn't want to, and that the article would be checked for accuracy before it was published.

That means no more sappy quotes about me crying myself to sleep. And no more stupidity about Hermione being my girlfriend.

And to top everything off, a major success occurred in Animagus lessons ten days before the task.

xXxXx

“This is so embarrassing.”

“What?”

Draco gave Harry a poisonous look. “Ginny Weasley, a year younger than me, has just finished her Animagus work. Luna Lovegood, also a year younger than me, only has one spell to go. My own little sister is the only one farther behind than me, and she's three years younger than I am!”

“And you can brew a potion better and faster than anyone in our year, and probably better than most of the fifth years. If we'd done the potion ourselves, you would have been in charge of the cauldron.”

“I know. It's just... I don't like being the last one to do things.”

“You don't like it? Think how Meghan feels.”

“She's used to it.”

“Doesn't mean she likes it.”

“Don't we know it.” Draco got up from his place by one wall. “Congratulations, Ginny,” he said. “Good work.”

“Yeah, good job, Ginny,” said Harry.

“Thanks,” Ginny said with a smile for both of them, though Harry thought it might be just a little brighter in Draco's direction...

And why do I care?

xXxXx

“Know what yeh're goin' ter do?” Hagrid asked Harry in Care of Magical Creatures two days

before the second task.

Harry nodded. “Little nervous, though,” he confessed, watching the girls stroking the gold unicorn foals. “I can swim, but I’m not great at it. And I wish I knew what they were going to take.”

“Yeh’ll get it back, whatever it is,” Hagrid said, patting Harry’s shoulder so hard that Harry felt himself sink ankle-deep into the mud outside Hagrid’s cabin. “Yeh’re goin’ ter win, Harry. I know it. I can feel it. *Yeh’re goin’ ter win.*”

“If you say so, Professor,” said Harry in a chirpy imitation of Hermione.

Hagrid guffawed.

xXxXx

We’re flattered that you think so highly of Harry’s fraternal ties, Albus, but since you’ve asked our opinion, we think two is enough for us to be worrying about. Thank you kindly.

Dumbledore chuckled as he tucked the note into his pocket. “Thank *you* kindly,” he told the screech owl sitting by his plate. “No response.”

I should not be surprised. Mr. Weasley it is, then.

xXxXx

“Why would Professor McGonagall want to see us now?” Hermione asked Ron as they walked through the halls together. “Unless she wants to know if Harry’s ready, and doesn’t want to ask him directly.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Why wouldn’t she ask him?”

“Maybe because that’s against the rules? No help from teachers?”

“It’s not helping if she just asks.” Ron knocked on the door to Professor McGonagall’s office, and opened it when she told him to come in.

Cho Chang turned around as they came in, and a little blonde girl standing by the fireplace shrank back a bit. She was even younger than Meghan, only about eight or nine, and Ron sucked in air when he saw her. “Looks like Delacour,” he whispered to Hermione. “Maybe her sister or something.”

Professor McGonagall waved her wand to shut the door. “Professor Dumbledore will be here in a few moments,” she said. “He will explain.”

She had only just finished talking when another knock came on the door, and the Headmaster entered. “Good evening,” he said politely, conjuring chairs with a wave of his wand and

motioning them all to be seated. “You understand English, my dear?” he asked the little girl, kneeling to be on her level.

The girl nodded and said something in French. “Very well,” Dumbledore said. “I have a similar problem with some of the Goblin dialects, I understand them perfectly but simply cannot pronounce the gutturals... but that is neither here nor there.” He rose and faced them all. “You may or may not know each other. Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger-Lupin, Cho Chang, and Gabrielle Delacour.”

Hermione smiled at Gabrielle, who smiled faintly back.

“Are you all familiar with the requirements of the second task of the Triwizard Tournament?”

Four heads nodded.

“Then you know that the champions must retrieve something they will sorely miss. You are to be that something.”

Ron gulped.

“If you wish to refuse this post, other participants can be found. However, I assure you that you will be perfectly safe throughout. I will place you in an enchanted sleep, from which you will awaken when your champion has brought you safely to the surface of the lake. Will you agree to this?”

Gabrielle nodded immediately, spouting off another torrent of French. Dumbledore listened until she was finished, adding comments of his own here and there, then raised his wand and waved it three times around Gabrielle’s head, murmuring an incantation as he did. Her eyes closed, and she slumped in her chair, breathing deeply.

“I’ll do it,” said Cho, sitting up. Dumbledore repeated the spell on her, and soon she too was asleep in her chair.

Hermione looked at Ron. *Scared?* she signed to him.

He gave her what was probably supposed to be a carefree grin, but the little tremor in his lip spoiled it. Still, the message in his hands was clear. *Let’s do it.*

“We’re ready, Professor,” said Hermione, turning around.

“I left you until last for a reason,” said Dumbledore, coming to stand in front of them. “I must ask for another sacrifice from you. Your pendants, having their own magic, may interfere with mine, and I do not wish to take any chances. I must ask that you take them off for the duration of the task. I will take the best care of them, and return them to you as soon as the task is over.”

It was Hermione’s turn to take a deep breath. The only time she’d ever taken off her Pack-pendants was the day they’d expanded the Pack to include what was now the Pride. She knew she

would feel naked without the familiar weight around her neck and metal at her breastbone.

But it's only for a little while. And I'll be asleep most of the time anyway.

Beside her, Ron pulled his pendants over his head and handed them to Dumbledore. Hermione swallowed quietly and did the same.

Dumbledore carefully placed the necklaces into an inner pocket of his robes. "I will see you tomorrow, then," he said, and began to wave his wand around their heads.

Hermione felt sleep gathering around her as the Headmaster chanted. Her last thought was mild regret that she wouldn't get to see Harry do the task.

But we wouldn't have... seen much... anyway...

xXxXx

"It's past eleven," Harry said, walking in a circle around the Pride's usual chairs. "Where are they?"

"Whatever McGonagall wanted, it ran late," said Draco. "Would you sit down? You're making me dizzy."

Harry broke into a jog and did two circuits of the chairs before encountering Neville's foot. He picked himself up off the floor and glared. "What was that for?"

"You're making me dizzy too," said Neville without looking up from his essay. "You're not going to make them come back by running around. If you really want to do something useful, go over your plan for tomorrow again."

Harry heaved a sigh and sat down. "The merpeople probably live in the deepest part of the lake," he said, unfolding a map from his pocket. "Which is here." He planted a finger on the spot. "Roughly north of where they're going to have us go in." Another finger in the shallows of the lake – viewing platforms had been erected not far from the Durmstrang ship. "I can do the Four-Point Spell to make sure I'm going the right way."

"Check so far," said Neville. Draco, Luna, and Meghan were listening closely. Ginny nodded absently, her mind obviously on the parchment in front of her.

"Once the gillyweed takes effect, I have a little over an hour to get finished. But the task has a time limit of an hour, so I should be all right that way. I wonder what happens if we go overtime?" Harry interrupted himself. "Do we get hauled back to base, or do we just get points docked for being late?"

"Probably docked," said Meghan. "They want you to finish."

"But I'll lose whatever they've taken if I go outside the hour. And Hermione found that Bubble-

Head Charm, so I can still get back alive if the gillyweed wears off.” Harry bent over the map again. “We know there’s grindylows in the lake, but they’re not a big problem unless lots of them attack at once, and they usually only come a few at a time. And the giant squid, but it’s friendly.”

“More or less,” said Draco. “As much as anything carnivorous of that size can be.”

Harry ignored this. “Once I get there, I’ll have to take back whatever they took. I don’t know how big it will be, but it’s not going to be something so big I wouldn’t be able to get it through the water with me. I’ll assume it’s something I can carry. But I’ll need my hands for swimming, so I’m taking some rope with me so I can tie it on. And I’ll have my dagger and a couple hairpins, just in case they’ve got it tied up or locked up with something that resists magic.”

“And if you meet any Lupisces, you can show them their reflections in your dagger, and they’ll leave you alone,” said Luna. “They won’t attack anyone with a shiny weapon.”

“What do they look like again, Luna? Furry fish?”

“That’s right. Gray fur on their sides and claws on their fins, and nasty teeth. Don’t let any of them taste your blood in the water, because then the whole school will attack you.”

“Good thing I know how to send them away, then,” said Harry. “Is there any other way? Say there’s a lot of them and they can’t all see the dagger?”

“They don’t like bright lights either. If you lit your wand, they might not attack you from that direction, but they’d just come around behind you. You’d need some way to make a light shoot out from you in all directions at once, because that would chase them away.”

“I’m sure I can think of something,” said Harry. “Thanks, Luna, that’s a big help.”

“For things that don’t even exist,” Draco muttered.

“Being ready never hurt anyone yet,” said Neville. “And I think you are, Harry. As ready as you can be, since you don’t know what they’ve taken.”

“Yeah.” Harry was starting to have a nasty suspicion at the back of his mind, but he dismissed it and folded up the map. “Better take a break from it, then, before I get burned out thinking about it.”

Heads nodded around the circle, and Meghan pulled out a Charms essay to ask for Neville’s help with it. Luna fished a small bag from her pocket and poured out what looked like glittering gravel from it, shaking it in her cupped hands and smiling as she did.

“She still drives you mad, doesn’t she?” Harry asked Draco quietly.

“Every day. But it’s *my* mad. If that makes any sense.”

“Not a lot, but I think I understand. You like her so much that you’ll put up with just about

anything she does. Right?"

"Right, but it's even worse than that. I actually want to know what she does. Sometimes I even want to do it. Because that will make her happy. Am I whipped?"

"Yes."

"Thought so." Draco straightened his shoulders. "Nothing to do now but relax and enjoy it." He got up from his chair and crossed the circle to Luna's side. "What's that stuff called, Luna?"

"There's something very wrong about that," Harry said under his breath, watching Luna pour half her gravel into Draco's hands, "but I can't figure out what."

"Hope you're not waiting for me to tell you," said another voice.

Harry jumped slightly. "No. No, I'm not. Sorry, Ginny. Forgot you were there."

"I thought Neville was the invisible one around here."

"He is. You were just so quiet. It's not like you."

"So I usually talk too much, is that what you're saying?"

"No..." Harry groaned, seeing the teasing expression on her face. "Fell for it again."

"It's why we love you." Ginny capped her ink carefully and set it and her quill on the table before straightening up in her chair. "Ready for tomorrow? Or shouldn't I even ask?"

"Like I said. As ready as I can be. How about you? What're you doing?"

"Finishing my incantation. It's stupid that I don't have it ready when I've already drunk the potion, I had so much time to write it, but one sentence won't work itself out right, and I'm missing a word."

"Can I see?"

Ginny handed him the parchment. "It's a mess," she warned. "And my handwriting's none too great."

"Better than Ron's. I'll manage." Harry sat down, deciphering the English phrases.

I am a lynx who loves the cold. My eyes shine bright in the dark, and my fur is rusty red. My tail is short but... something about courage... a warm heart? But it has to fit with the body... When I cry out, my voice is (something), and all my enemies fear.

"Good way to end it," he said. "You want something about courage in the middle?"

“I think I need it. I don’t have this for nothing, do I?” Ginny hooked her thumb around her pendant chain.

“Tail is short but courage is long,” Harry said slowly, folding a corner of the parchment back and forth. “Would that work?”

“I never heard it put like that, but it sounds nice. If it’s true.”

Harry snorted. “This from the person who stabbed a basilisk with a little bitty knife.”

“It was either that or stand there and let her eat me.”

“I think a lot of people would have taken door number three. Scream and pass out from terror.”

“But I didn’t want to look bad in front of you.”

Harry laughed. “Right. Like you could. What’s this here? A warm heart, but it has to fit with the body?”

“Everyone else’s incantations that I’ve seen mixed their physical forms with their mental parts. I wanted to do the same with mine. Maybe talk about how I had a warm heart, and parts of my body are warm too...”

“The early part says you love the cold.”

“Well, lynxes live up in mountains, in the north. They have to love the cold. I think that’s why they have such short stubby tails, because tails could freeze. And why they have such furry ears – it keeps them warm – and why their paws are so wide, so they can walk on the snow...”

“You just answered your own question,” said Harry. “Ears and feet are as warm as my heart. Or no, wait...” The corner of parchment came off, and he started folding it in half backwards and forwards. “My ears and feet are not any warmer than my heart,” he said finally. “That means your body stays warm in the cold, and that you care about other people.”

Ginny plucked the parchment off his lap and wrote down the sentence quickly. “My ears and feet are not warmer than my heart,” she repeated as she wrote. It certainly was true at the moment, Harry thought – if her heart was as warm as her ears looked, she ought to be sweating. “Now how about this last word?”

“Your voice. What kind of noises do lynx make?”

“It’s a lot like cats. They meow, hiss, growl, yowl...”

“You’re going for something scary. I think a yowl is best. What would you call a yowl?” Harry picked up the Latin dictionary that lay by Ginny’s chair and flipped the pages back and forth.

“Here, let’s try this.”

He opened the book to a random page, closed his eyes, and stabbed a finger down.

“So what’s it say?” Ginny asked.

Harry opened his eyes. “It says... hmm. This isn’t too bad. Cruel or savage. *Saevus , saeva, saevum .*”

“*Saeva* , then.” Ginny scribbled it down. “Thanks, Harry. I think that should do it.”

“Just paying back. You helped me do mine, remember?”

“Yeah.” Ginny took the dictionary from Harry’s hands and closed it. “I remember.”

It was obvious she didn’t want to talk about it. Harry cast about for another topic of conversation. “Are they ever going to get back? It’s quarter to midnight.”

“We should go to bed,” said Draco, stifling a yawn. “You won’t be able to do anything tomorrow if you can’t keep your eyes open.”

“I was hoping Ron and Hermione would get back first.”

“I don’t think they’re coming back,” said Luna. “Not tonight.”

“Not coming back?” said Meghan. “Why not?”

Luna lifted her hands as if they held Harry’s golden egg. “They’ve taken what he’ll sorely miss,” she chanted.

The suspicion in the back of Harry’s mind grew into certainty, and he felt himself tensing up. What he would have to retrieve from the bottom of the lake was not an object at all, but a living person. Possibly two people.

How’ll I get both of them?

“They’re probably not both for you,” said Draco, and Harry realized he’d spoken aloud. “Hermione could be for Krum.”

“Good point. All right.” A little of the tension in Harry’s chest eased. “Just Ron, then. But I still have to get him back before the hour’s up, or else...”

“They wouldn’t really let him die,” said Ginny worriedly. “Would they?”

Neville shook his head. “Dumbledore wouldn’t let that happen. Not somebody who’s not even really connected to the Tournament. Not that he’s going to let you die, either,” he added quickly to Harry. “But you have to take the chance. Ron should be fine.”

Harry nodded. But one of Letha’s favorite sayings kept repeating itself between his ears as he got

ready for bed.

There's a long, long way between should and is.

xXxXx

Harry kicked his webbed feet harder, following the faint trace of mersong.

Nothing terrible so far. Just a few grindylows, and they backed off pretty fast when they saw I could handle them. And I'm getting close now...

He sped up again, listening to the words of the song. *Time's half gone... half an hour left, then. And "stays here to rot"? They're really playing it up, aren't they?*

His earlier qualms were reasserting themselves now that he was down here. The merpeople were obviously hunters, and what Luna had said about them hating humans was stuck on "repeat" in his mind. What if the merpeople decided he was too late arriving and hurt Ron? What if Krum didn't show up in time, and Hermione got left behind?

He swam on, entering the mer-city, and followed the song for several more minutes, then rounded a corner and discovered something new to worry about. On the end of the row of hostages, on the other side of Ron from Hermione, was Cho Chang.

I should have known she'd be Cedric's hostage, though...

The fourth person tied to the statue was unfamiliar to him, though she must be related to Fleur Delacour somehow, probably a little sister.

At least she's asleep, so she's not scared.

He drew his dagger from under his swimming trunks. The merpeople around the statue drew back a little as he did, murmuring in surprise. The ropes around Ron were strong, but the dagger's edge was good, and in a few minutes Ron was floating free of the statue, still unconscious.

Harry spun in a circle, straining his fishy eyes. *Where is everyone?* He looked down at his watch – there were only fifteen minutes left. If the other champions didn't show up soon...

He sliced at one of the ropes binding Hermione, but instantly the merpeople closed in around him, pulling him away. "Take your own friend only," one large merman said, leaning over him threateningly. "Leave the others..."

"She is my friend!" Harry shouted, but only a large bubble emerged from his mouth – as Neville had warned, he couldn't talk under the influence of the gillyweed. He resorted to shoving at the hands holding him back, which made no difference at all.

"We do not help or harm," the merman said, prodding Harry with the butt end of his spear. "Only watch, and keep the rules. Here." He waved a hand over his shoulder, and a mermaid came

swimming up, towing Ron behind her. “Take your hostage and go.”

Harry accepted Ron’s wrist, but tried to swim towards the statue again. Immediately, a solid wall of merpeople blocked him. He backpaddled and settled into drifting, still holding Ron’s wrist. It was warm under his hand, and the pulse beat inside it – the merpeople kept their promises, it seemed. The hostages would be safe for the allowed hour.

But what about after that?

They waited. Every so often, Harry would try to get to the statue again, and the merpeople would block him. About the eighth time he tried, they repulsed him as usual, but then started pointing excitedly upwards and backwards. Harry turned to look.

“Cedric!” he shouted silently.

Cedric waved frantically. “Got lost!” he mouthed through the bubble of air surrounding his head. “You alright?”

Harry threw him a thumbs-up, and watched as Cedric cut Cho free. “Fleur – Krum – coming,” he told Harry, then took off for the surface with Cho over his shoulder.

Harry relaxed for the first time since he’d entered the lake. As soon as Fleur and Krum showed up, he could go. He’d be much faster going back than he had been coming, even with Ron to slow him down – he probably only had to get to the surface of the water to be in time – he wouldn’t get the most points, but who cared about points? Everyone would be alive, and that was what mattered.

Excited mer-screeches broke Harry out of his thoughts. Something large was coming their way, large and with a silhouette like Harry had never seen before – it was like a crossbreed creature, but something that never should have been... the body of a male human, with the head of a shark...

Krum. I knew he was doing something wanded, but not what. I suppose this makes sense, as long as he can reverse it when he gets above water.

The shark’s teeth gnashed near Hermione’s hands as Krum tried to sever the ropes. Harry winced and kicked past the merpeople. “Here,” he tried to say, then remembered his voice didn’t work. Instead, he smacked Krum on the shoulder, and when the other champion turned, held up his dagger. Krum snatched it from Harry’s hand and quickly sliced Hermione’s bonds, then handed it back to him and locked an arm around Hermione’s waist.

Harry checked his watch as the combined shapes of Krum and Hermione grew fainter above. Only two minutes left... had something happened to Fleur? Ninety seconds... one minute...

Harry reached inside his T-shirt for his wand, then spun on the merpeople. “Stay where you are!” he shouted, ignoring the bubbles that burst from his mouth. “Don’t try to stop me!”

The merpeople’s eyes widened in fear, and the space in front of Harry’s wand tip was suddenly

clear. Harry waved the wand in a horizontal arc, clearing the space in front of the statue where Ron was now floating. “Stay back,” he warned them. “I’m taking her with me.”

The merman who had threatened him before moved forward. “You must not,” he said. “Please, you must not. It is against the rules.”

Harry told the merman what he thought of the rules with a hand gesture that seemed to cross cultural boundaries. “I’m not leaving her here to die!” he shouted. “It’s not fair for her to die just because her champion got lost or wasn’t fast enough or something...”

The water rippled oddly all around them. The merpeople looked around uneasily. Harry checked his watch again. Time was officially up – the hostages were supposedly lost –

Beyond the merpeople, Ron stirred.

He’s waking up – I guess that’s what happens –

The stirring suddenly turned into thrashing, and Ron’s hands flew to his throat as his eyes popped open, staring around him wildly – Harry shoved off from the base of the statue and made it to his friend’s side in one frantic motion – “*Bulla Capitis!*” he shouted, and for one terrible second, was certain he’d done it wrong – Ron was still choking, he was going to drown, and it was all Harry’s fault –

And then a bubble of air wavered into existence around Ron’s head, and his thrashing subsided as his silent struggle for breath turned into just-audible, violent coughing. Harry pounded him on the back until Ron coughed up what water he’d breathed, then held him until he was breathing more or less normally.

The girl – Harry spun around. Fleur’s sister was still asleep, tied to the statue.

Maybe it doesn’t count if her champion didn’t show up...

He felt a hand against the back of his neck, and whirled back, wand out.

Ron dodged, his eyes wider than usual through the bubble. “Your chain,” he said, the words barely audible. “Both of us.”

Good idea. Harry extended his chain and tossed it towards Ron.

Overtime? was the first word out of Ron’s mind when they were connected.

I guess so. But Fleur never showed up, and I didn’t want to leave her sister behind.

Ron snorted mentally. **You were first here, weren’t you?**

Yes, Harry admitted.

You really should have... oh, never mind. Grab her and let's go.

They won't let me. But I think we can do it together. You cut her loose, and I'll keep them off our backs.

Deal. Ron accepted Harry's dagger, and they swam together towards the statue, Harry menacing the merpeople with his wand.

The girl's ropes were no harder to cut than Ron's had been, and a few moments later, they were all headed for the surface, the girl tethered to Harry's back, merpeople swimming around them. Harry kept his wand ready, but none of the merpeople came close to them.

All right? he sent, kicking a little harder.

All right. Ron's voice came in short bursts. **You're fast... faster than me... but don't stop.**

Why?

Just as Ron pointed past Harry's shoulder, the shouts of distant merpeople struck his ears. He spun in place to look.

A huge, amorphous figure was closing in on them. Merpeople were striking at it with spears, but thick ropes lashed out from it and swiped them aside –

The squid. Let's go! Harry yanked free a loose end of the ropes tying the girl to himself and handed it to Ron. **Just hang on. Kick if you can.**

Right.

The load was doubly heavy now, hard to swim with, and Harry was starting to feel the water in his mouth again – the gillyweed was wearing off, if there was much farther to go he'd have to stop and cast a Bubble-Head Charm on himself –

Harry, said Ron through the chain. **More trouble.**

Harry didn't even have time to look down. Swarms of tiny, dark fish seemed to appear out of the water, all around him, above, below, on all four sides, cruising around in small packs, moving closer and closer to him and Ron and Fleur's sister –

Her name's Gabrielle.

Thanks, I really needed to know that right now. Any other pearls of wisdom?

Ron squinted through the water. **They're furry,** he said.

What?

The fish. They're furry. Fish aren't supposed to have fur, are they?

Harry inhaled in relief, and nearly choked. **Hang on**, he said, pointing his wand at himself. **Bulla Capitis.**

This better not take long, Ron warned, kicking himself slightly higher in the water. **They look hungry.**

And I need to breathe. Just wait. Harry held his breath, waiting impatiently as the bubble of air grew around his head. **Luna told us about these. They'll go away if we can show them their own reflections in the dagger blade. You still have it?**

Right here. Ron fumbled it out of his robes. **Now I just need to hold it so they can see it... ow!**

Oh no. Harry whipped around. Three bright beads of blood oozed from the slice along Ron's finger where he'd cut himself. **Accio Blood!**

The blood zoomed away from Ron and toward Harry. Ron jammed his finger in his mouth. Both boys held their breaths.

A fish's jaws gaped wide, then snapped sharply closed.

I don't like this, Ron said shakily.

More jaws began to snap, with a sound like rain falling on water, except this rain would probably kill them all, Harry thought dizzily as the noises got louder and faster. If only there was some other way to drive these fish away from them –

A faint light caught his eye. The carving of the lynx was glowing on his last pendant.

As if I didn't have enough trouble, without adding someone else's...

But with his next instant of thought, he knew what to do.

xXxXx

"She *bit* me!" Dudley Dursley howled, both hands clutching his backside. "I *know* she did!"

"That's disgusting!" Ginny shouted back. "All I did was look over to see what you were doing with your wand in the water, and then we both fell in!"

"Quiet," said Madam Pomfrey peremptorily to both of them. "Trousers down, Dursley." A flick of her wand conjured a Privacy Spell around them.

Ginny felt a towel wrap around her shoulders and looked up. "Thanks, Neville."

"You're welcome." Neville helped her up. "I know you pushed him in," he said quietly, "but did

you really bite him?”

Ginny shook her head. “Scratched. It looks more like he could have caught it on something. Besides, I wasn’t going to bite him *there*, no matter what he was doing.”

“So it worked?”

“Just right. Any news?” Her hand pressed against her pendants, cool with more than the chill of the day and the water.

“No. Harry’s still in danger, but Ron isn’t, and Professor Dumbledore can’t find any of the merpeople to tell him what’s going on—”

Ginny gasped. “Look!”

Something was glowing bright red in the middle of the lake, from under the water. As they watched, the glow pulsed, brighter, brighter, brighter –

And a head topped with black broke the surface of the water, with a gasp that was audible from where they stood on the platforms. An instant later, a red head also surfaced, and a smaller, blonde one a second or so after that.

The pendants’ chill vanished.

Neville’s arm kept Ginny from falling over in relief. Harry and Ron were all right.

“Well, sort of,” said Neville when Ginny said this out loud over the sound of cheering. “But I think Harry’s mad about something.”

“I knew that,” said Ginny, squeezing water out of her hair. “It’s keeping me warm.”

The heads were closer than they had been, and now recognizably attached to bodies. Merpeople had surfaced around the three, singing in their strange, screechy language. Ginny saw Percy at the edge of the platform the three were aiming for. He looked rather pale, and snatched Ron’s arm as soon as Ron was close enough, hauling him out of the water by main force. Behind him, Mr. Padfoot reached down into the water and took the little girl Harry was boosting up, passing her back to Mrs. Letha before he leaned back down for Harry.

“Come on,” Neville said. “We’d better get over there.”

Ginny wrapped the towel more tightly around herself and followed him. She’d had a good look at Harry’s face as he climbed out, and he looked angry enough to chew wands and spit out spells.

I wonder what happened?

She lost sight of him briefly as she climbed over to the next platform, but she heard him before she saw him again.

“...not very fair, Professor. Maybe I was stupid not to take Ron and go, but I don’t think it’s fair for you to make him almost drown.”

Ginny looked cautiously around the corner. Harry, dripping wet, was staring down Professor Dumbledore. “What if I hadn’t known a spell that could save him?” he demanded. “Were you just going to let him die?”

Dumbledore’s brows drew in. “Harry, what are you talking about?”

“Don’t play stupid!” Harry shouted. “The sleep spell, the one on Ron! It kicked off as soon as the hour was up, he started waking up, and he couldn’t breathe! I don’t care if you take points off me for not getting back in time, but he could have *died* down there!”

A wave of gasps went around the platform, and Ginny’s chest constricted painfully. For the first time in her memory – possibly the first time in the memory of anyone present – Professor Albus Dumbledore looked stunned. “Mr. Weasley?” he said.

Ron looked up from where he sat, wrapped in a blanket. “Yeah,” he said hoarsely. “I woke up.”

Dumbledore drew his wand and began to point it at Ron, then stopped. “With your permission?” he said.

Ron nodded.

Dumbledore began a curious pattern of waves and choppy flicks, one which made Ginny feel sleepy after looking at it for a few moments. She pulled her eyes away from it to have a look around the platform.

Percy, still standing behind Ron, looked relieved and smug in equal measure. Karkaroff was frowning, though whether at Dumbledore or at Krum she couldn’t tell. Krum was also frowning, but his frown was definitely directed at Hermione, who was huddled up in a blanket with Draco and Luna on either side of her, Mrs. Danger behind them. Cedric Diggory and Cho Chang both looked worried. Ludo Bagman was shifting uneasily on his feet. Just a portion of Madame Maxime’s leg could be seen around the corner, from whence Ginny could hear a torrent of French which must be Fleur Delacour and the girl Harry’d rescued from the lake. But there was a deeper voice in there, a man’s voice – who was that?

Dumbledore rose. “Fellow judges, may I speak with you for a moment?” he said.

Madame Maxime stepped in around the corner, gravely ducking her head to avoid hitting it on the ceiling. Karkaroff closed in grudgingly, Percy and Bagman eagerly.

Mr. Moony came forward from a corner and handed Harry a blanket. “Good work, late or not,” he said quietly. “Madam Pomfrey should be here any second with some Pepperup Potion.”

“I hate that stuff,” Harry complained, wrapping himself in the blanket. “My head always feels like it’s full of steam for hours.”

“Better than what’s usually in there,” said Ron.

“I didn’t have to go after you, you know.”

“Would you have let him die, then?” asked Luna, sitting up.

“No, of course not.”

Fleur burst around the corner, Madam Pomfrey just behind her, with the little girl by the hand. “Miss Delacour, I must take care of those scratches before they become infected!” the nurse was saying.

“Later, later,” said Fleur impatiently. “Look after Gabrielle.” She swooped down on Harry. “You saved ‘er,” she said. “She was not your ‘ostage, but you saved ‘er.”

“Yeah,” said Harry, looking suspiciously at Fleur.

Fleur took his face in her hands and kissed him twice on each cheek. Ginny bit down hard on her lip to keep herself from shouting – Harry was not her property, she had no right to be angry –

“Don’t think I need the Pepperup now,” said Harry dazedly, with a vague smile on his face.

He’ll look like that over me someday, Ginny promised herself.

“And you ‘elped too,” said Fleur, leaning over Ron. “You ‘elped to save ‘er.”

“Yeah, a bit,” Ron said, looking hopeful.

Hermione’s face was a study as Fleur kissed Ron’s cheeks as well. Ginny was about to go to her – she knew perfectly well how her friend felt – but Madam Pomfrey stepped between them and shoved a flask into her hand. “Drink that,” she said. “All of it. Falling into the lake, swimming around in the lake, in February no less...”

“Ladies and gentlemen, in the interests of the champions, we will be returning to the castle before we give the marks,” Ludo Bagman’s magically amplified voice boomed out as the judges’ huddle broke up. “Unforeseen circumstances have forced the possible invalidation of this task, and the judges wish to confer at length.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Ron as Bagman ended the amplification spell.

“Put simply, Mr. Weasley,” said Dumbledore quietly, “this task was sabotaged.”

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 45: The Auxiliary Task (Year 4)

Chapter 45: The Auxiliary Task

“This is ridiculous,” Harry muttered to Ron out the side of his mouth as they walked up to the castle. “I keep wanting to shake.”

“Probably not a good idea to do that here, mate.”

“I know. But I still want to.”

“I know how you feel. I keep wanting to preen.” Ron shivered a bit and pulled the blanket tighter around himself. “And my shoulder hurts where Percy hauled me out. I have to get some flying time in soon or I’ll stiffen up.”

“Maybe tomorrow we can go out for an Animagus run. Take Ginny with us, let her try out her form.”

“That sounds like fun. We might even be able to pry Hermione away from her books for an hour or so.” Ron slicked his wet hair back from his face. “Harry... thanks.”

“For what? Oh, that. Never mind. I was just lucky I knew that spell. And we both owe Luna.”

“Luna?”

“For telling me about those fish, and how to chase them off.”

“But you did it. That was all you. You and that Gryffindor jewel.” Ron thumped a hand against Harry’s chest. “That was one hell of a response you got from it. What did you ask for?”

“Just enough light to chase the fish away. I didn’t think it’d go up like it did.”

“You’re not kidding. Looked like a firework on Skele-Gro.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“Gladly.” Harry shook his head, sending drops of water flying everywhere. “I want to get dry, and get out of these clothes, and then go back to bed.”

“Don’t you even want to know how you scored?”

“Not that much. You’re alive, and so’s Hermione, and so am I. That’s all I care about.”

Ron smirked. “So you don’t care about Cho Chang?”

“Shut up.”

“The marks will be given in the Great Hall at half past eleven,” Ludo Bagman’s amplified voice announced as the crowd reached the outside steps leading up to the main doors of Hogwarts. “Refreshments will be served beginning immediately. Champions will please report to the High Table by eleven twenty-five.”

“Which means we have at least forty-five minutes to clean up,” Harry said, rubbing the side of his neck where his gills had been. “Merlin, I’m freezing.”

“Me too. Budge up there, champion coming through!” Ron shouted at the crowd ahead of them. “Make some room for Harry Potter!”

People drew back, whispering. Harry felt his face heat. “Thanks a lot,” he muttered as he ran up the aisle thus created. “Now I’m freezing and embarrassed.”

“It got us inside faster, what more do you want?” Ron started for the marble staircase.

“Not there,” Harry said. “This way.” He hurried through the door leading to the kitchens.

“Why?” Ron followed him.

“Because this way we don’t have to climb seven flights of stairs. We can just go to the Den.”

“Good point. Took you long enough,” Ron added over his shoulder as Draco, Luna, and Hermione came jogging down the corridor to join them at the picture of the fruit bowl.

“Some of us don’t have legs as long as yours, Ronald Weasley,” Hermione said grumpily.

“What’s eating you?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. Here.” She handed Ron his pendants.

“Whenever you say nothing in that tone, it’s always something,” Harry said as the portrait swung open. “Hey, Neville, Meghan – Ginny, what happened?”

“I fell in,” Ginny said, peeling a sodden towel away from her shoulders.

“Right beside Dudley Dursley,” said Neville. “Who also fell in, after he’d had his wand in the water.”

Harry handed his damp blanket to a house-elf. “You didn’t see what he was doing?” he asked Ginny.

“No, but it can’t have been anything good.” Ginny added her towel to the house-elf’s load. “I

knocked him in, transformed where he couldn't see me, and scratched his buttocks so he wouldn't have any chance of finishing whatever he started."

"So you've transformed already?" Ron sounded disappointed. "I wanted to see it."

"You can see it again, it's not like I can't do it anymore. Let's get to the Den and clean up. I feel disgusting."

xXxXx

The judges were embroiled in a high-energy whispering session when the Pride got back to the Great Hall at twenty minutes after eleven. "Where were you?" Seamus asked them. "We cleared out the showers for you, but you never showed up."

"We found a different bathroom," Harry said. "Had the house-elves bring our stuff down. Thanks, though."

"You're welcome."

Moony waved at them from farther up the table. "Disappearing too often isn't a good idea, Harry," he said as the Pride found seats around him and Danger. "People will start wondering where you're going, and it's only a matter of time before someone finds it out."

Harry groaned for form's sake, but he knew his Pack-father had a point. "All right, we'll be more careful. Where's Padfoot and Letha?"

"Letha's up at the High Table with the judges and Pomona Sprout, and Padfoot's over with the students from Beauxbatons." Danger chuckled. "The way they're acting, you'd think they'd never met an Englishman who could speak French before."

"Dadfoot speaks French?" Meghan said.

"Oh, yes," said Moony. "Not perfectly, but passably. It was one of those things they made him study when he was young, and he's never entirely forgotten it. He says it's good for cursing at people when you don't want them to understand you."

"I think the girls especially like him," said Draco. Harry turned to see. Sure enough, Padfoot had little Gabrielle Delacour on his lap, Fleur beside him, and another Beauxbatons girl on his other side, with the rest of the female Beauxbatons students sitting nearby, all chattering to him at once. The boys of the Pride snickered.

"Mrs. Letha doesn't look too happy," Luna said. "Neither does Professor Sprout. I wonder what they're fighting about."

Harry turned the other way, regarding the High Table. "They don't look like they're fighting," he said. "Not fighting, fighting. More like they both really want something, but they're opposite things."

“And the judges look kind of interested,” said Neville. “I guess they like whatever she’s saying.”

“What is she saying?” Meghan asked.

“Well, if it was just Letha and Pomona, I’d know,” said Danger. “Letha broached an idea to Pomona back in the fall, and I’d think they were hashing out details. But with them up at the table and talking to the judges, it looks like this, whatever it is, has something to do with the Tournament.”

“Did Mrs. Letha’s idea have to do with the Tournament?” Ginny asked.

“Not exactly,” Danger hedged, “but she thought it would go along with the Tournament very well. Creating community and fostering cooperation. You lot gave her the idea, really, with your performances for the birthdays.”

Ron frowned. “Community, cooperation, performances,” he muttered. “Wait a minute – no way...”

“Champions to the High Table, please!” Ludo Bagman’s voice echoed over the crowd noise. “The judges have come to a decision!”

Harry swung his legs over the bench. Ron punched his shoulder lightly. Down the table, Krum excused himself to Hermione and started up as well. Cedric disentangled himself from Cho, and Fleur kissed Padfoot on the cheek, making him smile vacantly. Harry shuddered. *That’s just wrong.*

“Due to unforeseen events, it has been decided to halve the original amount of fifty points to be given in this task,” Bagman declared when the champions were lined up in front of the High Table. “Points for this task are therefore out of twenty-five. Miss Fleur Delacour, although she demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm, was attacked by grindylows and failed to reach her hostage. Her score is ten points.”

“I should have scored zero,” Fleur said under cover of the polite applause.

“Cedric Diggory, also using the Bubble-Head Charm, returned first with his hostage, one minute outside the time limit of an hour. He receives twenty-two points.”

The Hufflepuffs cheered wildly. Harry threw Cedric a thumbs-up, though his heart was sinking. *If he was overtime, how badly over was I?*

“Viktor Krum, using an incomplete but effective form of Transfiguration, returned second. He receives eighteen points.”

Harry noticed Hermione clapping quite hard.

“And finally, Harry Potter. Mr. Potter used gillyweed to begin with, and finished the task with a Bubble-Head Charm when the plant’s effects wore off. He also saved the life of his hostage, Mr.

Ron Weasley, when a person or persons unknown attempted to sabotage the task by awakening Mr. Weasley under the lake. Although Mr. Potter was the last to return with his hostage, Merchieftainess Murcus has informed Professor Dumbledore that this was not due to a late arrival but to Mr. Potter's determination to return all the hostages to safety. For his moral fiber and quick thinking, we award Mr. Potter twenty points out of twenty-five."

The Gryffindor table erupted in cheers. Harry slumped in relief. "I didn't muck it up," he said under his breath. "I'm not out yet. I still have a shot..."

"A shot, hell, you could win!" Cedric shouted over the applause. "We're tied for first, Harry! You and me!"

Harry quickly added up in his head and realized Cedric was right. "Hogwarts victory," he mouthed as the applause died down. Cedric grinned and nodded.

"Champions may be seated," announced Professor Dumbledore, standing up. "I have an important announcement to make, and you may as well be comfortable while I prattle on."

Laughter rippled through the hall as Harry returned to his seat next to Moony. "Do you know?" he asked quietly.

"I have an idea, but I'm probably wrong. Let's just listen."

"The reduction of points in this task," Dumbledore said. "would seem to call for an auxiliary task, to allow the champions to make up the points they were not awarded here. However, it would be difficult to create another magical task at this point in the year – therefore, my fellow judges and I have decided that the auxiliary task will be a test of courage and skills, but not of magic."

"Not magic?" said Draco in surprise as similar murmurs broke out all over the Hall. "What're they going to test, then?"

Dumbledore waited out the noise. "Our guests have been exposed to many of the facets of our life here in Britain," he said. "Our food, our language, our customs. But we of Hogwarts have made no significant attempt to share our culture with our friends. I am pleased to announce a remedy for that lack. At the beginning of May, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will present a musical comedy – a Muggle composition, true, but quite relevant to us as well. *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.*"

"Oh no," Harry muttered. "Oh no, oh no, oh no."

"Oh yes," Moony said in the same tone. "You will do just fine, Harry. If you try out."

"What d'you mean, if? Next thing he's probably going to say is..."

"Triwizard champions will receive fifteen points for participating," Dumbledore went on. "The participation can be in any capacity, there is no requirement to appear on stage. However, the remaining ten points which would have been awarded in this task will be allotted to each

champion based on performance in the champion's chosen role."

"But you can't do a musical with just four people," Fred called from the end of the table.

"Who else gets to be in it?" George added.

"Why, whoever else cares to be in it," said Dumbledore, smiling broadly. "Auditions are open to all students. Professor Pomona Sprout of Hufflepuff, who has graciously volunteered to direct the production, and her assistant director, Mrs. Aletha Freeman-Black, will conduct the auditions in as fair a manner as possible."

"What's that supposed to mean?" shouted a Slytherin.

"Professor Sprout and Mrs. Freeman-Black will use a particular spell to blind themselves to the identities, but not the skills, of the auditioners," Dumbledore said. "In this way, they can choose the best people for the roles without fear of being thought biased."

Harry felt a poke in his back and turned. Seven pairs of expectant eyes were all fixed on him.

"Well?" Ron said.

"Well what?"

"Are you going for it?" Hermione asked.

"No, I'm going to fart away twenty-five points. Yes, I'm going for it."

"But are you going for a part?" Draco said. "Or are you going to take the easy way out and be stage crew?"

Harry growled a little. "There's nothing wrong with being stage crew."

"There is when you can sing," said Ginny. "And when you know the judges will be more impressed if you take an actual role."

"I'm not that good."

"You are so," said Neville. "You're as good as any of us."

"You can sing like a rock star," said Luna. "Draco said so."

Draco reddened. "Luna, I thought we said we weren't going to tell anyone about that conversation," he said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. But you do, you know," Luna added to Harry. "Your voice is very nice."

"And you can dance," Meghan added. "At least you don't fall over your own feet."

“Thanks for the votes of confidence.” Harry rubbed his forehead and looked at Moony and Danger.

“You would be good, Harry,” said Danger. “I think you should at least try.”

“I think you’d enjoy it,” said Moony. “Once you got over being embarrassed about it.”

“That’s the problem.” Harry turned back to the Pride. “I’ll do it on one condition,” he said. “You all try out too.”

Heads nodded up and down the table. “I was going to anyway,” said Draco.

“Me too,” Ginny said.

“Might as well,” said Ron. “I mean, what’re the odds we’ll all actually get parts?”

“We could be in the band if we’re not on stage,” said Luna. “I’d like to play the piano.”

“Uh-uh,” Harry said. “Everyone tries out for a stage part or no deal.”

“That’s fine,” said Luna, unconcernedly. “But we’re more likely to get a part if we put down that we play instruments too.”

“Good point.” Neville stood up. “I’d better go get some practice in.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Meghan. “Bags we the music room.”

“Nuts,” Draco said.

“We’ll find somewhere else,” said Luna.

“Not with a piano. You two can carry your instruments, let us have it, won’t you? You can use somewhere else down there.”

“Fair enough,” said Neville. “Yellow bedroom, Meghan?”

“Fine with me. Let’s go.”

“I can set up on the Quidditch pitch,” said Ron. “Ginny, give me a hand?”

“Well, since you asked so nicely.”

“Please?”

“That’s better. Yes, I’ll help you.”

“And I’ll go and see if the library has a copy of the score,” Hermione said. “It’s had most things we’ve looked for so far. Harry?”

“Huh?” Harry looked up. “Oh. Right. I think I’d rather not do anything just now. I need to ask Moony something.”

“Oh, you do,” said Moony.

“Yes. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I’ll see you all later, then, everyone.” Moony hugged Hermione and Draco and tugged on one of Meghan’s braids. “And I’m sure Sirius will want to tell you what a good job you did, and Aletha as well, as soon as they’re free,” he said to Harry as the rest of the Pride worked their way through the crowd to the door.

“Here comes Sirius now, actually,” said Danger.

Harry let Padfoot ruffle his damp hair for a moment before latching onto his godfather’s hand and twisting his wrist.

“Ow!” Padfoot pulled free. “Getting quite a grip there, Harry. Good work – you saved Ron and Gabrielle, and you’re still tied for first!”

“I know.” Harry looked up the hall at the little knot of people around the High Table. “Letha’s probably going to be busy for a little while, isn’t she?”

“More like a long while,” said Danger. “At least she’s not directing it herself. She’ll have enough to do with both assisting and finishing up her training.”

“I suppose she just didn’t feel she had enough to do,” said Padfoot. “Why do you ask, Harry?”

“I need to tell you about what happened in the lake,” Harry said, looking around at them. “It was more than it looked like. Different.”

“I was going to ask,” said Moony. “What spell did you do that caused that red light we saw?”

“It wasn’t a spell. And that’s what I need to tell you about.”

“Privately?” Danger asked.

“We can stay here. There isn’t anyone spying on us or anything.” Harry leaned his elbows on the table as Padfoot sat down on the other side of him from Moony. “We were being swarmed by these little furry fish. Luna told me about them before the task last night, she called them Lupisces, I think.”

“Wolf-fish,” said Moony. “I’ve heard of them, but the same way I’ve heard of most of the things Luna likes to talk about.”

“These are real. And nasty. She said that blood in the water would make them attack, and showing them their reflection in a knife blade or shining bright light at them would drive them

away. So when they showed up, Ron took out my dagger – he had it to cut Gabrielle free while I kept the merpeople off–”

“Yeah, where were the merpeople?” Padfoot asked. “I thought they were supposed to guard you on your way up.”

“They went off to fight the giant squid. Anyway, Ron cut himself on the dagger by accident, and I summoned the blood, but I wasn’t quick enough. The Lupisces smelled it, and they started getting excited. Then I saw Ginny’s carving glowing on my pendants, and that made me think of the jewels.” Harry displayed his pendants. “Part of the Gryffindor gift is the carvings shining. And both times someone’s used a red jewel, it’s showed up with light. So I thought maybe I could trade a jewel for enough light to chase the fish away. I got a little more than I expected.”

“How much is a little more than you expected?” Danger asked.

“Well, when Ron used the jewel back in second year to find Ginny, it was just bright enough to see. This was more like setting off a box of fireworks. And it didn’t just flash once – it was three or four times.”

“Yes, we saw it,” said Moony. “And it looked very bright even to us. We were worried.”

“Sorry,” Harry said. “But I don’t know what else I could have done.”

“Would you stop apologizing?” Padfoot demanded. “You saved all your lives – what are you apologizing for?”

Harry grinned. “What do you want me to apologize for?”

Padfoot muttered something in French.

“So Ron’s used a red jewel, and so have I,” said Moony. “And now so have you. But your reaction was more potent than ours, stronger, brighter.”

“Yeah.”

“I think this might be a good time to tell everyone what we found out last spring,” said Moony. “When you were telling me about the safe place you went to, remember?”

Harry thought back. He’d showed Moony the map, whispered the password for the Hogwarts Den to it, called it a traitor when it had revealed how long they’d been using the Den, and then Moony had asked how the Map knew...

“Yeah, I remember.” *I don’t see what it has to do with anything, but I remember.*

“When was this?” Padfoot asked.

“We were investigating the Marauder’s Map together. Apparently we enchanted it better than we

knew, Sirius. It knows things about the school we didn't know."

"Really? How's that?"

"The Map claims that one of its creators is, or was, a blood Heir of one of the Founders, so that it's tied directly to the castle."

"That makes sense," said Danger. "We know that either Sirius or Aletha has to be an Heir of Ravenclaw. If it's you, mangy mutt, that's the mystery solved."

Padfoot tipped his head to one side. "Thank you, thank you, you're too kind."

"You were my first thought, Sirius," Moony said. "But then I thought again. It didn't say that more than one of you couldn't have been—"

"More than one of *you*?" Padfoot inquired. "Since when are you not one of us?"

"Fine, it didn't say that more than one of *us* couldn't have been. And we have proof that Meghan is an Heir, so it could well be you. But think about James. Think about the way he acted, the way he lived. Doesn't he make an awfully good candidate for Heir of Gryffindor?"

"Huh." Padfoot looked at Harry. "And that would make you one, titch."

"I'm not a titch." Harry aimed a punch at Padfoot's nose, let his godfather block it, then sneaked one under his guard onto his chest.

"Oof. I let you do that."

"Stop it," Danger said indulgently. Padfoot ignored her, so Harry did as well, but he kept listening as they scuffled. "So you think James might have been the Heir of Gryffindor, Remus. I admit, it makes sense. Especially with what Godric told us about his family's power in this generation — that it was bound by the current Heir's father, who is now dead."

Harry twisted out of Padfoot's grasp. "You really think my dad was an Heir of Gryffindor?" he said.

"Why don't you try putting that a different way?" Danger suggested. "Do we really think you might be the living Heir of Gryffindor? Yes, we do. It's certainly possible, considering all the trouble you manage to get into, and the way you get yourself out again."

"But I can't... you know." Harry twiddled a finger in the air. "Like you can."

"We were gifted with this, Harry." Moony opened his hand, revealing a flame dancing on his palm. "It's not the same as having it in your blood. I don't recommend you trying it, though. If your powers are bound, you'd get burned the same as anyone else would."

Harry stared at the flame. *Could I really be an Heir of Gryffindor? Could I call fire, make it do*

what I want?

“I can put out fires,” he said, still watching the flame dance. “Wandlessly. After the thing with the Goblet, when I was mad at Ron, every fire in Gryffindor Tower went out.” He blew gently on the flame, and it vanished.

“That sounds promising,” said Padfoot. “And strange. Is it just me, or are our cubs developing weird powers faster than any of us can keep up with?”

Harry grinned at his godfather. “Getting old?”

“Older every day.” Padfoot made a face. “Ooh, my aching back. And knees. And sides. And everything else.”

“That’s just because you don’t stretch properly before you try to prove that you can still run the obstacle courses at the Auror Office in the same time as the apprentices,” said Letha, coming up behind him. “If you ask nicely, I might give you a massage tonight. Hello, Harry, very good job. Do that well on the third task and you’ll have this Tournament won. What do you think of my crazy idea?”

“I think it’s great,” Harry said. “When will the auditions be?”

“Next Wednesday and Thursday, I think. What part are you trying out for?”

“Do we have to try for specific parts? I was just going to come.”

“That’s fine too. But I thought, since you know the show so well, you might like to try for a specific part.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Don’t remind me.” *Joseph* was one of Draco’s favorite CDs, which meant he played it quite often. Harry was sure he could sing any of the songs from memory, though he’d need some help remembering the exact words. “Is that why you picked it?”

“No, as a matter of fact, it’s not. I just thought it would make a good show to do here at Hogwarts, since it’s silly and bright and colorful, and has lots of good parts for different people. Joseph is the biggest role, of course, but most of the other roles are about the same size.”

“One song apiece.”

“That’s right. So, do you want to be Joseph, or would you rather let someone else be in the spotlight?”

“Someone else,” said Harry decidedly. “I don’t have the voice for the part anyway. But I know who does.”

“Yes, and so do I, but I can’t just pick him for obvious reasons. At least with blind auditions no one will be able to claim nepotism, even if you lot do end up with all the biggest roles, as you well

might. Anyway, Pomona makes the final decisions, and she's got no reason to favor you."

"Other than the fact that you're good," said Padfoot. "And you are good. But Harry, if you don't want to be on stage, there's no shame in doing something else."

"No, I want to." Harry crossed his toes on his right foot – by the time the show was going on, it would probably be true. "Besides, if I try out for a stage part, I can blackmail everyone else into trying for one too."

"Everyone?" said Letha dryly. "Lord help us when we go to cast you all."

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"So you're going forward with it anyway," said Sirius as the Pack-adults strolled towards the kitchens, from there to Floo home. "I thought you were going to beg off."

"Pomona talked me into it. Mainly by saying that if I wasn't involved, there wouldn't be any show."

"Just don't get overbooked," Danger said, resting a hand on Aletha's shoulder for a second. "If you feel you have too much to do, tell us, we'll do what we can for you."

"I don't think you can take my tests for me, Danger."

"Why not? Some quick cramming, a little Polyjuice Potion..."

Aletha turned to look at Remus. "Did you know she was insane when you decided to marry her?"

"When I decided to marry her, she had just run into a house with a full-grown werewolf and grabbed its paw because she saw herself doing it in a dream."

"So that would be a yes, then."

"Yes, that would be a yes."

"And you say I'm reckless," said Sirius. "Speaking of which. Harry Potter, Heir of Gryffindor?"

"What's this?" Aletha turned in surprise. "Harry an Heir?"

The others filled her in. She listened quietly, nodding. "Do you think we should try to find out if he is or not?" she asked when they were finished.

"It might be a good idea to have it settled," said Danger. "That way we're not in for any big surprises. Do you have any ideas for finding out?"

"Not offhand. But I know who might. Follow me."

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“Come in,” Dumbledore called as Remus lifted his hand to knock.

“I hate it when he does that,” Aletha murmured.

“Mad-Eye,” said Sirius, tossing a salute to the grizzled Auror, who was standing near Dumbledore’s desk. “How are you? Haven’t seen you since... well, haven’t seen you.”

“Go on, boy, say it,” Moody growled. “Since Lupin put the pieces together and sussed out I was too old to defend myself.”

“I doubt any of us would have done much better under those circumstances,” said Danger. “Early morning, two on one, and a surprise attack.”

“It’s not your job to do well. It is mine.”

“It *was* yours, Alastor, as I have told you repeatedly,” said Dumbledore with just a hint of impatience in his tone. “It is no longer, and you were wise enough to know that, which was why you retired.”

“Shouldn’t’ve,” Moody grumbled, resuming his seat. “Especially not with Rufus Scrimgeour taking over. Heard you’ve clashed with him a few times, Black. Good on you.”

“Just doing what I was taught, sir,” said Sirius, taking a sherbet lemon from the dish Dumbledore offered him. “Defending truth, justice, and Chocolate Frogs.”

Moody snorted. “Glad you’re here, actually,” he said. “We’ve been going over the residue Dumbledore picked up at the lake. Come see what you can make of it.”

Six heads bent over the parchment. Three lines of ink crossed it, each starting straight at one edge, then becoming wildly jagged in the middle before dying off near the other side.

“This burst means a spell, right?” Danger asked, pointing to the top pattern, which was closest to the left edge of the page (the middle pattern was closest to the right, with the bottom pattern falling directly in the center).

“Yes, and the different shapes are from different spells,” said Aletha. “I don’t recognize any of these, but I wouldn’t – the only ones I’m familiar with are healing spells and basic injury-causing curses. In case we have to look for residue to see what someone was injured with,” she added impatiently at Sirius’ questioning look.

“I doubt any of you would be familiar with these spells,” said Dumbledore. “But I will ask, without prejudicing you, if any of the three spells on this parchment seem similar to one another?”

“These two,” said Remus surely, tapping the two lower bursts of ink. “Look, they’re almost identical.”

“But the middle one isn’t as clear, or as big,” said Sirius. “The corners aren’t sharp, look. They’re sort of curved.”

“I believe this spell was cast by an amateur,” said Dumbledore. “A half-trained witch or wizard, at best. But you agree that it appears very similar to the spell here at the bottom of the page?”

“Yes, of course,” said Danger. “Look, they both go way up first, then way down, then up and a little jag down, then down even farther than at first... does that mean they’re the same spell?”

“In essence,” said Dumbledore. “And I do recognize this spell, and am rather glad that you do not. It is quite Dark, a fusion of the Imperius Curse and the Summoning Charm. Instead of drawing an object towards its caster, this spell compels some living creature to come nearer to either its caster or to an object designated by the caster.”

“But that’s not a Dark spell,” Danger objected. “Remus knows it, he taught it to the cubs.”

“Yes, but that’s non-compulsory, love,” Remus reminded her. “It’s the difference between ‘please come here’ and ‘come here now or you’ll be sorry.’”

“Oh. Never mind.” Danger frowned at the spell traces. “So two different people summoned things. Towards themselves?”

“That I cannot tell, but I know that both creatures, or groups of creatures, were summoned either towards the casters or towards the same designated object. Otherwise the spells would not be so similar.”

“Potter say anything about trouble with creatures on his way up?” Moody asked.

“Actually, yes,” Remus said. “And two different types, although one never got there...”

Dumbledore nodded grimly when he had heard the story out. “The squid was probably summoned by the less talented wizard,” he said. “That would account for its unwillingness or inability to break through the merpeople’s guard. But it distracted them long enough for the Lupisces to become a serious threat.” He sighed. “I am more and more worried about allowing the Tournament to continue.”

Moody grunted. “Don’t have a choice, do you? No more than you did in October. Somebody’s forcing your cast, Dumbledore. Only thing you can do now is pick your spell wisely.”

“As you say, old friend.” Dumbledore nudged his glasses up his nose. “Now, this spell at the top is the counter to my spell of sleep. And if I overlay times on this chart...”

“It was cast exactly at ten-thirty,” said Sirius. “Someone wanted to make sure it looked like you’d set it to wear off then.”

“But that makes no sense,” Aletha objected. “You’d never do that, Albus, everyone knows you wouldn’t. Well, Harry didn’t know, but he was scared, you can’t blame him for what he said.”

“Never fear, Aletha, I do not.” Dumbledore smiled tiredly. “Though I can find it in my heart to wish he had not accused me of endangering Mr. Weasley’s life in quite so public a manner.”

“You’re missing the point,” Moody growled. “Everyone was checking watches at ten-thirty, looking for the champions to get back. Whoever cast that spell must’ve been seen, there’s no place to hide on those platforms. Let ’em know you’re looking for a spell cast at that time and see who comes forward.”

“That doesn’t make any sense either,” Danger said. “Nobody would have cast a spell towards the champions where people could see them. They would have gone off somewhere alone.”

“Then ask about people going off alone too.” Moody rolled his normal eye. “Do I have to think of everything?”

“But you’re so good at it,” said Sirius.

Remus gave Sirius a look. “Albus, is there anything else we should know about these?” he asked. “We do have something else we need to tell you, and ask you.”

“No, I think these spell patterns have told us all they can... but wait, there is one more factor. The timing on them is so synchronous – you see, how close they are? – I doubt they could have been cast by the same person. The top and middle spells, perhaps, could have been, but the spell styles are wildly different. Unless the caster was far more proficient with the first spell than the second, I doubt that any of them came from the same wand.”

“Or the same person,” said Remus. “That’s what you’re not saying. These spells were cast by three different people.”

“But that means three different people wanted to hurt Harry somehow,” Danger said.

“One of them may have been more interested in Mr. Weasley,” said Dumbledore, “but in general, yes.”

“Three people at Hogwarts hate Harry enough to sabotage a Triwizard task?” Sirius shook his head. “Silly me, thinking just because we’d found Voldemort’s plant we wouldn’t have any more problems.”

“Plots within plots, Black,” Moody said. “Wheels within wheels. Always.”

“And you can’t tell who cast the spells by the residue,” said Aletha.

Dumbledore shook his head. “Unfortunately, they had already faded too far. As well, I believe the more proficient of these casters may have taken steps to hide their identity. And spell residue, like any other kind of track, is dependent on its environment. A spell cast through water is harder to track than one cast through air.”

“Weird,” said Danger.

“Indeed. But we shall continue to be vigilant.” Dumbledore rolled up the scroll and set it aside. “Now, what is it you need to ask, friends?”

xXxXx

Harry debated telling the Pride what Moony had suggested and finally decided against it. It was only a possibility, after all, and they’d tease him something awful if they knew about it and it turned out not to be true.

You can always tell people things. You can’t untell them.

At least not without Memory Charms.

And the Pride had plenty to think about anyway. Details of the auditions had gone up on the noticeboards, and it seemed like half of Gryffindor was planning to try out. Enthusiasm in the other houses was mixed, but some of the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs (especially the girls) seemed very interested, and even a few Slytherins were seen reading the notices on the public boards.

AUDITIONS FOR JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT

2-3 March, 8:00 pm , Great Hall

No previous experience necessary. However, please bring a song to sing, or be prepared to learn one, and wear loose clothes for the dance audition. Be ready to indicate part desired, or if you will accept any part in which you are cast.

A list of the parts followed, detailing the necessities of each. The role of Joseph was described as “very demanding.” Harry thought this might be an understatement. He also wondered how many of the purebloods were puzzled by the notation next to the role of Pharaoh.

Cedric Diggory hailed Harry at breakfast on Monday. “Are you trying for any particular part?” he asked. “One of the brothers, or the Egyptian, what’s-his-face?”

“Potiphar. No, I’m just going. How about you?”

“The butler or the baker,” Cedric said. “It said those were small roles, a few lines each. I think that’s about all I could handle. And no dancing. I don’t want to dance.”

“You danced fine at the Yule Ball.”

“Different kind of dancing.”

“The same rules apply. Stay on your feet and off the other person’s.”

Cedric laughed. “True enough. But I still don’t want to dance. See you there.”

“See you.” Harry felt the familiar rush of heat into his chest as Cedric turned away to greet a laughing Cho. *It’s my own fault, he told himself sternly. My own fault, I did it to myself, I shouldn’t have waited so long...*

“Harry, good luck at auditions,” Cho said.

Harry’s brain disengaged for a crucial second, and his mouth went on automatic. “Thanks,” he heard himself say. “But you shouldn’t say good luck. It’s bad luck.”

“What?”

“It’s theatre tradition. Saying good luck makes the luck spirits angry, and they bring bad luck. So you say, ‘break a leg,’ and then the luck spirits think you want the person you’re talking to to have bad luck, so they give that person good luck.”

“Oh. Well, break a leg, in that case. I’ll be there to watch.”

“That’ll be great,” Harry said tersely, regaining control of his speech. “Great.”

He gritted his teeth as Cho and Cedric walked away. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why do I start babbling every time she comes near?*

xXxXx

Ginny lay on her stomach on one of the benches in the Great Hall, filling in blanks and ticking boxes on her audition form. Her form was number fourteen, since the Pride had been among the first people into the Hall. Most of the crowd was composed of younger students, though, and they would probably only want chorus roles, standing in the background and singing...

Wishful thinking, girl.

But she couldn’t help hoping that she had a shot at the part she really wanted – one of the Narrator roles. Although this was only one part in the original show, Professor Sprout had decided that it was too much singing for one person their age and split the part in half. They were the best female roles in the show, and Ginny wanted one.

Well, the best if they don’t cross-cast anything. Some casting of girls in male roles seemed inevitable, given the split in the Hall of about three girls to every boy. But Ginny still couldn’t think of any role she wanted more than the Narrator.

It’s so neat, to be in the story, yet out of it. Telling it to the audience, able to see everything at once, almost like a little taste of being a goddess... She craned her neck to look up at the ceiling and put her hand to her chest. *Do you ever feel that way, watching our stories grow?*

There is a difference, little sister, murmured a woman’s great voice – or maybe she was imagining it. *You know that when all is done, no one has truly died, no one is really hurt. The story was only a story. We must watch real suffering, real pain, real deaths, and do nothing. You would not want*

what we have.

Ginny shrugged. *Maybe not. But I do want this.* She ticked off two boxes, wrote “Narrator” on the *part preferred* line, and went to hand in her form.

“Number fourteen, thank you,” said Mrs. Letha, looking past Ginny’s shoulder. The spell on the two directors to make sure they didn’t play favorites with the students was a bit creepy, but Ginny understood why it was necessary. She’d heard some of her fellow Gryffindors singing in the shower, or trying to sing. Most of them had the musical ability of her father’s car without its horn.

But that might just be because they’ve never been trained.

To her surprise, there were Slytherins in the crowd of students – even Theodore Nott was handing in a form, though Ginny could see that he’d marked orchestra as his only availability.

I wonder if he’s doing this because he wants to, or because his father wants him to?

“All right, we have enough to start!” Professor Sprout called, her voice cutting over the chattering students effortlessly. “Numbers eleven, twelve, fourteen, thirty-two, and forty-six! Please come forward and get your music!”

Ginny stepped up to the table and accepted the music Mrs. Letha handed her. She looked down and felt her heart do a little leap of gladness – it was marked for the Narrator.

Down, girl. It’s just an audition, you’re not cast yet. You have to prove you can do it first.

But her spirits would not be dampened. She had spent enough time at the Den, with Draco’s CDs going, that she knew most of the songs in the show, and the piece in her hand was “Go Go Joseph.” *Not exactly the hardest music around. I might just do this...*

“Number fourteen?” said a familiar voice.

Ginny looked up and grinned. “Hello, Hermione. What are you, eleven or twelve?”

“I’m eleven. He’s twelve.” Hermione flicked her fingers through Draco’s hair.

“Would you *stop* that. Look at this, I’m Joseph.”

“In auditions,” said Hermione repressively. “Don’t count your Ashwinders before they’ve hatched.”

“But I don’t want my Ashwinders to hatch.”

Ginny batted her eyelashes. “Why, Draco, I never knew you cared.”

Draco clutched his head in both hands, crumpling his music.

“Oh, so I’m not allowed to mess with your hair, but you are,” said Hermione. “That makes so much sense.”

“First group, come with me!” called Professor Sprout, as Mrs. Letha began calling more numbers to come up for music. Ginny followed her, and found herself beside Cedric Diggory.

“Hello,” he said, smiling at her. “You’re Ginny Weasley, aren’t you?”

“Y-yes...”

“Surprised he knows you?” asked Cho Chang from Cedric’s other side.

“A little,” Ginny admitted.

“I decided I should get to know the competition,” said Cedric, smiling. “Even though we don’t have Quidditch this year.”

“You’re still competition, I suppose,” said Cho. “In a different sense. Not that you’re competing for anything, but Harry Potter is, and you’re part of his crowd.”

Ginny nodded coolly. She didn’t quite like how Cho seemed to see the Pride. *We’re not just together because of Harry. We’re together because of all of us. Because we’re all friends.*

And you were more right than you know when you said I was competition, Cho Chang...

Ginny let her eyes rest on the older girl for a moment or two. *I will beat you*, she vowed silently. *Not because I don’t like you... I don’t, but that doesn’t matter... but because I am totally convinced that I will be better for Harry than you will.*

I only hope I’m right!

“Auditioners in here,” said Professor Sprout, opening the door to a small side chamber. “We will run through the music three times, then stage the scene, then perform. Take a seat and listen to the playback.”

xXxXx

Sirius looked up from his typewriter. The Floo had just chimed downstairs.

Probably Letha – at least I hope it is...

“Oh, Sirius!” called Danger. “Someone here who needs you!”

Yep, she’s back. Sirius took the stairs two at a time and jumped down to the ground floor from the fifth one. “Coming!”

“An unnecessary comment if there ever was one,” said Remus as Sirius entered the kitchen.

“I’d hex you, but I’m in a hurry.” Sirius strode down the hall into the music room, passing Danger on her way out, and gathered Aletha into a hug. “Tired?” he asked solicitously.

“Exhausted.” Aletha leaned into him. “That spell is harder to handle than I thought. I kept fighting it without meaning to.”

“Not surprising – it is compulsion, after all.”

“But after I agreed to it, and even did it myself...”

“It’s still compulsion. And you’ve never been good at doing what you’re told.” Sirius caught Aletha’s wrist as she made a half-hearted slap at his ear. “Ah, ah. You come and sit down, and have some nice soup, and tell us all about it.”

“Well, we got the list done,” Aletha began as she dropped onto the couch. Sirius sat down at the other end, and Aletha promptly put her feet in his lap. “It took quite a while, but we finally agreed on the best people for the parts. And then we took the charm off and looked, and we had a good laugh.”

“Lots of cubs?” Danger asked, coming back into the room with a mug of soup.

“Oh, indeed. I don’t think I could have cast it any better if I wasn’t charmed. And the best part is, they deserve those parts, because they can sing, and dance, and act.”

“None of which they would probably have been able to do if they hadn’t been taught by someone,” said Sirius, rubbing Aletha’s ankles.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Danger sat down on the floor beside the couch. “Our cubs are pretty good actors all by themselves. Just because they never fool us is no reason they can’t fool other people.”

“Yes, they aren’t very good at convincing us they had nothing to do with it, whatever it was.” Aletha blew on the soup.

“Probably because we know,” said Remus, coming in, “that if they didn’t have anything to do with it, it was only for lack of opportunity.”

Sirius chuckled. “And sometimes even then, they manage to sneak in anyway.”

xXxXx

“This isn’t fair,” said Meghan, staring at the board in the entrance hall on Friday morning. “I know they have the casting done, why don’t they just tell us? Why wait until this afternoon?”

“Because they want to torture us,” Graham said seriously. “They can’t stand the thought of us being happy.”

Natalie giggled. “That sounds like teachers,” she said. “Your mum was a teacher here, wasn’t she, Meghan?”

“For a year. The Defense job is jinxed, you know, nobody can stay more than a year. And she didn’t really want to stay, not after my Dadfoot got Petrified.”

“I can see why not,” said Graham.

“So what parts did you try out for?” Meghan asked. “Anything special?”

Natalie shook her head. “I don’t think I should even have gone,” she said. “I know I won’t get in.”

“Why not?” Graham asked. “I know you can dance, because you told us about taking lessons. Can’t you sing?”

“No, I can sing. But I was afraid. I didn’t sing the first time, they had to take my group again just for me. They won’t want someone there who freezes up on stage.”

“But was that because you were afraid?” Graham asked. “Or because you didn’t know the music?”

“Well... maybe some of both.”

“Being on stage is exciting,” Meghan said. “But getting ready for a show can be boring. You do the same thing over and over until you hate it, and then you do it more. By the time you’re done, you know it so well you could do it even if hundreds of people were staring at you.”

“Which is what happens when you’re on stage,” Graham pointed out. “And a show at Hogwarts will be very well attended, I’m sure.”

“Besides, you only wanted a chorus part, right?” Meghan asked.

Natalie nodded.

“Then nobody will notice if you freeze a little. The chorus is supposed to be quiet and still when they’re not singing, so they don’t take the attention away from the actors.”

“Okay.” Natalie scuffed her foot along the floor, staring at it. “I really do want a part,” she said quietly. “I think if I got used to it, I might like being on stage. But I’m afraid at the same time. I don’t want to do the wrong thing and look stupid in front of everyone.”

“That’s what rehearsals are for,” Meghan said positively. “You do it so much that there’s no way you can do it wrong.”

“And even if you do it wrong,” said Graham, “your friends don’t stop being your friends – or if they do, they weren’t your real friends anyway. I’ll make you a deal.” He put a hand under her

chin and lifted it gently. “If you do something wrong on stage, I’ll do it with you.”

“Really?”

Graham nodded. “Really. People will think we’re a miniature chorus of our own.”

“The Opposite Chorus!” Meghan laughed. “Always doing the reverse of what the director says!”

“We wouldn’t last long in that case,” Graham said. “But I do mean it, Natalie. If you make a mistake on stage, I’ll do my best to match it right away.”

Natalie beamed and hugged him. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you, thank you so much.”

Graham stiffened within the hug, but slowly relaxed, and even managed to get his arms up around Natalie in return.

Meghan turned away so she wouldn’t seem to be laughing at her friends.

xXxXx

Harry stood on the moving staircase, frowning to himself. *The cast list goes up in ten minutes. Why does Dumbledore need to see me now? I haven’t done anything... recently...*

“Come in!”

Harry opened the door wide and gulped slightly. All four of the Pack-parents were sitting beside the fireplace, looking at him. “Whatever it is, I didn’t do it,” he said.

“It is not what you have done, Harry.” Dumbledore was standing in front of his desk, beaming at Harry. “It is what I believe you are about to do. Would you be so kind?” He held out the Sorting Hat to Harry.

More puzzled than ever, Harry accepted the Hat. “Should I put it on?” he asked.

“No, no, no need. Just hold it – oh, and put your right hand into it, if you don’t mind.”

Harry changed the Hat to his left hand and slid his right inside the cone-shaped top. “Do I have to get a rabbit out of it?”

“Perhaps.” Dumbledore had turned away, he was fiddling with something on his desk. “Perhaps. If you think a rabbit would help you.”

“Help me with what?”

“Help you with – oh, dear.” In turning back to face Harry, Dumbledore had knocked a small glass vial off his desk. The vial shattered on the stone floor with an incongruous roaring sound – smoke billowed up from the point of impact –

And a chimaera lunged forward at Harry, dragon's tail whipping across Dumbledore's desk, goat's hooves clattering on the floor, lion's mouth opened wide in a roar of rage –

Harry flung the Hat aside, meaning to go for his wand, but his hand was already clutched around something, and the weight and sheen of metal told him it might well be a weapon – red and silver flashed as he slashed at the monster with what he now held –

Dumbledore waved his wand, and the chimaera vanished. “Well,” he said, sounding a bit breathless but very pleased. “I think that answers our questions.”

Harry stared at the silver sword in his hand, shifting his hold on the ruby-studded grip to get a better look at it. “It looks like my dagger,” he said. “Only bigger.”

“Like your dagger.” Dumbledore was still smiling. “Indeed. I have no doubt that this weapon, like your dagger, was goblin-wrought.”

Harry sneaked a look at the Pack-parents. Letha had a faint smile on her face, while Danger looked impressed and Padfoot dumbfounded. Moony seemed to be thinking hard about something.

No help there. Harry turned back to the Headmaster. “Sir, is this part of the Tournament?”

“No, Harry, not exactly. I do apologize for frightening you, but it was the only way to discover the truth.”

“The truth, sir?” *What, that I can pull swords out of hats? Handy, but I don't think it was really worth getting scared half to death for.*

“Look closely at that sword, Harry, and tell me what you see.”

Harry turned the sword in his hand, looking it over. And then he saw it.

Engraved just below the hilt, along the flat of the blade, was a name.

“Godric Gryffindor,” he whispered.

“This makes it official,” Padfoot muttered. “Our cubs have just broken all records for strangeness.”

Harry glared at his godfather. “Fat lot of help you are, sitting there,” he said. “That thing could have eaten me.”

“Albus told us not to interfere,” said Letha. “If we'd fought it off, you wouldn't have that lovely little piece of work in your hand right now.”

“And we wouldn't have the question settled,” Danger added. “I believe we can safely assume Harry is the Heir of Gryffindor?”

“I would do so, if I were you,” Dumbledore said.

Moony looked up. “Do you assume it?” he asked.

There was a long pause.

“I do,” Dumbledore said slowly, his eyes fixed on the far wall. “I find that I must.”

Harry felt his arm start to shake, and began to lower the point of the sword to the ground.

“No, no, up here,” said Dumbledore hastily, waving his wand and clearing his desk. “Here, by all means.”

Harry laid the sword on the desk, his mind buzzing. *I’m the Heir of Gryffindor. Me. I can use the magic of the castle, I can do things nobody else can –*

Or can I?

He looked back at the Pack-parents. “My magic’s bound, isn’t it?” he said. “My dad bound it when I was a baby.”

“So we’ve been told, Greeneyes.” Moony stood up and crossed to Dumbledore’s desk, staring at the sword. “Lovely work on this, really beautiful. May I?”

“Of course,” Harry said, realizing Moony wanted his permission to pick the sword up.

My permission. When does he ever ask my permission to do things?

“It’s a good thing your father did bind your magic,” said Danger, joining them and casting a tolerant glance at Moony, who was carving patterns into an imaginary foe. “If he hadn’t, you probably would have burnt things every time you cried.”

“You might have been able to fry Voldemort before he ever cursed you,” Padfoot put in.

“No, I’m sure he could counter the fire magic,” said Letha. “Or why did James die?”

Padfoot winced. “Ouch. Point. But it could still be a Snitch in the sleeve for Harry, if he can do it and the Dork Lord doesn’t know about it...”

“The problem is, it takes a blood relative to undo a binding like that,” said Moony, setting the sword down. “And all yours are dead, Harry. Except your aunt and your cousin, and besides being the sort of people I wouldn’t ask for the time of day, they’re on the wrong side of the family. You’re the last Potter.”

Harry stared down at the sword. “But you have the fire magic,” he said. “Can’t you just unbind mine?”

Moony shook his head regretfully. “I’m fairly sure that I can’t,” he said. “That sort of magic almost always needs a blood relative. I’d be willing to try, but not now. Not while you’re in the middle of the Tournament. The last thing you need is a sudden, unexpected surge in power that you don’t know how to control.”

Harry looked up. “But after the Tournament, you’ll try.”

“Yes. After the Tournament, I’ll try.”

“And in the meantime, I shall search for ways that a blood binding may be undone without a blood relative present,” said Dumbledore. “Welcome home, Harry Potter, lion’s son.”

He held out his hand, and Harry shook it, feeling the familiar rising of mingled fear and excitement in his chest.

Harry Potter, Heir of Gryffindor.

It doesn’t sound half bad.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 46: Cast Away (Year 4)

Chapter 46: Cast Away

Harry stepped off the revolving staircase and stood still for a few moments, looking down the familiar stone hallway.

“I’m the Heir of Gryffindor,” he said under his breath.

Nothing changed.

Was I expecting something to? Harry snorted at his own stupidity. *Heir or no Heir, I have to do what I have to do. It’ll be a part of what I do, but not the whole thing.*

And right now, there’s a cast list with – I hope – my name on it.

He headed for the stairs. The list would be posted on the main castle board in the entrance hall. *The trick is going to be getting close enough to read the thing!*

His stomach knotted as he descended stairs and began to hear the sound of a large and cheerful crowd in the entrance hall. *What if I didn’t get a part? No, that’s stupid, I’m a champion. I have to have a part. But what if I didn’t get a good part?*

Or what if I did? Can I do this? Can I really get up in front of loads of people and sing and dance without feeling like a complete fool?

The answer, he decided, was no, probably not. But he was in this, foolish or not.

Besides, I’ll have plenty of company.

He started down the marble staircase, looking for the Pride.

“HarryHarryHarryHarryHarry!”

There’s Meghan. “Oof,” Harry said as his sister rammed him. “Happy, Pearl?”

“I’m Benjamin!” Meghan beamed. “I get to be in trouble!”

“Like that’s anything new.” Harry hugged her. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Come on, see, see, we all got parts!”

“All of us?”

“All of us what?” asked Ginny, sliding out of the crowd with Luna and Neville behind her.

“We all got cast?”

Ginny nodded. “A lot of people just wanted chorus roles,” she said. “Or to be in the orchestra, or backstage. We said we wanted big roles, so we got them. I’m one of the Narrators.”

“Good on you.” Harry clasped her hand. “You’ll be great.”

“I’m Jacob,” said Neville. “Remind me what he has to do again?”

Harry grinned. “Cry for your poor lost son who got killed by a goat.”

“It must have been a Carnicorn, then,” said Luna. “They’re the only goats that eat meat. I’m going to be Mrs. Potiphar. I think I’ll like it. Viktor Krum is Potiphar.”

Harry’s mind was still back at meat-eating goats, so it took him a moment to get around to Luna’s other statements. “Is that why you’re going to like it?” he asked. “Because of Krum being Potiphar?”

“I won’t mind,” Luna said. “But I’ll like it better because of someone else. Krum likes his part because he gets to sing a duet with a Narrator.”

Harry’s insides did a brief trampoline exercise. “You get to sing with Krum?” he asked Ginny.

“Not me,” Ginny said. “The other Narrator.”

“Oh.” Harry swallowed to make sure everything was back where it should be. “What other Narrator?”

“That other Narrator,” said Neville, pointing.

“Hermione, you’re a Narrator?” Harry asked.

Hermione nodded, her smile almost too big for her face. “Isn’t it wonderful? And Ron has a song all to himself!”

“I’m Levi,” Ron said, beckoning everyone to follow him. They broke through the crowd to a small quiet area beside the stairs. “I have ‘One More Angel in Heaven.’”

“Country and western,” said Harry. “Good style for you.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“You’ll never believe who’s playing Reuben,” said Hermione. “Singing ‘Those Canaan Days.’”

“Fleur Delacour,” Harry guessed.

Hermione’s face fell. “You knew!”

“I was right?”

“It is a French song,” said Neville.

“It’s a song that makes fun of the French,” said Ginny. “I can’t believe she’s doing it.”

“So that’s Fleur and Krum,” said Harry. “What’s Diggory playing?”

“The baker,” said Ginny. She made a face. “With Cho Chang as the butler.”

Harry shrugged. *Probably inevitable.* The show was starting to take shape in his mind. “What about the Benjamin Calypso?” he asked. “Right near the end of the show?”

“Lee Jordan,” said Ron. “Probably with Fred and George doing backup, they’re two of the other brothers.”

“Parvati Patil and her sister Padma are brothers too,” said Luna.

“Hang on, hang on,” Harry said, waving a hand. “Meghan and Ron, Fleur and Lee, Fred and George, Parvati and Padma. That makes eight brothers. What about the other four?”

“Two of them are from Durmstrang, and one’s from Beauxbatons,” said Hermione.

“That makes three, not four.”

“The fourth one is Joseph,” said Ron.

“Oh, right. Who got that?”

Everyone looked at someone else.

Harry pressed a hand against his chest, feeling his heart pounding under his pendants. “Just tell me it isn’t me,” he muttered.

“It isn’t you,” Luna said.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I think you’ll make a good Pharaoh.”

“Thank y – what?”

“We worship you, O mighty ruler of Egypt,” said Ron, bowing deeply. “Good one, Harry.”

Harry groaned and hid his face in his hands. “I’m going to die.”

“Everyone dies eventually,” said Luna.

“I know, but I was hoping to put it off for a few more years.” Harry looked up at his Pride. “I’m not the Pharaoh,” he said with waning hope.

“Sorry, Harry, but you are,” said Hermione. “And Luna’s right.”

“What, that everyone dies?”

“No! Well, yes, but...” Hermione stamped her foot. “That’s not what I mean! I mean that I think you’ll do a good job too!”

“Thank you. You can send a nice bouquet of flowers... to my funeral! I am *not* doing this!”

“Cast list says you are,” said Neville.

“I’ll refuse the part. I’m allowed to do that.”

“If you do, so do we,” said Ron, indicating the Pride.

“And I don’t think Professor Sprout would be very happy if a third of her cast walked out just because you got in a snit,” said Meghan.

“I am not in a snit!”

“Yes, you are.”

“She’d know,” said Hermione.

Harry ignored this. “I’m not in a snit, and I’m not doing it! It’s embarrassing!”

It was only after the last word left his mouth that he realized that he was yelling. And that the hall was silent. And that everyone was looking at him.

“You’re not dead yet,” Ginny remarked as conversations started to resume.

Harry glared at her, aware it was doing nothing for his blush. “Who said I would be?”

“You were acting like getting embarrassed would kill you. But you just got more embarrassed than you will on stage, and nothing happened to you.”

“How do you know how embarrassed I’ll get on stage?”

“I’ve seen you. You didn’t have any trouble being King Arthur. Why is the Pharaoh so much harder?”

Harry sighed, admitting defeat. “It isn’t, I guess.”

“Could be fun, right?” said Ron. “Adoring fans, girls screaming your name, begging for autographs...”

Harry shrugged. "Sounds like my regular life. All right, I'll do it. But you never told me who's going to be Joseph."

Hermione laughed. "You have to ask?"

Harry put two and two together and came up with twenty-two. "Draco," he said with certainty.

"No one else," said Ginny. "And you get to seduce him," she said to Luna. "Lucky."

Luna smiled brightly. "Turnabout is fair play."

Everyone turned to look again as howls of laughter rose from the Pride's corner.

xXxXx

"Den tonight," Harry said as the Pride climbed the stairs to the Tower after dinner. "If that's all right."

"Why wouldn't it be?" Neville asked.

"I don't know. People have things to do sometimes."

"Nothing that can't be done in the Den," said Draco, who hadn't stopped smiling all afternoon. "Practice, practice, practice..."

"Just don't get too stuck-up, Mr. Walking Work of Art," said Ron. "Fred and George are good at dealing with stuck-up little brothers."

"And you're not?"

"I don't have any little brothers."

"You know what I mean."

"I might help them out," Ron conceded. "If they need me."

"But they won't need you, because they won't need to do anything," said Hermione warningly. "Right?"

Ron and Draco eyed each other for a moment, then nodded.

Hermione moved up to the front of the group to walk beside Harry. "What was that?" she said.

"What do you mean, what was that? That was Ron and Draco being rude to each other. It happens a lot."

"I know, but you're usually right on top of it. You seem distracted. Is something wrong?"

“Yes. No. Not really.”

“Yes,” Hermione said with certainty.

“No,” Harry corrected her. “Nothing’s wrong. Just... something happened I wasn’t expecting.”

“Is that what den’s about?”

“Yeah.”

“Good unexpected, bad unexpected, or you don’t know?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, it’s good to have that cleared up.” Hermione linked her arm through his and hugged herself against it. “Children of Israel,” she murmured before dropping back again.

Harry smiled as his mind completed the quote. “Thanks, Neenie,” he said under his breath.

“I heard that.”

Alpha females, in Harry’s experience, all had hard heads, soft hearts, and sharp ears.

xXxXx

“You get everything, you know that?” Ron said when Harry had explained what had happened in Dumbledore’s office.

“I know. But it’s not like this does me any good. Without somebody from my dad’s side to take the bindings off, I won’t be able to use the fire magic, or tap into the castle like Neville and Meghan can.”

“But we’re all related,” said Neville. “All the purebloods. There ought to be someone around who can do it.”

Harry shook his head. “My dad was an only, and so was his dad, and I think even his dad before him.”

“How do you know it comes that way?” Meghan said.

“Don’t you think we would have heard about it if it didn’t?”

“No. We never heard about any Heirs of Ravenclaw, but if it comes through Dadfoot, then his whole family has it too, and none of them ever showed it.”

“So maybe it only shows up in certain people,” said Draco.

“Or somebody bound their child’s powers and then died,” said Hermione. “Like your dad, Harry.

So the child didn't know what he could do, or she, but passed it along anyway, and now in Meghan it shows up again."

"How did we get to talking about Meghan?" Ginny asked.

"Am I a bad thing to talk about?"

"Yes, you are." Ginny shook her finger. "Bad thing. Very bad thing."

Meghan pouted.

"We know about Meghan," said Ron. "Makes sense to talk about her. Or Neville. How did Mr. Moony and Mrs. Danger know about you again, Captain?"

"They guessed it from one of Mrs. Danger's dreams. It talked about me and Meghan, and my dad and mum, and they worked out who it had to be."

"One burst out," said Luna. "One had to be coaxed. And one was bound – is bound," she corrected herself. "Do you think you could make your powers come if you wanted it enough, Harry?"

"I don't know. When would I want it enough?"

"Fighting You-Know-Who?" Ron suggested.

"All right, that does it." Harry leaned over and deftly snagged the plate of treats from under Ron's nose. "You get no more until you say the magic word."

"What magic word?"

"Voldemort," said Draco.

Ron shuddered. "I don't want to say that!"

"We can tell," said Hermione. "But it's just a name. It's not like saying it will make him appear."

"He can't come here," said Meghan. "He doesn't belong."

"You know, something always bothered me about that," Ron said. "If he's the Heir of Slytherin, why wouldn't he belong here? Slytherin was a Founder as much as Gryffindor."

Draco stared. "You want him here?"

"No! I'm just saying, why is it?"

"Because Slytherin left," said Ginny. "He broke his oath, and Hogwarts remembers."

“The Heart of Hogwarts especially remembers,” said Luna. “They might even have sworn the oath in here, right where we’re sitting.”

Ron looked around the main room of the Hogwarts Den, at eight stone walls hung with colorful banners, a soft floor where the Pride reclined, the gently glowing ceiling which provided light. “You think so?”

“This was their special place,” said Neville. “It makes sense.”

Ron nodded, his eyes fixed on the green banner across the room. “Do I have to say it tonight?”

“Take it one piece at a time,” said Harry. “It starts with ‘Vol.’”

“Rhymes with bowl,” Ginny added. “Do you want another ‘Vol’ of porridge?”

Everyone laughed. “Another ‘Vol’ of porridge?” Ron repeated. “That’s disgusting.”

“But you said it,” said Draco. “Next part is ‘de.’ Like ‘la-de-da.’”

“This is ridiculous.”

“So is being afraid of a bunch of letters,” said Hermione. “Go on, say it.”

Ron let himself fall backwards onto the cushioned floor and lay stretched out. “La-de-da,” he said to the ceiling. “Happy now?”

“And the last bit is ‘mort,’” said Meghan. “Like ‘Mort’a known you’d be here.’”

Ron raised his head. “You do a lousy accent.”

“Fine, you do it better.”

“Mort’a known you’d be ‘ere,” Ron said, rolling onto his stomach.

“Nice,” said Neville. “You sound just like my cousin Cepheus when he sees someone he doesn’t like.”

“So you said all three parts,” said Luna. “Now you just have to put them together.”

“Why don’t you do it if you’re so clever?”

“Voldemort,” said Luna without hesitation. “I wouldn’t do it anywhere else,” she added, “because sometimes the luck spirits hear you call someone you don’t want to see and bring that person to you to be mean. But it’s safe in here.”

“There, see?” Ron pointed to Luna. “There’s a reason people don’t say his name.”

He found himself the object of six disbelieving gazes.

“Well, it could be true. Lupisces were.”

“True enough,” Harry said. “But it’s safe in here, right, Luna?”

“Oh, yes. There are enough good spells on the Den to stop all but the most powerful luck spirits, and those are down in the Great Hall where the show will be, deciding what kind of luck to give it. So we should be safe here.”

“Come on, Ron,” said Draco. “I can do it, so can you.”

Ron indicated Draco’s condition with his hands. “Vol,” he said aloud. “Volde. Volde... Voldemort. There, happy now?”

Harry led a round of applause.

“Voldemort,” said Ginny clearly, earning her own applause.

“Voldemort,” said Neville. “Dad and Mum say it, why shouldn’t I?”

“So that makes everyone,” said Meghan, leaning against Neville happily. “We’re not afraid.”

“Of the name,” said Harry. “Of the person, yes.”

“No we’re not!”

“Yes, we are.” Harry leaned over and took Meghan’s arm. “We’re just as afraid as will keep us from doing stupid things,” he said, looking her in the eye. “Because magic can’t do everything, and I like my Pride alive. Okay?”

“He’s not even around anymore,” Meghan grumbled.

Harry brought his other hand around and laid the pads of his fingers against Meghan’s throat.

“Okay, okay,” Meghan said quickly.

“Thank you.” Harry let her go. “And he is still around, or why was there a Death Eater here pretending to be Moody? He must have had something planned with the Tournament.”

“And someone else picked it up afterwards,” said Ginny. “Or a couple of someones. I still think Dursley had a part in what happened to you in the lake.”

Hermione frowned. “Professor Dumbledore didn’t tell you anything else about that, did he?” she asked Harry.

“He just said it was under investigation.”

“Such a lovely phrase, ‘under investigation,’” said Draco. “It could mean anything. Anything

from 'we're making the arrest in five minutes' to 'we know who did it but we can't prove it' to 'we don't know a bloody thing about it.'"

"If I had to guess, I'd say it would be closer to the last one," said Harry. "They haven't done anything about it that I've seen."

"Be fair, Harry, we don't see everything," said Hermione.

"And there have been people asking questions," said Luna. "About people doing spells on the platforms at ten-thirty."

"All right, I take it back. They're doing something. Not a lot, but something."

"I wish I knew who did it," Ron said, cracking his knuckles. "I'd wait until they're asleep and shove them in a sodding lake, and see how they like it."

"I'll help," said Harry and Ginny together, looked at each other in surprise, and laughed.

"Count us in," said Draco, indicating himself and Luna.

"And me," said Hermione fiercely. "Lowlife scum, whoever it was, no better than Voldemort..." Her expression softened into thoughtfulness. "That's odd, I hadn't thought of it before."

"What?" Neville asked.

"You and Harry," Hermione said. "Voldemort's two choices for the one who would vanquish him. You're both Heirs of Founders, just like he is."

"Don't take this wrong, Harry," said Neville, "but I'm glad it was you. You make a better hero."

"Yeah, and it means you still have parents," Harry shot back automatically, but his mind was elsewhere. "It almost had to be me, didn't it?" he said. "The fight in the Founders' time was between Slytherin and Gryffindor. So we're just bringing it forward a thousand years."

"I hope we are," said Ginny. "Gryffindor won back then."

"But a lot of people got hurt along the way," said Draco. "And a lot more died."

"That, I could do without," said Ron.

"So could we all," said Harry.

Silence fell for a few moments. Meghan broke it, beginning to sing.

"It was red and yellow and green and brown..."

xXxXx

“Madam Skeeter!”

Rita turned, setting down her suitcase. “Dursley,” she said with a dull smile.

“I have information for you,” the Slytherin wheezed out, leaning on the wall of the Three Broomsticks and catching his breath. “For your next article.”

“Thank you, Dursley, but that’s not necessary. There won’t be any more articles.”

“No more articles?” Dursley’s look of dismay would have been funny, if anything was funny anymore. “But – I saw – in the newspaper, just after the second task...”

“Dismally inadequate,” said Rita sadly. “And it was the last I’ll ever write.” She sighed. “Have you ever been under pressure, Dursley? Have you ever been caught between two undesirables, forced to take the only honorable way out?”

Dursley nodded, his eyes wide. “Is someone...”

“I can’t tell you anything.” Suddenly the possibilities of this situation struck Rita. “But if I could...” She picked up her suitcase again, smiling. “Shall we have a drink together, then?”

xXxXx

“Step, hop, step, step, hop, hop, step,” Ginny chanted, her feet keeping time with her words. “Step, hop, step, step, hop, hop, step.”

“And turn,” said Hermione, spinning on her right foot as Ginny did on her left. “And out again...”

“Step, hop, step, step, hop, hop, step,” both girls recited as they danced outwards.

“Did you see the *Prophet* today?” Hermione asked in time with her dancing.

“No, I didn’t, why, what’d it say?”

“That rhymed.”

“Good.” Ginny stopped where she was and rubbed her side. “This is harder than I thought it’d be. What about the *Prophet*?”

“The cover story was about Mr. Crouch. He’s still not coming to work.”

“Maybe he’s just sick.”

“But that would mean he’s been sick since Christmas. Percy came to the Yule Ball instead of him, remember? Why wouldn’t he go to St. Mungo’s if he’s been sick for so long?”

Ginny nodded. “Maybe we should write to him and ask. But we’d have to be careful not to make

it sound like we think Mr. Crouch is doing anything wrong. Percy likes him a lot.”

“Is Penelope jealous?”

“Eww!” Ginny clutched at her head. “Hermione, that’s so *wrong!*”

Hermione grinned. “So show me how to do it right, then, if you’re so good at dancing.”

“Arrggh!” Ginny took a quick look around to make sure they were alone in the alley in Hogsmeade, then whispered a few words under her breath. The world spun briefly around her, and then she was close to the ground, perfectly poised, ready to leap –

Her flying form struck Hermione in the chest and knocked the older girl down. Hermione changed as she fell, but Ginny was not to be put off by such tricks. Like red lightning she struck, catching the housecat’s orange scruff in her teeth and shaking her head hard. When she let Neenie go, the calico cat staggered a few paces, then sat down abruptly, eyes wavering between open and closed.

The sound of applause startled Ginny into a yowl. Harry, Ron, and Draco stood at the entrance to the alley, all clapping enthusiastically. “Nice,” said Harry. “Really nice. Just be glad she didn’t have a chance to use her claws. They’re nasty.”

Neenie hissed at him, then returned to her human form, still slumped on the ground. “Now I’m all dizzy,” she complained.

“You shouldn’t have been saying nasty things about my brother,” said Ron sanctimoniously.

“I wasn’t.”

“You w–” Ron lost the rest of the word as Draco thumped him on the back with an open hand.

“Don’t contradict the lady,” the blond boy said, crossing to his twin to help her up. “Either of them.”

Reditio ipsa, Ginny murmured inside her mind. “How is he supposed to do that?” she asked when she had lips again. “We were saying opposite things.”

“This is why boys shouldn’t get into girls’ arguments,” said Harry, offering Ginny his hand. She took it and stood up, enjoying his firm grip while hoping he thought any redness in her cheeks was from the brief scuffle. “We can’t win.”

“You ought to be used to that by now,” said Hermione, now on her feet with Draco’s arm around her waist. “You’ve never won an argument at home.”

“Have so. With Draco.”

“You’ve never won an argument *with me* at home.”

“Now that I won’t argue with.”

“And she wins again,” said Ron. “What’re we supposed to do?”

“Shut up and enjoy it?” Draco suggested.

Ginny snorted. “Twins. Ron, we were talking about Crouch, Percy’s boss.”

“I know who he is. What about him?”

xXxXx

“All right, people, time to get to work.” Letha clapped her hands. “Places. Narrators, midstage, one right, one left. Watch but do *not* call attention to yourselves.”

Hermione winced but had to admit her Pack-mother had reason on her side. *But I didn’t mean to sneeze yesterday. It just happened...*

“Chorus, spread out in an arc from one Narrator to the other. Not an uninterrupted line, small groups, but I want the effect of the sweep.” Letha considered the line, frowning. “You girls in the center, split up a bit. Pritchard, one is not a group, pick a side.” Giggles ran through the line. “Yes, Cauldwell, she’s a girl, yes, Macdonald, he’s a boy, neither condition is contagious, close the gap.” More giggles. “Baker and Butler, where are you?”

“Backstage, ma’am,” Diggory’s voice answered.

“I want to see you a moment.”

Diggory appeared behind the nearest Hufflepuffs, Cho Chang beside him. “Right here, ma’am.”

“I want you two in the wings watching this song, understand? If one of you isn’t there, the other one go and get him, or her. Missed cues are no fun for anyone. Clear?”

It was.

“And Joseph, right in the center here.” Letha drew a circle on the floor with her wand.

Draco stepped into it. “Look, Mum, the Caucasian Chalk Circle.”

“I’m the director, not your mother, this is Webber, not Brecht, and if you can’t stay inside your mark any better than you did when you and I blocked this number last night I’ll put bars on it ahead of schedule, is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Draco said, not quite standing at attention. His hands moved as Letha turned away. *Touch-y.*

Hermione smothered a laugh. Harry, sitting out front at one of the displaced House tables, didn’t

bother.

“Quiet on stage,” Letha called. “Chorus, when you sing, I want you to walk around Joseph. Narrators, lead them. We’re doing this by halves, people, the split is between Finch-Fletchley and Quirke. Granger-Lupin, your group circles inside of Weasley’s, understood? Narrators, when you get to your opposite position, stop. Chorus, when the Narrator stops, you take a seat, watching Joseph. Yes, that puts your backs to the audience, live with it.”

Self-conscious smiles from some of the girls who had been in shows before and complained early on that some of the blocking put them facing away from the audience.

“When it’s time for you to sing again, turn around gracefully, there’s no hurry. If that means you have to sing a few notes upstage, do it, that’s what the amplifying spells are for. The audience will still hear your lovely voices, I promise.” Letha’s tone was slightly sardonic, as some of the chorus members had proved more difficult to teach than others. “You know what to do when the song is over...”

“Move into the next one,” the cast answered in unison.

“Correct.” Letha put her hands on her hips and surveyed the scene. “Well, cast, I think this calls for a celebration. Let’s hear it for finishing the last piece of blocking in the whole show.”

“Really?” The words tumbled from Hermione eagerly. “We’re done?” She was clapping at the same time, as was everyone else, shouting questions over the applause.

Letha shook her wand once in the air, letting off a loud bang that silenced everyone. “Thank you for your enthusiasm, but save it for the show. We have four weeks to go and in that four weeks we are going to work even harder than we have been.” She smiled at the groans. “That’s right, the real work starts now. Blocking is finished, on-book time is nearly so. I want everyone completely memorized – and Pomona is telling this same thing to the brothers over at their rehearsal, so no complaining that they get off easy – by Monday of next week.”

“But this is Thursday!” said Cho from behind the chorus’ groans.

“That’s right, Chang, and that means you have Friday and the whole weekend to finish memorizing your lines, as I’m sure you’ve been working on them all this time, the way we told you to.”

She’s enjoying this, Hermione signed to Harry.

No kidding. The actual translation of this sign was cruder, but Hermione didn’t care for swearing except in emergencies, even in hand-sign.

“This also means that it’s time to stop marking. No more pretending; this is going to be the real thing now. Thanks to magic, none of you will lose your voices even if you sing full-out every rehearsal from here to performance, as long as you all use the lozenges we gave you and have a

drink of the Voice-Restoring Potion after every rehearsal. You all got supplies when the cast list went up; if anyone's run out, see me, Professor Sprout, or Madam Pomfrey for more." Letha paused, looking the cast over. "You're a good group," she said. "Keep doing as well as you have been, and we'll have a stellar show."

Harry started clapping. The rest of the cast took it up quickly. Letha acknowledged it with a small bow, then waved them to silence. "Now let's get this going. Black?"

"Ma'am?"

Letha leapt off the stage and took a seat in the pit. "Make me cry."

She waved her wand at the ceiling and nodded to Theodore Nott, at the piano.

The lights over the audience went to black, with hardly more illumination than that on the chorus. Draco stood in the middle of a spotlight, his expression one Hermione had known all her life.

He used to look like that just after he woke up from his nightmares...

Two solemn chords, twice repeated, and the song began.

Not hard to make Letha cry with this one. Not when she used it herself. Hermione blinked back tears of her own. There were some stories the Pack didn't need to hear too often.

The blocking's good. I wonder if she got Padfoot's help? Draco's restless pacing illustrated Joseph's dilemma clearly – should he give up the torture of hope, become resigned to his fate, or should he continue to believe that his dreams held the truth, and all he had to do was wait?

The instrumental section began. Hermione cleared her face and voice quickly by reminding herself of the more outrageous things Draco had said lately and began to walk and sing at the same moment as Ginny and the Chorus. *At least there's no very hard lyrics to remember here. Just "la la la."*

Draco took up the song again, and Hermione had to concentrate again on her twin's occasional insanity to avoid being pulled in by what he was projecting. *He's never really experienced this. Not when he was alone. The only time it happened, I was with him. And we got away.*

The memory kept her from weeping as she began to sing again. *It's a terribly sad song, but at the same time it's defiant. "No matter what you do to me, I refuse to be defeated." A perfect song for the Pack.*

She was sure she heard at least two different sobs from the audience in the silent moment after everyone let the last note go.

Not my problem. People will probably be crying the night of the show. Give it a few seconds for applause, and then...

She stepped forward and began her line, projecting to the back of the Hall as she'd been taught. When she had finished, she turned and made her way through the Chorus to Joseph's side, hearing Ginny take up the melody line.

Draco stood dejected in the center of his "cell," staring at the floor. Hermione stopped at the edge and sang directly at him. His head came up, and he stared at her. Ginny joined them on the other side and sang her line, pulling his attention. The Chorus leapt to their collective feet as the music picked up speed.

Perfect act-ending song. Bouncy, lively, leaves the story on a bit of a cliffhanger... what more could we want?

The Baker and the Butler entered, told their dreams, got their bad and good news. Hermione was vaguely aware of motion in the audience as the final chorus began, but didn't let it distract her from the rhythms her feet were beating out. *Step, hop, step, step, hop, hop, step... step, hop, step, step, hop, hop, step... and get to positions for the ending tableau... three, two, one, hold.*

The applause startled her, and everyone else judging by the noise level. Not even if Letha had forgotten herself enough to applaud her own work could there be that much clapping out there...

The house lights came up, and Hermione relaxed. Charlie Weasley and Tonks were standing in the middle of the Great Hall, next to Harry, all three applauding enthusiastically.

"Break," Letha called, and everyone relaxed. "Five minutes, then we're doing it again." She chuckled at the groans, then turned and was halfway up the aisle by the time Hermione could get out of her position. "And what are you two doing here?"

"Delivering the fancy invitations," said Tonks, handing over an envelope of creamy parchment. "You already know the date, this is just so people have something for the scrapbook."

"Two months," Charlie said, his arm around Tonks' waist. "I can't wait."

"I'm sure you can't." Letha was turning the envelope over and over in her hands as Hermione arrived beside her. "Tonks, can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure, I'm off all day." Tonks frowned. "Is something wrong? You look upset."

Letha started for a more distant section of the Great Hall without answering. Tonks followed, pausing to exchange shrugs with Charlie.

"You know anything?" Charlie asked Hermione and Harry.

They shook their heads. Draco came up the aisle. "What goes on?"

"We were bringing around invitations, but now I'm not sure," Charlie said. "You've got a hell of a voice."

“Thank you.”

“Incoming,” said Harry, pulling Draco back from the aisle. Hermione stepped aside hastily as Ginny charged at Charlie.

“What’re you doing here?” she asked when they let each other go.

“Delivering wedding invites. I never knew you could sing like that.”

“You never listened.” Ginny flicked Charlie’s ear. “You coming to the show?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. You still maid of honor?”

“No, I decided not to be while you weren’t looking,” Ginny said sarcastically. “Yes.”

“And I might be the wrong person to ask you this,” Charlie said to Hermione, “but you and Meghan are the closest thing Tonks has to sisters...”

A tremor started in the middle of Hermione’s mouth. “You want us to be bridesmaids?”

“Yeah.”

The tremor exploded outwards into a huge smile. “I don’t think Meghan will mind.”

“I don’t think you’ll mind either,” said Draco. “What a terrible thing for you, Hermione, to have to go get new dress robes. My sympathies are with you.”

Charlie laughed. “Your sympathies ought to be with Bill. Percy and Ron got new robes for the Yule Ball, but Bill hasn’t worn his in years, and with all the traveling he’s done I don’t think even Winky will be able to get the creases out. Where did Ron find her, by the way?”

“In the kitchens here,” said Harry. “She used to belong to Percy’s boss.”

Charlie shook his head. “He must have been mad to fire her. She’s great. She and Mum will sit there for hours and talk about recipes and cleaning... do you think Mum could be part house-elf? It’d explain a lot.”

“That would mean we’re part house-elf, too,” said Ginny. “It might account for the short ones like us and the twins, but I don’t see it in Bill or Percy or Ron.”

“True, they are pretty tall for house-elf blood. People used to claim Mum and Dad had really only had Bill and me, and they were just duplicating us by magic every couple years.”

“And the spell slipped once, so they got two,” said Harry.

“But we do look a lot alike,” Ginny mused. “Even me.”

“Even you,” said Hermione. “But no one would ever mistake you for a boy.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Draco. “Dressed right, hair cut short... you might pass for a little while.”

Hermione shook her head. “Nope, wouldn’t work. It’s a girl’s face, not a boy’s, for all she looks like the twins.”

“I do not!”

“She does not!”

Hermione blinked. “Well, if you say so,” she said to Ginny and Harry.

“It’s not such a bad thing,” said Charlie. “Why don’t you say she looks like me?”

“That I don’t mind so much,” said Ginny.

“Why don’t you want to look like the twins?” Draco asked, perplexed.

“Because I would occasionally like to be taken seriously?”

Draco was about to answer this when Harry tapped his arm and pointed. Tonks was standing up, her hair rippling through different colors like Joseph’s coat. She was staring down at Letha, who was staring towards the opposite wall. Hermione couldn’t see her Pack-mum’s face, but she could see Tonks’, and it was twisted in anger, sorrow, and... betrayal?

“How could you do this to me, Letha?” Tonks’ voice carried over the ambient noise made by three dozen chattering students, and reduced it to silence. “Why?”

Letha’s answer was inaudible, but Tonks’ reply to her was not. “You could at least have asked if I was willing! If I wanted to do it! But you didn’t – you just went ahead and did it, and now I’m not sure about anything...”

“Tonks, what’s wrong?” Charlie asked, starting towards her.

Tonks turned and held up a hand. Her hair was a mid-length mousy brown. “Don’t, Charlie. Just... don’t.”

“What... did I do something?”

“No.” Tonks looked over her shoulder at Letha, then back. “No, Charlie. *You* didn’t do anything.”

“Please don’t do this in public,” Letha said just loud enough to carry.

Tonks wasn’t listening. “Didn’t you ever wonder why I suddenly turned into a clinging vine? Why I was suddenly so happy to be with you, and so unhappy to be away from you? Why I was so

ready to agree to marry you that night, even though I thought I might love someone else five minutes before?”

Letha's wand was out, drawing a line across the Great Hall, a line formed in grey smoke, and Hermione recognized a Privacy Spell. Charlie stared at Tonks. His lips formed the words “love someone else.”

“Letha slipped me a love potion,” said Tonks, hatred audible in her tone. “She thought it would be ‘best for me.’” No hands were necessary to show the sneer quotes. “She wanted to make everything all clear. And it was, while the potion was working. But as soon as she told me, it got unclear again. It got a thousand times less clear than it used to be.”

She shut her eyes tightly, then opened them again. “I don't even know if I love you anymore, or if that's just the potion working. I don't know if I love the other man, or if it was just a stupid crush. I don't know anything. So the wedding's off.” She held up a hand as Charlie started towards her. “I'm not saying I'll never marry you. I just want to be sure it's really me doing it, and not a *potion*. So I need some time.” A watery smile edged onto her face for a few seconds before disappearing. “I'm sorry. I never wanted to hurt you.” One more poisonous look over her shoulder. “But I didn't have a choice.”

She started for the exit, but Letha met her halfway there, speaking in low tones.

Tonks scoffed aloud. “Don't ruin your dream? Why should I care about your dream, when you ruined mine?”

Another quiet comment. Hermione had to look away from the pleading and sadness lined into Letha's face, but she couldn't escape that in her Pack-mother's voice. Even though she couldn't hear the words, she knew what one of them must be...

“Sorry doesn't cut it this time, Letha. I trusted you. And you let me down pretty damn bad.” Tonks marched around Letha and out into the entrance hall. Charlie stood frozen for one more second, then followed her at a run.

Letha shut her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, her face was serene. A flick of her wand dismissed the Privacy Spell. “Rehearsal is over,” she said to the Chorus, lined up on the other side of the spell far more neatly than they ever did it on stage. “Back to your common rooms.”

Amid the bustle of everyone getting ready to go, Letha caught Hermione's eye and slid a finger firmly across her lips. *Explain later*, she signed.

Hermione nodded automatically.

But how can she? It's wrong to give someone a love potion – I don't think it's illegal, but it's still wrong!

Even if you're just making them fall more in love with the person they're already in love with? asked part of her mind. That's what it sounded like.

Yes, even then! Even then, it's still taking away that person's right to choose! It's still wrong!

Her mind took a long time answering, and when it did, it was hesitant. Then... I guess Letha can be wrong.

xXxXx

This is not the time, the place, or the way I would have chosen for them to discover that we're fallible...

Aletha smiled weakly at her own folly. Of course not. You would have much preferred it if one of the others had fouled up in front of them first. But it wasn't any of the others, it was you, and now you have to own up to it and take your medicine.

Or start taking it. It's likely to be a long dosing.

The Hall was empty now, empty of everyone except her three and Ginny, who were all watching her without trying to hide it. Aletha steeled herself and met their eyes, one set after another, acknowledging what they had seen.

She looked at Harry last, and it was Harry who spoke first. "Did you?"

"Yes."

Harry's brows drew in. For all his bravery, all his intelligence, he was still a boy talking to his mother. "Why?"

"Because I thought it was necessary." Time to take the dose. "I was wrong."

Her mouth tasted as though she'd chewed on an orange peel. Harry still looked baffled, as though it had never crossed his mind that she could do anything wrong. Ginny's face was closed, as if she were unsure what to feel. Draco's confusion was starting to clear, but Hermione...

We could never hide anything from you, little Neenie. Hermione's eyes held comprehension, and perhaps a trace of understanding.

Of course, the only thing worse than knowing you did wrong is being understood by someone else when they find out you did wrong. Not that Hermione can know that.

Aletha nodded to them all, then Summoned her bag and started for the door. She needed to go home. She needed to think about what she was going to do now.

You need to tell someone why, exactly, you gave Tonks that potion.

She rejected this thought. That would be either begging for sympathy or making an excuse. She refused to do either.

An explanation is not an excuse. You are not asking them to ignore your behavior, merely to understand what prompted it. Your intentions were good.

She smiled wryly. *And we all know which road is paved with those.*

Still, it was a valid point. The Pack, at least, might react better if they knew the whole truth. *And they won't reject you out of hand, you know that.*

No, they'll wait until they have the whole story, then they'll reject me!

She snorted a brief laugh. *The Pack won't reject me for an honest incident of stupidity. Heaven knows we've all had enough of them in the past.*

And with these semi-comforting thoughts Aletha had to be content.

xXxXx

Hogwarts being what it was, the whole school knew within two hours that an Auror engaged to one of the older Weasley brothers had come to the rehearsal of *Joseph*, had an argument with Mrs. Freeman-Black, and stormed out. Harry, Hermione, Ginny, and Draco were able to find Ron, Meghan, Neville, and Luna as they left the other half of the rehearsal and tell them the part of the story no one else knew.

“She gave her a love potion?” said Ron.

“But the wedding can't be off!” Meghan wailed.

“Did Mrs. Letha really do it?” asked Neville.

“Why didn't Tonks just take an antidote and trust herself?” Luna said.

“Yes,” said Harry, pointing to Neville. “Yes.” Ron. “Yes, it can, but maybe not forever.” Meghan. “I don't know.” Luna.

“Because she's afraid that she never really loved Charlie to start with,” said Hermione quietly.

“Oh, come on,” said Ron. “Everyone who ever knew them knew she'd fallen for Charlie, even I could see it.”

“Must have been really obvious, then,” Draco muttered.

Ron ignored the sarcasm. “It was. It really was. Maybe I should go talk to her...”

“No,” said Hermione. “She doesn't want anyone to talk to her right now. She wants to go home

and cry for a while, and then she wants to get an antidote – she didn't actually take one, but the potion's mostly worn off by now – and then she wants to figure it out herself. And if she's honest, and if you're right, Ron, she'll figure out that she does love Charlie, and come back."

"And what if she's not honest?" said Ginny. "Or what if Ron's wrong – and me, and the twins, and Mum, and everyone else who watched them together?"

"Then we deal with that when it comes," said Harry. "Let's go back to the Tower. We shouldn't hang around out here."

xXxXx

Remus held back his urge to laugh hysterically over the cause of Aletha's peccadillo. Tonks had been in love with *him*? He still occasionally doubted that Danger stayed with him for any reason other than the purely physical necessity they'd discovered over the summer –

Of course, she smacks me every time I doubt, so I'm learning not to doubt.

But the idea of a younger woman, a woman so different in almost every way from him, suddenly and immensely attracted...

Truth be told, he thought, making no attempt to conceal the thinking, if I had never met Danger, I might have been attracted in return. It would be very flattering, at the very least, to have Tonks interested in me. And whether it stayed a shallow interest or turned into something deeper, I would have been kind to her and helped her find her heart's desire.

No matter your own?

Remus smiled inwardly. **I can hardly answer that, least of all to you.**

Oh, go on. Pretend I'm somebody else.

I don't think so.

Pretty please with sugar on top?

Remus gave a silent groan. **Fine, all right, yes, I think I could have loved her. If I had never known you. If we had never met, if I had made it to right now without you and the Pack, if I had met Tonks first as an adult without ever seeing her as a little girl... then yes, I could have loved her.**

And you would have been as wonderful to her as you are to me. He felt the warmth of Danger's smile. **Don't worry. I of all people don't need to be frightened about you straying. How could you, with us so much together?**

And yet I managed to stitch something of that together out of whole cloth about you and Sirius...

I thought we weren't going to talk about that any more. Over, done with, no longer important.

Remus frowned. **But we never did get around to having that talk about what you want, and how we could deal with it. Other things got in the way.**

That's true, but there certainly isn't time for it now. We have to reassure Aletha that we still love her, that we're grateful for what she did, and I doubt there's any need to rub it in to her that it was wrong.

No, I don't think so. And then we'll have to remind her that we'll stand between her and Molly, if it becomes necessary.

Good point. Danger gulped. How is Molly going to react when she finds out Aletha's responsible for Charlie's wedding being postponed?

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Percy Weasley sat at his desk, neat piles of parchment in front of him. He straightened the framed photograph of his family, then straightened it again.

So much disorder. No, I think chaos would be the more proper word.

He prided himself on using the proper words, to the proper people, at the proper times. But lately, what was and was not proper had become harder and harder to discern, with even his own heart divided against itself.

As if his family woes were not enough – *I had already taken the time off work for the wedding, and now I will have to use it some other way* – Mr. Crouch's mysterious illness was niggling at Percy. He tried to tell himself that he enjoyed the responsibility of being interim Head of a Department, but he was uncomfortably aware that he was young and untried, and probably making mistakes that his subordinates were quietly correcting. He wasn't ready, not for something as big as this, and he wished Mr. Crouch would get well and come back and take some of the load off his shoulders.

And he's ill at home, with no one around, not even his house-elf. Percy had reason to know the house-elf was no longer with Mr. Crouch, since it now cleaned his room every day while he was at work, and sometimes bobbed a curtsy as he passed it in the hall or on the landing. Apparently his brother Ron had found it at Hogwarts, drunk on butterbeer or some such nonsense, and offered it a job at the Burrow. That was one reason Percy would rather Mr. Crouch stay away; he didn't want to have to admit that his family had never had a house-elf, and could only find a drunken and disgraced one.

That same brother, in collusion with his friends – *and why they must call themselves a Pride I don't know* – was now suggesting that there might be something unusual about Mr. Crouch's illness. The letter lay on top of one of Percy's stacks of parchment, open to its brief contents,

asking if Percy had seen Mr. Crouch lately or gone to his house, or if he was just getting instructions by owl.

At least Rita Skeeter is leaving us alone. Percy had been in terror that the overly inquisitive reporter would learn he hadn't seen his boss in the flesh for four months. He could hear her voice now. *“And how do you know that someone isn't duping you into accepting false instructions? Are you positive this is Bartemius Crouch's handwriting? Are you aware that handwriting can be mimicked, either with skill or with magic? Are you willing to bet your job that this is Barty Crouch's handwriting?”*

Percy blinked, and picked up the letter on top of the right-hand pile. It looked like Mr. Crouch's writing, but...

He dug into the pile, to the very bottom, pulling out the first letter he'd received from Mr. Crouch, shortly after the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. Setting the two side by side, he compared them.

There could be no doubt. The letter written yesterday was shakier, less firm, less sure than the one written months ago. If Mr. Crouch was ill, he was getting worse.

And if he is too ill to work, he should be too ill to care for himself. Who is taking care of him, without the house-elf there?

The obvious answer was that Mr. Crouch had owned more than one house-elf, that he had freed only the disobedient one and retained another to serve him...

But he still should not be there alone, without any human company. Especially when he is obviously getting worse instead of better.

Percy stood up, having made his decision. *I have been a valuable and faithful employee. I can afford to take this risk.*

I will go to Mr. Crouch's home and see if there is anything I can do for him.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 47: Snakes and Songsters (Year 4)

Chapter 47: Snakes and Songsters

Draco sat by himself in a tree at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, mostly hidden from sight by the sprouting leaves. In the castle, two rehearsals were going on, but neither involved him.

And that's not likely to happen again, so I'm taking the time while I have it.

The grounds, as far as he could see them, were deserted. He was alone.

Which, every now and again, is a nice way to be.

He drew his flute from the pocket Danger had sewed into his robes specifically for that purpose and blew into it once or twice, making sure it was ready. A moment later, sweet, pure notes filled the air around him.

The first thing I ever played for Luna. And Ron and Ginny and the twins, but Luna asked about the recorder first. He hadn't played this song, his own composition, since summer, but his fingers knew their places, and the melody soared out sure and clear, evoking the images of Hobbiton and Bag End that he'd used when he was creating it.

I don't know if I'd make a good hobbit. Maybe one of the unusual ones, like Merry or Pippin, but I don't fit the mold any other way. I like eating, but not that much, and I don't care much for gardening...

I know who's a hobbit. Neville.

Draco had to stop playing for a minute to laugh. *Yes, our Captain is a hobbit all right.*

He amused himself as he played on by setting the rest of the Pride in Tolkien's races. Ron, despite his height, seemed likely to be either another hobbit or a dwarf, since both races were concerned more with real things than with abstract thought. Ginny might be a dwarf as well, but Draco couldn't see her as a hobbit, so he assigned the Weasleys to the category of dwarfs.

Makes sense with all the boys, too. There were never many dwarf women.

Hermione was human to the core, though Draco had a hard time deciding if she ought to be a shieldmaiden like Eowyn or a studious lady of Gondor. Studious finally won out, especially when Draco contrasted his twin with Meghan. *Pearl's a shieldmaiden if there ever was one, and the Rohirrim were the humans closest related to hobbits, which is the other place I'd put her. Harry would be human as well, but a Ranger, keeping his own counsel and defending the helpless from evil. Not so different from what he usually does.*

So that just leaves me, and Luna...

Draco gave musical shape to his thoughts of Luna, her constant look of wonder, her soft smile when something delighted her, and wove in the image of her at the Yule Ball that lived forever in his mind, a princess of sun and moon and stars.

An elf. There's nothing else she could be. A picture arose in his mind. Two tall, slender figures stood side by side, the lady clad in soft and flowing white with a red rose in her golden hair, the lord in green with his carved bow in his hand, the arrows in his quiver as sharp as any thorn, as sharp as the points of both their ears.

Draco blinked and the picture was gone, but the memory remained. *All right, so I guess that makes me an elf too.* He shrugged. *Fits, I guess. I might have thought of human first, but elf works better. Especially if that's what Luna is...*

“There you are.”

He only jumped a little, mostly because he'd been thinking of the speaker just before she spoke. “Yes, here I am. I thought you were at rehearsal.”

Luna leaned against the tree, looking up at him. “I was, but I was just watching. We're not rehearsing my part until tomorrow. I can't do it without you.”

“Right, silly me.” Draco moved over on the branch. “Want to come up?”

“All right.” Luna stretched up and caught the lowest branch, walked her feet up the trunk, and in a moment was sitting beside Draco. “Did you want to be alone?”

“I notice you didn't ask until you were already up here.”

“You invited me.”

“I know. And I did want to be alone when I came out here, but I think I'd had enough by the time you came along.”

They sat for a little while together, not talking, not touching, merely knowing one another. Luna broke the silence, singing the first stanza of an old song, a song of a capricious lady who learned the true value of love too late. Draco joined her, taking the man's part and leaving her the woman's until the final verses, which they sang together, their voices entwined like the plants which had grown from the lovers' hearts.

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In the Great Hall, Ginny watched approvingly as Fleur led the final chorus of “Those Canaan Days,” which involved half the brothers singing until they fell over. *She has a voice, and she's not afraid to use it. Probably trying to catch up on Tournament points, I can't think of any other reason a girl with so much dignity would agree to do this.*

The interview with Professor Dumbledore in that morning's *Daily Prophet* came to mind. The

interviewer (*not* Rita Skeeter, who hadn't had an article published since the second task) had asked him why he had suggested something so out-of-keeping with the remainder of the Tournament as an auxiliary task. Lurking in the background had been words like "unsuitable" and "frivolous."

"I felt that the champions, and indeed, all the representatives of each school participating, needed some change from the challenges to life and limb," Professor Dumbledore had replied mildly. "As well, performing in a musical comedy requires the courage to allow oneself to look foolish in public, and I wish my students to be acquainted with all forms of courage."

Ah, courage. What would we be without it? Ginny stepped forward with Hermione to sing the few lines that followed the song, describing how the brothers went to Egypt to find relief from the famine ravaging the land. *We wouldn't be Gryffindors, that's for sure.*

She shivered a little, and noticed a faint frown on Ron's face as he passed her, marching towards Egypt with the other brothers. *I wonder if everything's all right?*

"Good, very good," called Professor Sprout as the music stopped. "We'll work this section again tomorrow, then go on and get as far towards the end as we can. Don't forget to take your Voice-Restoring Potion."

Ginny hurried towards Ron, who was now standing off to one side, hand against his chest. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. Do your pendants feel just a little cold?"

Ginny hooked them out with a thumb and cupped them in her hand, frowning. "Maybe. But there isn't anything glowing that I can see."

"Maybe we have to get in the dark to see it." Ron looked around. "Right back here." He stepped to one side and pulled open a flap of the curtain that had come into being when the stage was conjured up. "We can wrap up in this."

Ginny joined him and shut her eyes to let them acclimate better. When she opened them, a faint glow was indeed visible. "It's the first one," she said. "But it's not just one carving, it's glowing all over."

"Battery and baking," Ron muttered, flipping his first pendant back and forth. "Ginny, it's somebody in the family – we don't have carvings for all of them, it has to be somebody we don't have a carving for, Bill or Charlie or someone..."

Ginny felt her breath come faster. "It can't be Fred and George, they're right out there, and it's not you or me, or Mum or Dad. It's Bill or Charlie or Percy."

"You're right. And it's not too much yet. Whatever it is, there might still be time to stop it." Ron grabbed her hand. "Come on, we have to get to a Floo."

“Why?”

“Call Mum. Get her to look at the clock.” Ron shoved the curtain aside, and they were running, leaping off the stage, ignoring shouted questions as they pelted out of the Great Hall, headed for the kitchens.

“We spend... way too much time down here,” Ginny panted out as Ron tickled the pear.

“Only because we have to.” Ron yanked the door open and was at the fireplace within seconds. Ginny felt on the mantelpiece for the small pot she knew was kept here and reached inside, snatching up a generous handful of the glittering powder within and scattering it on the flames, which roared up and turned green.

“The Burrow!” Ron shouted, and stuck his head into the fire.

The only thing odder than making a firecall yourself, Ginny discovered, was watching someone else do it. All she could see was Ron’s apparently beheaded body, crouching in front of the fire. Her pendants were cycling now, stabs of heat from her own and Ron’s worry and fear alternating with a deepening chill.

Whoever, whatever it is, it’s getting worse.

The kitchen door, which Ginny had slammed behind herself, crashed open again. Meghan darted in. “Ginny, what’s wrong?”

“Someone’s in trouble,” Ginny said, holding out her pendants so Meghan could feel them.

“But I don’t have anything cold!”

“I think it’s our family, Meghan. One of our brothers. You don’t have them, so you wouldn’t know.”

Meghan nodded. “The others are coming,” she said. “Hermione stopped to tell them where you went.”

“Thanks.” Ginny accepted the smaller girl’s hand and held it tight. All she could do now was wait...

Ron pulled his head out of the fire as Harry, Neville, and Hermione arrived all at once. “Percy,” he said through a fit of coughing. “It’s Percy.” He sneezed. “Mum says his hand’s on ‘mortal peril,’ she’s going to the Ministry right away...”

“We can get a message there faster than that,” said Harry, and pulled a small metallic object from his pocket. As he flipped it open, a green flame arose from it. “Sirius Black,” he said into the flame.

Neville pulled over a chair for Ron. Ginny stared at the flame, barely feeling Hermione’s arms

around her. *This had better work...*

“Black here,” Mr. Padfoot’s voice said brusquely.

“This is Harry.”

“Harry, this isn’t a good time...”

“Percy Weasley’s in trouble,” Harry said quickly. “We don’t know what kind, but Mrs. Weasley says his hand on the clock’s on ‘mortal peril,’ and Ron and Ginny’s pendants are cold.”

A muttered curse emerged from the flame. “All right, I’ll see what I can do.” A pause. “Good thinking to get in touch with me this way. Black out.”

Harry’s Zippo chimed, and the flame vanished. “There,” Harry said, closing the lighter and putting it away. “Two messages are better than one.”

“Percy not being in trouble would be best,” said Ron, staring at the floor. “What kind of danger would *he* get into?”

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Percy stared up at the house distrustfully. *It looks as if no one’s been here for months. If Mr. Crouch is here, he must be doing everything by owl order. He wrinkled his nose. And it seems the owls have cached a meal or two and forgotten about them.*

All the more reason he needs someone to help him. He straightened his shoulders and started to ring the doorbell –

Only to have his hand stop an inch away from the pull.

What if he doesn’t want to be disturbed? What if his illness embarrasses him somehow, and he knows how to take care of himself? He’s never said that he wanted help, never hinted that I might do well to come by the house and get some personal instructions. This is ridiculous; I should be back at the office.

He turned to go, but stopped again as his original arguments returned to him. *What if he’s more ill than he thinks he is, or too proud to ask for help? He can’t possibly take offense that I’ve come to check on him...*

Oh, yes, he can, his doubts reminded him. He can most certainly take offense at one of his employees doing anything he hasn’t authorized. Look how he behaved towards his house-elf when he found her doing something against his explicit instructions, even when it was the best thing she could have done. I could lose my job just by being here.

But he’s never said not to come. And besides, something very odd is going on around here, and it is my job to root out oddities and stop them.

Percy's doubts were just about to rally after this salvo when he heard an odd rustle. He turned, and his vague feelings about "something very odd" solidified into a terrifying reality.

A twelve-foot snake was staring at him, its beady eyes bright, its tongue flicking out.

Percy fumbled behind him, found the doorknob –

It's sure to be locked –

But it wasn't, it was turning, the door was swinging open –

Snakes don't have hands, it can't get in if I shut the door –

He was inside, the door closed behind him. He was safe.

Hand pressed to his chest, panting, he turned and just stifled a yell.

A grey-haired man lay on the floor of the hall, his arm outstretched towards the door. Percy inhaled sharply, and gagged. No living person lay so unnaturally still, and no living person would remain here with such a smell –

Worse than that, the smell was coming *from* the man.

Percy groped behind him for the doorknob again – between a living snake and a dead man, he'd take the snake. He could stun the snake, or even kill it if he had to – he fumbled with his other hand for his wand, in case the snake was waiting on the other side of the door –

His hands were shaking, his palms slick with sweat. He lost his grip on his wand as he drew it out, and it clattered to the floor. Bending down to pick it up would mean getting closer to the body...

Not bending down means facing the snake without a weapon.

He compromised, dropping into an awkward squat and reaching for the wand with his fingertips. Closer, closer, just a little closer –

Movement on the winding stair in front of him caught his eye. He wasn't alone.

He dropped to the floor and snatched up his wand – a green spell passed over his head, close enough to make his hair stand on end, and blew a hole in the door behind him. "*Stupefy!*" he shrieked, and was on his feet and out the door with only one panicked glance to tell him that he'd missed, that his attacker was coming after him.

I'm going to die – I'm going to die –

The snake reared out of the garden, hissing. Percy screamed and dived away from it, landing in the remains of a flower bed. His robe snagged on a bush, and he tore at it but couldn't get loose as the snake slithered leisurely towards him –

“*Stupefy!*” shouted a new voice, a man’s, and the snake dropped where it was. “Take it off, you idiot!”

Percy pulled his arms swiftly out of their sleeves and just caught his glasses with his wand hand as the neck of his robe scraped them off his face. No sooner was he free of the fabric than a hand closed around his free one, hauled him to his feet, and he was half-running, half-being dragged away from the house – he could see a blurry outline of a man with dark hair in an Auror’s red robes –

“Hold on!” the voice ordered, and a large hand clamped both of Percy’s around the speaker’s arm. “I’m going to Apparate us out.” Percy felt the man twisting away from him and clutched tighter, his wand and his glasses leaving furrows on his fingers as everything constricted around him –

And then he was gasping for breath, hearing the splashing of running water and voices exclaiming all around him. Even without his glasses, he could tell where he was.

The Atrium, at the Ministry.

In my underwear.

Please let this be a bad dream.

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The Pride sat in a small huddle in the kitchens, Ginny sitting on the floor with Meghan in her arms and Hermione’s arms around them both, Ron opposite the girls with his hands buried in Wolf-Harry’s ruff and Neville in a chair behind him. No one spoke, no one moved, until –

“Oh!” Ginny’s hand went to her chest, and her shoulders unknotted in a rush of relief. “It’s gone,” she said thankfully, hugging Hermione and Meghan tight. “It’s not cold anymore.”

Ron sagged onto Wolf. “He’s all right,” he said into the dark fur. “He’s going to be all right...”

“Are you?” Neville asked, going to one knee. “You don’t look good.”

“I’ll be fine.” Ron sat up, turned pale green, and leaned over again. “Or not.”

“Excuse me,” Neville said to a passing house-elf. “I think we need something to eat. Nothing too fancy,” he added quickly.

The house-elf nodded and disappeared, and within a few moments four house-elves trotted up with a large silver tea tray, containing a steaming pot, six cups, and a plate of plain tea cakes. Hermione poured while Meghan passed around the cakes, giving the first one to Ron and catching his hand in hers. “You’ll be all right in a minute, Ron,” she said with certainty, offering the plate to Ginny, who took one carefully, since they were still warm. “You were so worried that you used up a lot of energy, and you came straight from rehearsal to here, so you didn’t have any to spare.”

“Yeah.” Ron took a small bite of the cake and chewed slowly, adjusting his position so that he was leaning on the chair instead of on Wolf. “I wonder what happened.”

Wolf whined, then sat up and changed back into Harry to accept a cup of tea from Hermione. “Padfoot’ll probably call and tell us,” he said, squinting into the tea. “Or your mum will. Wonder where Draco and Luna are?”

“You have to ask?” Meghan made kissy noises. “Bet they didn’t even notice when the pendants went off.”

“Or they noticed, but thought we could deal with it,” said Hermione.

“Yeah.” Ron was regaining some of his usual color. “We don’t always all have to come running when there’s a problem.”

“Fine.” Harry mock-glared at his friend. “Next time you need help, I’ll stay right where I am.”

“But have you noticed,” interjected Neville, “the pendants don’t always go off when we’re upset? Only when someone needs help. It’s like they can tell what doesn’t matter and what does.”

“They don’t always go off?” Ginny frowned a little. “When didn’t they go off?”

Neville grimaced. “When Meghan and I had a fight, they didn’t go off. I was mad, and you were too, Pearl, but nothing registered on the pendants.”

“Maybe they can tell,” said Harry. “Not about what matters, but about what other people need to get involved with. It wouldn’t have helped anything to have us all horning in on your fight; we’d start picking sides, and then we’d all be mad at each other.”

“And we can do that anytime,” said Meghan cheerily.

Harry was about to answer when his pocket chimed. He fished out the Zippophone and flipped it open. “Hello?”

“Harry, it’s Padfoot. Are Ron and Ginny with you?”

“Yes, they’re here.”

“Tell them it’s all right.” Padfoot chuckled. “Be glad Percy’s so rule-following – he left a note on his desk, saying where he was going. If he hadn’t, we might never have known what was going on in the Crouch house.”

Everyone sat up straighter or leaned in. “Is something going on in the Crouch house?” Hermione asked eagerly.

“Judging by the big hole in the front door – the kind you get when someone misses with a Killing Curse – and the bloody huge snake I stunned, yes, there’s something going on.”

“Voldemort,” Harry said with certainty.

“I’d think so, yeah. Neville – you there?”

“I’m here.”

“Your dad should be going in there right about now. He pulled duty for this round. Your mum’s escorting Percy home.”

“Thank you, sir.” Neville laid his hand over Meghan’s as she hugged him from behind. “I like knowing that.”

“I’ll tell you more when we know more. Probably through more regular channels, though, so don’t expect any more calls today. We’re likely to be busy. Black out.”

“That means, ‘you did right to tell me about this, but now I have to concentrate on taking care of it, so don’t bother me,’” Meghan translated.

“Just about.” Harry pocketed his Zippophone again. “Rehearsal’s over for today, dinner isn’t for another hour or so... anyone want to go hunting?”

“That’s a great idea,” said Hermione. “We’ve never all gone out together.”

Ginny swallowed another bite of tea cake. “Do we have to eat it?” she asked, feeling a bit queasy at the thought of freshly dead rodent.

“Only if you want to,” Ron said. “Funny thing is, in Animagus form, you usually do.”

Meghan folded her arms. “Are you trying to tell me to go away?” she demanded.

Harry knocked on his own forehead dramatically. “Yup, empty,” he said. “Sorry, Pearl, sorry, Neville. Forgot.”

“It’s all right,” Neville said. “Just because we don’t hunt doesn’t mean you shouldn’t. We can still come out with you, can’t we? If we won’t be in the way.”

“We might have to wait a little while after we get there,” said Ron. “Humans usually scare the game away. But if you sit quietly and don’t make noise, then it comes back. I guess you could come.”

“And there’s somebody I want you all to meet, anyway,” said Harry. “And she’s out in the Forest. So we can do both, go and meet her, and then hunt.”

“Who do you know out in the Forest?” Hermione asked in surprise.

Ginny grinned. “Long and scaly, Harry?” she asked.

“That’s her.” Harry locked his hands and popped his shoulders, stretching. “I did say I’d introduce her to my family. Might as well be now.”

“Long and scaly?” Neville repeated.

“Oh no.” The truth had dawned on Ron. “You can’t be serious.”

Ginny watched Harry, Hermione, and Meghan avoid each other’s eyes and repressed a giggle. “No, he can’t be,” said Hermione finally. “But he can mean it, and I think he does.”

“I do.” Harry started for the door. “Nobody’s making you come, Ron.”

“I should have run,” Ron grumbled as he shut the kitchen door behind them. “That day in the orchard, I should have just run away before I ever got to know you...”

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Well, aren’t we a good little boy and girl. Draco would be willing to bet that for the hour he and Luna had been sitting together in the tree, they’d spent less than five minutes doing anything that their parents would disapprove of.

Of course, Luna’s dad almost never disapproves of anything, and the Pack-parents are notoriously lax about that kind of thing...

Still, we’re being good. He tilted his head sideways to touch it to Luna’s, which was resting on his shoulder. *And good feels pretty nice.*

Leaves rustled behind them. He turned.

And yelled in strangled shock, nearly falling off the branch. Luna shrieked and clung to him.

The enormous snaky head confronting him withdrew a foot or two, quiet hissing coming from between the enormous fangs. Draco would have bet his broomstick that the snake was laughing at them.

Especially when he heard several more familiar laughs coming from nearby.

“Draco and Luna, sitting in a tree,” Meghan’s voice started to chant.

Ron and Harry joined in. “K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”

“Oh, shut up,” Draco snapped, grabbing the branch with both hands and hoisting himself off it backwards. “Just because the best kiss you’ve ever had is from Padfoot in dog form...”

“Ewww!” all the girls squealed in unison, as Harry went bright red and Ron and Neville howled with laughter.

“Harry, is this Sangre?” Luna said, dropping to the ground.

“Yes, this is Sangre.” Harry took Luna’s hand and led her to the basilisk, speaking in Parseltongue. “She wants to get your scent, Luna. Hold your hand out.”

Luna did, and the basilisk’s tongue whipped around her wrist twice before snaking back into the mouth.

Harry looked at Draco. “You want in or not?”

“Fine, you don’t kiss Padfoot in dog form.”

“That wasn’t what I meant, but thank you.”

“What did you mean then?”

“It was an actual question. Do you want Sangre to know your scent?”

“Why does she want to?”

“So she knows what not to eat.”

“I thought she wasn’t supposed to eat humans at all.”

“She isn’t. But we’re going to have other forms than human eventually, and if she knows your human scent she probably won’t go after your animal form. You can show her that as soon as you’re done.”

“Okay.” Draco stepped forward and held out his wrist, watching Harry hissing to the giant snake. His brother had always been puzzling to him. Harry loved playing pranks, and understood the law of get-backs as well as any Marauder’s cub, but he had an ability to forget things that Draco felt he himself lacked.

I broke his freaking wrist before Christmas, and first he covered for me, then he never said another word about it once I apologized. If someone broke my wrist, I’d be looking for ways to get back at him for months, even if he didn’t mean to do it.

I guess that’s some of the difference between us. And it’s probably good to have someone like Harry to lead – if I was alpha, I’d always be pulling the Pride down, trying to get back at people. Harry gets his get-backs if he feels he needs them, and that’s it.

“So what brings you out here?” he asked when the basilisk had taken his scent.

“Hunting.” Harry climbed onto the snake’s back and up to her head. “And snake-sliding. Watch.” He rapped twice on Sangre’s skull, and she reared up, sending him zooming down her neck and along her back.

Draco winced at his brother's landing. *Ouch.* "If that's how it ends, think I'll pass."

"That's not how it ends. Not always. You just have to be careful." Harry got up slowly. "Nothing broken. I'm fine."

"Quidditch players," Hermione muttered.

"We're not risking our necks on brooms, so we have to do it somehow," said Ron. "Harry, can I have a go?"

"Sure. Let me tell her." Harry hissed, and the snake lowered her head for Ron to climb on. "She says she likes your scent. It's very warm."

"Er, thanks." Ron braced himself as the basilisk's head shot skyward.

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Percy buttoned his fresh robes with, he was pleased to note, hands that had mostly stopped shaking. He'd saved his glasses, he'd saved his wand, and he was alive.

I owe Sirius Black my life.

That pleased him less. He hoped it was a reaction to the owing of the life, rather than to whom it was owed. He'd been happy that Ron and Ginny had found friends in their new neighbors, but he had never been close with those neighbors himself, and deep inside him lurked the angry and hurt fifteen-year-old whose pet rat they had callously stolen.

No matter how often I remind myself of who and what Scabbers really was, I cannot escape who and what he was to me. Percy fussed with his hair, making sure the part lay just down the center. *I know that he never cared about me, that I was only his hiding place and his meal ticket, and that I would have lost him anyway, to Ron in the fall. It makes no sense that it still hurts me after all this time.*

He was beginning to suspect that emotions rarely made sense.

And I am being waited for downstairs, so there is no reason to stay here any longer.

An Auror and two MLE personnel sat at the Weasleys' kitchen table, Winky carrying around the tea service. Mum was doing something at the sink, but turned as she heard him on the stairs. "There you are," she said, coming over to him. Percy was afraid she'd try to straighten his collar or something equally embarrassing, but all she did was look up at him with her eyes very bright, then embrace him quickly and hurry out of the room.

"Have a seat, Mr. Weasley," said the Auror, indicating a chair. He was tall and black and bald and wore a gold earring in one ear. By comparison, the two wizards from MLE were identical, except that one had slightly darker hair than the other, who was scowling.

“I’m Kingsley Shacklebolt,” the Auror went on, offering his hand. “Michael Hudson...” Dark-Hair nodded. “...and Endymion Monroe.” Scowler inclined his head sullenly.

“You’re in no trouble,” Shacklebolt added, accepting a teacup from Winky. “We don’t generally prosecute people who tip us off to trouble spots the way you did. So I’d like you to tell us, in your own words as far as possible, what you did and what you saw when you went to Barty Crouch’s house.”

Percy took his own teacup from Winky’s tray and gave her an absent nod. “I was starting to be concerned,” he began, “because of Mr. Crouch’s prolonged absence, and because his handwriting seemed shakier and less sure than it had been...”

He covered arriving at the house, being unsure whether or not to enter, being surprised by the snake – “Twelve feet?” said Hudson. “You’re sure?”

“Not positive,” Percy admitted, “but it was quite a bit longer than I am tall.”

“Couldn’t be native, then,” muttered Monroe. “Go on, Weasley, go on.”

“I wasn’t thinking about whether or not it would be wrong to enter the house,” Percy admitted. “I just wanted to be away from the snake. So I tried the doorknob, and it was unlocked. The door opened, and I went in. But when I turned around, I saw...” He swallowed. “I saw a body.”

“A body?” repeated Shacklebolt, sitting up straighter. “What kind of body?”

“A dead body.”

“Are you trying to be funny, Weasley?” snapped Monroe.

“No, sir,” Percy said quickly.

“Man or woman?” Shacklebolt put in.

“A man, sir. He looked as if he’d fallen reaching for the door.”

“Did you see his face?” asked Hudson.

“No, but I think I know who he was.” It had come to him while he was sitting at the kitchen table in shock, letting his mother hold him for the first time in years. He didn’t like it, but if it was true, someone else had to know. “I think he was Mr. Crouch.”

“Just because you were in Crouch’s house?” Monroe peered at him. “Or do you have something else?”

“I could be wrong, sir. But he had grey hair. It was a little longer than Mr. Crouch’s used to be, but it’s been a few months since I’ve seen him. And his robes were dirty, but they looked expensive.” Percy tightened his grip on his mug. “I think whoever was in the house was holding

him, forcing him to write instructions as if nothing was wrong, and they killed him when he tried to get away.”

“Why do you think there was anyone else in the house?” Hudson asked.

“Because someone shot at me, sir. I was trying to get back out, I dropped my wand, and while I was picking it up a spell went over my head. It was green, and it left a large hole in the door behind me. I tried to shoot back, but I missed.” He hated admitting that, but he couldn’t have them thinking something untrue about him. “I ran out the door, tried to get away from the snake, and got caught in a bush. Auror Black arrived then and helped me.”

“And brought you back to the Ministry.” Shacklebolt’s voice was devoid of laughter, for which Percy was grateful. “Did you happen to see who was shooting at you?”

“Yes, sir, I think I did.” This was the impossible part, the part that was going to get him fired, but he never lied and he wasn’t going to start now. “I think I saw... I think I saw Headmaster Karkaroff.”

The older wizards looked at one another. Percy sneaked a look under the guise of drinking some tea. Skepticism was plain on Monroe’s face, Hudson just looked confused, but Shacklebolt... Shacklebolt was clearly thinking hard. As Percy watched, the Auror’s lips moved, forming Karkaroff’s name.

A whoosh of green flames in the kitchen fireplace, and Auror Mr. Longbottom’s head was there. “Kingsley?” he called.

“Here, Frank.” Shacklebolt came around the table to kneel in front of the fire. “What do you have?”

The two voices dropped too low for Percy to hear. He rested his teacup on the table and stared into it. *I’ll be fired*, he thought miserably. *I’ll be fired for falsely accusing an esteemed guest, for spreading malicious rumors, for taking too much on myself...*

“You’re sure?” Shacklebolt said sharply.

“Positive. You care to come through and identify him yourself?”

“No, I take your word for it. Weasley’ll be glad to hear it. Anything else I should know?”

“Not at the moment. We’ll keep you informed.”

“Do that.” Shacklebolt stood up as the other Auror’s head disappeared. “I have some good news for you, Weasley,” he said. “It seems Barty Crouch isn’t dead after all.”

Percy stared at the Auror. “Sir?”

“They found him in one of the rooms upstairs. He’d been held the way you said, under Imperius

mostly, but under lock and key as well after he started fighting it. No one else in the house, dead or alive, though signs of two or three other people's occupancy for the last few months. And also no snake. They must have taken it with them when they left."

Percy barely heard most of this. He was too busy reexamining his life and finding it good.

There ought to be a reward. If not an official one, then Mr. Crouch will certainly not overlook me. I have kept the department running as per his instructions – which I am sure were good, even if he was forced to write them – and it was only by my intervention that he was freed.

"You were wrong about Crouch, Weasley," said Monroe, breaking into Percy's thoughts. "Think you could have been wrong about Karkaroff too?"

"I think so, sir." *I was unnerved, saw an unfamiliar face, and my mind made it familiar.* He nodded in satisfaction. It made sense.

Life was very good for Percy Weasley at this precise moment.

Near-nudity in the Ministry notwithstanding.

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"Full dress, schmull dress," Harry grumbled, scratching the side of his face. "At least magical makeup doesn't smear."

"Places!" Letha's voice echoed around the backstage area. "The call is places!"

"Places, thank you," Harry called back, one part of a discordant chorus. "You ready for this?" he asked the two people beside him.

"Ready as I'll ever be." Ginny was pale under her makeup. Hermione nodded tightly without speaking.

Harry put a hand on both their shoulders. "You'll do great," he said. "You've sounded great in every rehearsal, you know the show forward and backward, you'll do fine."

Both girls smiled back at him, and Hermione dipped a brief bow, letting Harry's hand slide up to the back of her neck. A moment later, Ginny did the same.

"Scuse me," said Dursley, emerging from the shadows behind them. Harry snatched his hand away from Ginny's neck. "Have to lower the first backdrop. They called places, you know."

"We know," said Ginny coldly. "Break a leg, Harry."

"You too, Gin, Neenie."

Hermione bared her teeth briefly before moving out on stage to her position opposite Ginny's.

Harry moved back a few steps and watched Dursley waving his wand in lazy swirls to bring the weighted edge of the painted backdrop down from the pipe on which it hung. Something about the other boy made him uneasy.

He's my cousin, but I hardly know him. And I don't think I want to. Everything I hear makes me like him less. He used to be one of Nott's bully boys, but now he's in business for himself, and I've seen him walking around and laughing with Crabbe and Goyle. And there was that thing last year, where Wormtail and Malfoy both used his face to get onto the grounds...

Harry made up his mind to watch Dursley very carefully during the final rehearsals and the show. After all, on the stage, anything could happen.

Then the music began, and Harry forgot Dursley for the moment in the pleasure of hearing his sister and his friend sing.

They look good, too. Pink suits Hermione, as much as she hates it, and blue is just right for Ginny. She wore blue to the Yule Ball, too...

The music segued from “You Are What You Feel” into “Jacob and Sons,” and Harry nipped out of the way as Jacob, his twelve sons, and the chorus surged into the wings.

And we are off.

Jacob presented his favorite son Joseph with a fabulous coat of many colors, making Joseph's eleven brothers insanely jealous. To add to the troubles, Joseph had fantastic dreams, featuring sheaves of corn, stars and moons, all bowing down to him.

Loves to dress up, dreams of interesting things... typecasting the Fox much?

Joseph's brothers decided the only proper way to deal with such a pest was to get rid of him. At first, they thought they'd simply throw him into a pit and let him starve, but then a bunch of Ishmaelites – dressed in this production as sightseeing American Muggles – came along, and the brothers decided that selling Joseph into slavery would be more profitable.

Maybe we're 'perpetuating stereotypes,' but it's funny...

The brothers covered Joseph's coat with goat blood, then presented it to their father as evidence that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

Ron actually looks good in a cowboy hat. And Fred and George are having far too much fun with those dance steps.

The song over, the brothers scattered, and Dursley and his black-robed partner on the other side of the stage levitated down a new backdrop, showing pyramids and a sphinx. The Chorus massed onstage; Krum brushed by Harry's spot without looking around; Luna followed but wiggled her fingers in Harry's direction.

“Room for one more?” murmured a voice beside him.

“Sure, Ron, c’mon in.” Harry moved over. “You can see everything from here.”

“Yeah.” Ron was leaning forward to watch as Hermione circled Krum, tossing sung lines at him and letting him lob them back. Harry heard an odd grinding sound and almost peered around the side of the curtain to see what the drummer (a third year Hufflepuff) was doing, then realized the noise was coming from beside him.

“What’s wrong with you?”

Ron pointed stiffly at the stage, where Hermione was standing beside Krum, both watching Luna dance. “Her... him... them.”

“It’s a show. They have to do it.”

“They don’t have to be standing that close.”

“Yes, they do. It’s in the blocking.”

“Damn it, Harry, would you stop being reasonable? I’m trying to get pissed off here, and you’re not helping!”

Harry had to press Pharaoh’s golden cape up to his mouth to keep himself from laughing. Ron leaned back against one of the crates that framed their hiding place and grinned reluctantly. “I know,” he said, peering back out onto the stage, where Luna, in her role as the wife of Joseph’s master Potiphar, was attempting to seduce Joseph. “It’s just... Harry, aren’t you even a little worried about Hermione getting too close to Krum?”

“Why would I worry?”

“You know Durmstrang’s reputation. They actually study the Dark Arts there, not just Defense. And didn’t Karkaroff use to be a Death Eater?”

“He said he was sorry,” said Harry. “Named names to the Ministry. Mind, this was *after* he’d been caught and spent a while in Azkaban.”

Ron’s snort said more than words.

“Yeah, I know. But I’m sure the Ministry’s watching him anyway. Just in case.”

“Percy said he thought he’d seen him at Crouch’s house.” Percy’s adventure had become common knowledge by the afternoon of the day after he’d had it, helped along by an interview in the *Daily Prophet* with both him and Mr. Crouch. “But Crouch said he’d never recognized anyone who was holding him.”

“Course, he also said they wore masks.” Potiphar had just discovered his wife and Joseph in a

compromising position. Being in love with his wife, he immediately assumed the fault was Joseph's and had his slave hauled off to prison. "Ssh, I want to hear this."

A full dress rehearsal meant that everything was exactly as it would be for a performance – costumes and makeup, sets and props, lighting, music. It was the first time Harry had really appreciated how each of those elements worked together. He'd heard "Close Every Door" dozens if not hundreds of times, heard Draco sing it in rehearsal at least ten, and this was still giving him the shivers.

Movement to one side caught his ear. He leaned out to have a look, then quickly pulled his head back in.

Talk about a mood-breaker.

Cedric and Cho, as ordered, were in the wings. One or both of them had decided on a better way to pass the time than watching the action onstage.

Against his better judgment, Harry edged out for another look. *God, she's gorgeous in that outfit.* Cho's butler costume was black and white and gold, skintight except for a demure apron in front. She fit perfectly into Cedric's arms, though his tall baker's hat kept threatening to fall onto her head...

Stop watching them, he remembered saying to Ron at the Yule Ball about Hermione and Krum. *You'll only drive yourself crazy.*

A tiny trickle of an idea began inside Harry's mind, but the Chorus burst into song at that precise moment and he lost it.

It'll come back eventually.

Besides, the act was almost over, and in Act Two came his big number. Harry smiled. If he could pull this off, Cho might just be impressed with him.

Remember what Letha said. If you think you look stupid, then you do. But if you think that you look great, that you're giving it all you have, then that makes it good.

Harry sighed, watching Joseph interpret the Butler's dream. *I don't know what to think about Letha anymore. Or any of the Pack-parents, really. If Letha could make a mistake that big, so could any of them.*

Can I trust them anymore?

Joseph finished interpreting the Baker's dream and added his disclaimer, and the Chorus went into the big final dance. It swirled in colorful spirals, the occasional misstep notwithstanding, and Harry let it mesmerize him.

Can you trust Draco? murmured a voice in the back of his head.

Of course I can trust Draco. Harry looked out on stage, locating his brother easily at the center of the dance. *He's my brother, I'd trust him with my life.*

Even after he Stunned you and locked you in a closet?

Oh, come on. He was scared, he made a mistake. He doesn't make a habit of it. I still trust him.

And what about you? Can you trust yourself?

Harry felt his eyebrows ascend. *Well, I think I can.*

After all the stupid stuff you've done? The voice started with things Harry barely remembered and worked up through telling Danger's secret in Defense, fighting with Hermione just before she got Petrified...

Harry closed his eyes and exhaled through his teeth. *Shut up. Yes, I've done stupid things, but now I hope I know better, and I won't do them anymore.*

The voice took on triumphant shadings. *So why do you feel you can't trust Letha, then? She didn't do anything worse than either you or Draco. She should have known better, but she didn't. So now she will. Do you think she'll ever give anyone a potion lightly again?*

Well, no.

There, see? It happened, it's over. She's learned what she needed to learn. And no permanent harm was done. Not if you use what you know, and what you have available to you. A colorful image swirled on the inside of Harry's eyelids – not the dance on stage, which was just ending, but the tie-dye cover of the program for *Joseph*, in which families and friends could place messages for their actors...

Harry's eyes shot open as the final button of the song played and the dancers struck their tableau. "Ron," he said urgently over the applause from the orchestra and crew. "Ron, is Charlie coming to the show?"

"Yeah, he should be. Why?"

"Because I think I know something we can do to fix what went wrong."

"Fifteen minutes to Act Two!" Professor Sprout bellowed from the audience.

"Fifteen minutes, thank you!" Harry and Ron shouted back.

"I'll find Meghan and Neville and Luna," Harry went on. "You get Draco and Hermione and Ginny. Meet me at the back of the Hall in two minutes."

"Right."

Harry watched Ron hurrying towards the panting, laughing dancers for a moment, then dashed farther backstage. They had a wedding to salvage.

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Harry took the stage at the opening of Act Two in high good humor. Operation Changing Dragon was off to a smooth start. Neville knew where the proofs for the programs were being kept, Draco had volunteered to write to one of the persons involved, Ron and Ginny would tell the other what was in the wind. Everyone had volunteered a Sickie or two to cover the cost, though Harry thought they might well end up reimbursed if they pulled it off.

And that's assuming they don't make up on their own before the show. It's been a month.

But Letha was still being quiet and as close to meek as she ever got, and Ron and Ginny reported that a certain room at the Burrow was still occupied, meaning its occupant was allowing the other tenant of his flat her privacy...

Well, we'll just see about that.

The music began. Harry straightened his back and looked regal.

I am the King. Worship me.

Worship was uncomfortably close to what he was seeing in some of the younger girls' eyes as they went through the choreographed bowing. Part of him wanted to run away and hide, but he growled at that part and clamped his hand around its throat.

I am the boss here. Not you. I will not be ruled by fear.

The fear submitted. Harry remained where he was through the song explaining Pharaoh's status and power, and into the beginning of the one about Pharaoh's strange nightmares. Cho entered and, at Hermione's prompting, sang her lines directly to Harry, about the man she'd known in jail who had interpreted dreams. Harry allowed himself a quarter-turn to regard her with a proper majesty.

Remember, she's your servant. Kings don't drool over servants. Kings can appreciate servants, but not drool over them.

Ginny gave Harry his prompt, and he ordered that Joseph be fetched. Two of the guards at the side of the stage hurried off and brought Draco in, his hands held together by a thin length of chain. Joseph asked what he could do for the mighty Pharaoh, and the beat of the music changed in response.

Here we go.

Harry leapt down from his platform, feeling Wolf's easy grace in his human movements. He sang, with the entire Chorus backing him up, about his dream – he'd been walking along the Nile

River, when he'd seen seven fat cows and seven skinny cows. The seven skinny cows had eaten the fat ones, but hadn't got any fatter themselves.

Don't listen to the Chorus, he reminded himself. *Don't listen to the Chorus*. The one time he had, the sheer silliness of their scat lyrics had made him crack up in the middle of the song. *And this is your big moment. The only one you get. Make the most of it.*

Pharaoh danced backwards up the stairs of his platform, appealing directly to Joseph; kings weren't stupid, but he didn't understand the dream at all. "You gotta help me out, I'm begging of you," Harry sang, dragging out the last word, turning it into almost a vocal howl. The surprise in Draco's eyes was gratifying.

I do believe he likes it –

"Harry, look out!" Draco screamed, pointing upwards.

Harry's head jerked back. Something very large was falling towards him. He dived forward, forcing himself to go limp in anticipation of the impact with the stage –

Girls screamed – a horrible crash sounded –

Why don't I hurt?

He opened his eyes. He was hanging about two inches from the stage floor, held there by – he looked up – Letha's wand. She was standing up in the audience, her face gray even in the dim light.

Draco was beside him, offering a hand. Harry took it and got his feet under him, and Letha ended the spell, letting him drop the last two inches. "Thanks," he said.

"You're welcome." Draco's voice was cool in the way that meant he was madder than a caged pixie. "I guess someone thought we were doing *Phantom* instead of *Joseph*."

Harry turned. The Canaan backdrop, coiled on the pipe from which it usually hung, was lying across the platform he'd been standing on a moment before. "Was I that bad?"

"I don't think so. Now if you'd been singing Carlotta..."

Harry smacked him in the shoulder.

"Dursley!" shouted Professor Sprout. "Dursley, you're in charge of backdrops – where are you?"

"Coming!" Dursley sauntered out onto stage. "What's – holy shite."

"Where were you?" Letha demanded.

"Boys' toilet." Dursley stared at the fallen backdrop, looking shaken. "That shouldn't have

happened.”

“No, it shouldn’t have.” Professor Sprout was on stage now, moving through the Chorus to investigate. She knelt beside the backdrop, then pursed her lips. “Clean cut most of the way,” she said, holding up one of the cables that had held up the backdrop and its pipe. “Then left to fray and come apart on its own time. Anyone could have been hit.”

Hermione was beside Harry now, her shoulder against his, and Meghan was peering out from the wings, her desire to be with him in tension with her stage training never to come into sight unless she was supposed to be onstage. Harry waved her on, and she came at a run, Ron and Neville and Luna on her heels.

“All right, that’s enough of that,” said Professor Sprout, turning away from her inspection of the backdrop. “Everyone take ten. Get a drink, have some Voice-Restore, and calm yourselves down. We’ll take Act Two from the top in ten minutes, with extra Holding Charms on the backdrops.”

Letha leapt onto the stage and was at Harry’s side. “You’re all right?”

“Fine,” said Harry through suddenly chattering teeth. “Except I’m cold.”

“Delayed reaction,” Letha murmured. “Oh, Harry...” She pulled him into a tight hug. “I’m sorry I didn’t catch it, I’m so sorry.”

“I’d rather you catch me.” Harry had his eyes shut, letting Letha’s warmth flow into him, her clean safe mother scent wash away the fear smell. “And you did, so nobody got hurt, not even bruised from hitting the stage too hard.”

More warmth behind and beside him was Meghan, the presence to his left was Draco, Hermione was on his right now, the rest of the Pride ringed them, watching to see that no one bothered them. The fear of a few moments ago, the doubt of twenty minutes past, the unease of the month since Letha’s disclosure, were all revealed for what they were – little things, petty troubles, not worth worrying about.

For what trouble could threaten a united Pack and Pride?

Harry opened his eyes and smiled at his Pack-mother. “Thanks,” he said, and let it mean everything it should.

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Nymphadora Tonks fidgeted in her seat. She didn’t know why she was here.

Yes, you do. Draco sent you a free ticket and a copy of the cast list. You had to come.

So she knew why she was here. She still didn’t know why she’d come so Merlin-blasted *early*. Granted, she wasn’t alone – the entrance hall had been filled with excited witches and wizards

before the doors had opened a minute or two ago and the student ushers had started taking tickets and showing people to seats – but there were still twenty-five minutes to kill until the performance started.

I suppose that's what this thing is for. She looked dubiously at the brightly-colored program. *Probably full of sappy messages for the actors. "We're so proud of you, darling – now, are you fourth from the left or fourth from the right?" Gah.*

She flipped the cover open and started reading. As she had suspected, the adverts were nauseating. She took to flipping the pages at the rate of one a second, and she was three pages past a certain one when it registered in her mind.

That was my name.

She hastily flipped back. *No, no, no, no... where did it go? I know I saw it, where is it?*

Five minutes of frenzied searching brought her no closer. She was almost ready to give up when she turned a page over and saw it, sitting clear and plain on page fourteen, where it must have been all the time.

Tonks –

Love Potions only last two months, but my love for you lasts forever.

I'm in seat G12. Please at least come over to say hello.

– Charlie

Tonks stared at the message, her heart suddenly pounding a totally different rhythm than that of the boy testing his drums.

Love Potions only last two months?

Letha had given her the potion in December. If the only reason she loved Charlie was the potion, she should have stopped caring in late February.

But it was April, and I was bringing around invitations, I was going to get my dress fitted, I was choosing people to be in the wedding party...

She was on her feet, peering around. Absently, she sharpened her eyesight until she could read the labels on the red velvet seats someone had conjured in for the audience.

There's row G. Seat 1, 2, 3... huh. Nobody in 12. Nobody in 11 or 13, either, and no programs. She smiled. *Guess they're not here yet.*

Tucking her precious program into her pocket, she started to sidle out of her row, changing her face as she went.

When Charlie arrived, he'd already be in his seat.

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A silver-grey eye peering through the crack in the curtains withdrew, and small feet pattered gleefully across the boards of the stage.

Operation Changing Dragon was a success.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 48: Privacy and Philosophy (Year 4)

Chapter 48: Privacy and Philosophy

“Clean up and get into street clothes!” Aletha shouted after the last departing actors. “Cast party in classroom twelve in fifteen minutes!”

She turned around and jerked violently, nearly banging her shoulder into the wall of the narrow hallway. “Molly,” she said inanely.

Molly Weasley had her hands on her hips in a pose Aletha was familiar with, though she was more used to it being directed towards one of her cubs or Molly’s own children. “If I had a Knut for every time your family has interfered with mine,” she said, “I would be the richest woman in England. It’s moved beyond odd into ridiculous.”

“I know.” Silently, Aletha cursed herself. There was more to say, much more, but none of it would come to the surface of her mind.

Molly’s hands sketched circles in the air. “Quite apart from what you’ve taught Ron and Ginny, about which I’ll say nothing, since I did agree to it, you’ve interfered with Charlie’s romance – I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same, Tonks has kept him hanging quite long enough, but I hope I’d have had enough brains to keep it under my hat if I had – but then Sirius saved Percy’s life...” She shook her head. “I’ve had enough. I have had enough.”

“Have you?” Aletha wasn’t sure if she should feel hopeful or frightened, and her insides were compromising by feeling both at once.

“Yes. Quite enough. From now on, I refuse to quarrel with any of you, because there’s simply no way I can keep it up.” Molly laughed aloud. “Oh, Letha, dear, you should see your face! You thought I was here to shout and scold at you, didn’t you?”

Aletha leaned against the wall, letting out a long-held breath. “I don’t think I can answer that question without getting myself into more trouble,” she said shakily.

“Then don’t.” Molly pulled Aletha upright and hugged her. “You’ve not been having an easy time of it, have you? Yes, I’ve talked to Danger, and you needn’t make that face, either. You knew she was coming for tea.”

“Yes, but I had no idea I was the topic of conversation.” Aletha shook her head, smiling ruefully. “Though I suppose I should have known.”

“Yes, you should. And the wedding’s only been put off a few months–”

“I’m sorry?”

“Oh, you didn’t know – I am sorry, I should have told you already, but yes, it’s all back on and everything’s all right again – that’s why I came to find you, to tell you the children’s plan worked.”

“They had a plan.” Aletha sighed. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Because you know them, and more importantly, you raised them. And you raised them to be planners and plotters, don’t act as if you didn’t.” Molly peered down the hall as several young male voices were raised in song. “I’ve seen my four, of course, told them how well they did, and I’m sure you’ve seen yours. Must you go to the party, or will they be all right unsupervised?”

Aletha scratched her elbow indecisively. “They might do stupid things without someone there,” she said. “But on the other hand, they have parties just as crazy after every Quidditch match, and the worst that ever happens is the house-elves have a mess to clean up. Of course, this is an inter-House undertaking, so there might be some fights...”

“Where you have boys, you’ll always have fights. Girls too, come to think of it.”

Aletha frowned at Molly. “I have the feeling I’m being talked into something.”

“Tonks did want to have a word with you,” Molly admitted. “And Sirius said... now, let me get this right... ‘Hogwarts students don’t need any help partying. If she’s not out here in ten minutes I’m coming back there and carrying her home, whether she likes it or not.’”

Aletha laughed. “Yes, that sounds like Sirius.”

“He also said to tell you it was a lovely show. I thought so myself.”

“Thank you.” Aletha looked down the now-quiet hall. “Excuse me a moment? I should tell someone I’m not stopping, so they don’t expect me.”

“Of course.”

Walking towards the girls’ dressing room, Aletha took a deep breath and let it slowly out, feeling the double weight of show and guilt sliding off her. *No permanent harm done. I was a fool, and now it’s over.*

And the show went brilliantly.

But I still want to know who cut those cables at dress rehearsal.

xXxXx

“All right, here’s one for you,” said Harry, picking a Chocolate Frog out of the pile in the center of the circle of Gryffindor boys. “What is it that mine is longer than Draco’s, Ron’s and the twins’ are all exactly the same, and Neville’s is longer than anybody’s?”

“Are bloody not,” Ron said hotly.

“Is this going to require getbacks?” Draco inquired.

“What about me?” asked Lee Jordan.

Harry pointed at the three boys in turn with a hind leg of Frog. “Are so, no it’s not, same as me.”

“Is this a trick question?” George asked.

“No, not at all.”

“What about you and us?” said Fred.

“Mine is shorter, but not by much. Neville’s is far and away the longest.”

“I think you’re embarrassing him,” said Lee, looking across the circle at a crescent of brown hair and red face mostly hidden by a pair of hands.

“Shouldn’t be. It’s not like it’s anything secret. Meghan could tell you the same.”

Neville lifted his head long enough to glare at Harry. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Harry shrugged innocently. “You all have dirty minds, you know.”

Draco snapped his fingers. “Got it,” he said. “This is the one Padfoot taught us when we were nine, isn’t it?”

Harry swallowed his mouthful of chocolate. “I was wondering why it was taking you so long.”

“Give the rest of us a hint, why don’t you,” said Ron.

“Five,” said Draco, pointing to himself. “Six.” Harry. “Seven all around.” Ron and the twins. “Ten.” Neville.

“What’s that, a rating?” said Fred.

Draco shuddered artistically. “Hardly. It’s a simple fact.”

Neville looked up again. “There are ten letters in my last name,” he said slowly. “And six in Harry’s and Lee’s, and five in Draco’s...”

All the boys groaned. Ron crushed his handful of crisps and dumped the crumbs on Harry’s head. Harry wiped his chocolaty hand on Ron’s face, making it possible for George to drop three ice cubes down Harry’s back. Draco flung a handful of Every Flavor Beans into George’s face, then had to defend himself from Fred’s counterattack with his glass of punch, leaving himself open to Lee’s Pumpkin Pasty offensive. Neville moved back a few feet to watch.

xXxXx

Hermione shook her head in resignation, watching the tussle. “Boys,” she said wearily. “Impossible to housetrain.”

“And the only really good taming method is illegal,” Ginny agreed.

“The Imperius Curse isn’t the only way to tame a boy,” said Luna. “You just have to get him to want what you have more than he wants what he usually does. It’s not impossible.”

“But first you have to get him to want what you have at all,” Ginny muttered.

“Harry will come around, Ginny,” said Luna with certainty.

Ginny threw her hands into the air. “Does the entire world know except him?”

“No, just us,” said Meghan. “Do you want us to help you, or do you want to wait a little longer?”

Four heads swiveled back towards the boys, Harry now flat on his back and pinned by the combined weight of Ron and George, Draco twisting Fred’s ear while Lee hauled him off.

“I think I’ll wait,” Ginny said.

“Excuse me.”

All four girls spun in their chairs. A dark-haired Ravenclaw boy was standing beside them. “You’re Ginny Weasley, aren’t you?” he said. “You were the Narrator.” He Summoned a chair from the far wall and sat down. “I thought you did really well. Especially the song about the Pharaoh in the second act.”

“Thank you,” said Ginny. “And you are...”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Michael Corner.” He shook Ginny’s hand. “I’m a fourth year. And you’re Hermione Granger-Lupin,” he said, turning to Hermione. “You were the other Narrator. You’re always top of every class.”

“Not always,” Hermione protested, but she could feel a blush starting under her cheekbones.

“Ven not, Herm-own-ninny?” asked Viktor, coming up behind Corner, who jumped. “Viktor Krum,” he introduced himself, holding out a thick hand. “Potiphar.”

“Michael Corner. Er, just Chorus.”

Viktor shrugged. “It is still a part. There vill be music soon, Herm-own-ninny,” he said to Hermione. “I came to see if you would like to dance.”

Hermione cast one more look towards the boys. Harry had just head-butted Ron in the stomach.

“Of course I’d like to dance,” she said.

“And you?” Corner asked Ginny. “Only if you want, of course. I mean, I’d be honored. I mean...”

Ginny flicked the first two fingers of her right hand against the index finger of her left. “Yes, I’ll dance with you,” she said, letting Corner help her up.

Hermione hid a smile. Ginny’s sign, loosely translated, had been, *Tripping over his own feet, this one.*

“I’ll go get someone to dance with,” said Luna.

“I’ll help,” said Meghan. Hand in hand, they advanced on the tussling boys.

Hermione accepted Viktor’s hand as Celestina Warbeck’s “Don’t Need a Potion (For Your Love)” began to play. Years of drills kept her eyes on her partner, kept her feet moving in the dance steps, kept her smiling and listening with half an ear, but couldn’t banish the vague wish that the hand clasping hers and the one on her waist were thinner, longer-fingered, maybe with a few freckles dotting them...

Stop that.

Red hair caught her eye, and Fred and George danced gracefully by, Fred leading. Hermione giggled. Viktor turned to see what had caught her eye, and Hermione heard his slow chuckle as the twins reached their destination, the three Gryffindor Chasers. Fred twirled George out, and both boys bowed deeply to the girls, extending their hands to Angelina and Alicia at precisely the same moment. Lee Jordan had worked his way around the room to join them, and now held out his hand to Katie Bell.

“Soon many people will be dancing,” Viktor said, leaning close to her ear as he led her through the dance. “Perhaps we could... slip away. To be alone.”

Hermione’s heartbeat resounded in her ears like a thousand drums, reminding her again of Ron, and infuriatingly, the turn of the dance brought her around to where she could see him. He was glowering at her and Viktor.

Maybe next time he’ll think to leave his silly old fight.

“Yes,” she said, realizing Viktor was waiting for an answer. “Yes, of course.”

And you can put that in your cauldron and brew it, Mr. Ronald Weasley.

xXxXx

Harry leaned against the wall, trying to look casual without making it obvious to everyone that he was looking casual. Luna had got Neville to dance with her, and Meghan had cajoled her friend

Natalie into accepting Draco's invitation, leaving Meghan free to dance with Graham Pritchard. Ron was getting more punch, or so he said. Harry suspected he was using the snack table as a convenient excuse to glare at Hermione and Krum from close range.

Not my problem. Ron's a big boy now; if he doesn't know how to get Hermione to dance with him, he'll have to learn on his own.

After all, Harry knew how to get a girl to dance with him. At least, he hoped he did.

Because if I don't, I'm going to look like the world's biggest idiot.

The music ended. Harry looked for the telltale brown and black close to each other, and spotted them only a quarter of the way around the floor.

Here goes.

He plunged into the crowd, passing Lavender Brown and the Patil twins headed for the snacks, Fred, George, and Lee trading partners, Meghan and Pritchard both laughing, and then he was there. "Hello, Cedric," he said. "Hello, Cho."

"Harry!" Cedric turned with an open smile on his face. "You were amazing – did you hear them clapping for you?"

"You weren't too bad yourself," Harry said. "You too," he added with an awkward nod to Cho. "But I wanted to ask... I mean, I was wondering..." He took a deep breath and was reassured – their scents held curiosity but no contempt. "Cho, could I dance with you?"

"I'd love to," Cho said immediately. "If you don't mind, Cedric."

"Be my guest." Cedric released her hand and stepped back. "I feel like I should ask for a security deposit."

"I'll bring her back in good condition," Harry joked.

"I beg your pardon!" Cho had her hands on her hips. "I am not your broomstick, either of you!" But she couldn't keep a straight face, and in a moment all three of them were laughing.

She's laughing at my joke. I made her laugh. And she's going to dance with me. Harry's ears were buzzing, and he was grateful for the months of rehearsals, when he'd had to stay calm no matter how he felt, because if left to his own devices at this moment he would be running around the room screaming for joy.

A slow, languorous beat filled the room as Harry placed his hand on Cho's waist. "Oh, it's 'Charmed By You,'" Cho said happily. "By the Warbling Warlock. I love his singing."

Some of the buzz in Harry's ears dissipated. He wished it hadn't. He couldn't stand the Warbling Warlock. Summers at the Den were often punctuated with fights between Harry and Meghan

about retuning the wireless when the man came on.

He'd sound all right if he just didn't pretend he was a woman. The Warlock's voice was naturally deep, but he threw it up high and sang in a screechy alto that hurt Harry's ears even in human form. Wolf had been known to howl to try to block the noise.

How can she like him?

Harry shrugged it off. Everyone had some things they liked that other people didn't. Cho probably wouldn't care for hunting in the Forest and eating what one caught, either naturally or turning back to human and lighting a campfire to cook it.

I wonder what sort of animal she'd be?

He elided the usual disgust he felt listening to the Warlock by considering this, and by enjoying Cho's spicy-cool scent, the feel of her soft hand in his, the little smile on her face when he sneaked looks at her. Distantly, he noticed Ginny dancing for the second time with a dark-haired Ravenclaw, Hermione leaving the room with Krum, Cedric offering his hand to Fleur, but none of it mattered.

He was dancing with Cho Chang. The rest of the world could bugger off.

xXxXx

"I believe I haff had more fun in this show than in any other part of the tournament," Viktor told Hermione as they stood together on a balcony on the fourth floor. "But then the tournament vos not made for fun. It vos made as a test. A show is no danger to anyvon – excepting, of course, ven the backdrop fell."

Hermione shivered, though the evening was warm and the waning moon was bright. "Yes, wasn't that awful? But you weren't on stage for it, were you?"

"No, but I vos votching, close by. It must haff been terrible for you, my Herm-own-ninny – no, my *Hermione* ." He pronounced her name carefully correct, sending chills through her again. "I would not sound foolish to you, ven you haff been so kind, to tell me many stories of your life and your growing up, and to listen to my stories in return."

"You could never sound foolish to me," said Hermione dizzily, wondering what had been in the punch to make her head spin like this. "And I was very interested in your stories. I never realized you lived so close to Durmstrang, or that your father was such good friends with Headmaster Karkaroff."

Viktor exhaled quickly, an impatient sound. "Pah – vot do I care for Karkaroff or Durmstrang tonight? Tomorrow I must care, for tomorrow they vill announce the points from our performing, and soon ve vill know the third task. Then, then I must care for Durmstrang. But tonight... tonight, my Hermione, tonight I care for me. And for you."

His arm went around her shoulders; his hand gently turned her face towards his. He was leaning towards her, his face shadow-dark except for his bright, intense eyes. “The daughter of a verevolf... how right that you are most beautiful in the moonlight...”

xXxXx

Harry turned, leading Cho, and missed a step altogether in amazement. Ron was dancing with Lavender Brown and Parvati and Padma Patil.

All at the same time.

“Leave some girls for the rest of us, mate!” Lee called over the laughter.

“Get your own,” Ron yelled back.

“Has he given up on Hermione, then?” Cho asked as Harry resumed dancing.

“Who, Ron?” Harry stared at her. “Ron and Hermione?”

“He’s always staring at her. I thought everyone knew.”

“They’re just friends. We’ve known each other since we were kids.”

Cho shrugged. “If you say so. She seems very interested in Viktor Krum, anyway. First the Yule Ball, now tonight.”

Harry’s irrational desire to ask Cho what business it was of hers evaporated as Cho looked straight at him. “Harry, can I ask you something?”

Harry took a deep breath to be sure of his voice. “Of course.”

“Did you really think I did well?” Her dark eyes were fixed on his anxiously.

“You were great,” Harry said, and meant it. Cho had looked marvelous, and though she might never be a star, her singing voice was far better than passable. Letha’d had to work with her much less than with some of the other students.

“And Cedric?”

Harry bit down on an urge to growl. *Why does bloody Cedric have to come between us every time we get a chance to talk?*

Fleetingly he wished the show were real, but banished the thought on the instant. He didn’t want Cedric to die. Cedric was too nice.

No, I just want him to lose all his looks and his charm and get sick and ugly and nasty. And even then, she’d probably stay with him because he’d need taking care of. Girls!

“Cedric did fine,” he said aloud, allowing the grin in his voice to appear on his face. “I think everyone did well, really. It was a great show. I’m sorry it’s over.”

“Me, too. But in a way, I’m glad. We have exams coming up – not that it matters to you, or Cedric, but the rest of us still have to pass our classes. And you and Cedric have the third task to get ready for. You find out about it next week, don’t you?”

“That’s right.” Harry repressed the urge to gulp nervously. “And a month after that, whatever it is, we do it.”

“Are you frightened?” Cho put the question almost coyly.

“Only all over,” Harry admitted. “But I still have to do it, so I might as well stand up and do it right. I should be all right. I beat the first two tasks, and I think I did well in the show.”

“You did,” said Cho as the song wound to a close. “And I’m sure you’ll bring the Triwizard Cup home. One of you.”

She pressed Harry’s hand and started away, then turned back and blew him a kiss.

Harry could have sworn he felt it land on his cheek and sink in.

I am never washing my face again.

xXxXx

“Will we start our Animagus lessons again soon, do you think?” Luna asked Draco in the quiet corner of the party room they’d taken for their own.

Draco checked quickly, but no one was within earshot. “We might,” he said.

“Oh, I shouldn’t have said that, should I.” Luna sighed. “There are so many rules to remember. But it bothers you if I say things wrong, so I am trying to get better.”

“You are,” Draco assured her. “You’re much better than you were. And I don’t mind if you say what you’re thinking when we’re alone, or with the Pride. But out in public, we could get my parents in trouble if we talk about our private lessons. That’s the only reason.”

Luna nodded. “I’ll remember. I was asking because I think I have everything ready. Because I had such a small part, I’ve been working on my incantation at rehearsals, and as long as my final transfiguration goes right, I’ll be... like Harry and the others... in about a week.”

Draco found a smile left over from the show and put it on. “That’s great, Luna. I’m so glad for you.”

“But you’re jealous,” said Luna complacently. “Because you had the biggest part, you didn’t have time to work on yours during the show, and you’ve always been behind anyway. You don’t want

to be the last, or even the second to last.”

Draco dropped the smile, which felt too tight anyway. “I should stop trying to fool you, shouldn’t I.”

“Yes, you should. If we’re going to be married someday, we shouldn’t have secrets from each other. Or should I say mated, since we’re Pride?”

A real smile found Draco’s face. “You can say whatever you want, O Silent Flyer of the Night.”

“Thank you. Because I want to say that I don’t think I will do my final transfiguration just yet. I’ll wait a little while, until someone else has time to catch up.”

“Luna, you don’t have to...”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to.” Luna ran a finger down Draco’s jawline and brushed it back and forth under his chin. “Draco, did you shave here?”

“Stop that, it tickles.” Draco batted her hand away. “Yes, I shaved. Not much, but I wanted to look right for the show.”

“Where did you get the razor?”

Draco looked away. “I’ve had it for a while,” he admitted.

“Waiting until you need it?” Luna sounded approving. “I have one too, you know. I use it about once a week, but Ginny does it every other day, and Hermione does too.”

Draco’s head whipped back around. “Hermione does not shave.”

“Yes, she does. She won’t let Meghan use her razor, but Meghan’s planning to buy one the next time she sneaks out to Hogsmeade.”

Don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t ask...

“Luna, *where* do girls shave?”

“In the bathroom. Where else?”

“No, I know that. I mean...”

Luna raised a hand. “I understand.” She lifted her robes and pointed.

“Oh,” Draco said in relief. “I thought you meant...”

“No, we don’t have to shave our faces.” Luna giggled. “Maybe Neville’s great-aunts do that, but not girls like us.”

“Phew.” Draco wiped his brow exaggeratedly.

“Do you want to find out why we do it?” Luna asked softly.

Draco was still considering his answer when Luna’s hand closed on his. She placed it on her ankle, then slid it up to her knee and down again.

Draco’s heartbeat went from sixty to one hundred twenty in three seconds flat. “Oh,” he managed to say, before there was no need to say anything anymore.

xXxXx

“Neville, do you think I’m too young for you?”

Neville snorted punch up his nose. Meghan handed him a napkin. “You did that on purpose,” he accused when he was done coughing.

“I did not.” She was sitting with one leg pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped around it, regarding him with those disconcerting silver eyes of hers. “I’m sorry. But I want to know.”

“Any reason why you’re asking now?”

Meghan looked around the room, at the few people still dancing or eating, at the small groups chattering and the couples gazing adoringly into one another’s eyes or snogging in half-hidden corners. When her eyes returned to him, they were troubled.

“You’re three years older than me,” she said. “Maybe that’s not a lot to grown-ups, but we’re not grown-up, and we won’t be for a long time. Longer for me than for you. And if you’re always waiting for me, you can’t do everything you should. So maybe you can try being with some other girl, or not being with anyone. I don’t mind.”

Neville forcibly unclamped his jaw muscles to let himself talk. “Meghan, do you not want to be with me anymore?” he asked, dreading the answer. “Please, just tell me the truth.”

Meghan turned away, pulling her other leg up onto the chair and huddling down. “It doesn’t matter what I want.”

“Yes, it does!” Suddenly desperate, Neville reached across and caught her arm, spinning her back to face him and sliding his other hand under her chin to lift it. “Meghan, tell me. What is it? What did I do?”

Meghan shook her head hard. “You didn’t do anything,” she said, her eyes glinting. “I’m holding you back. You ought to be able to do whatever you want.”

“Good.” Neville slid his hand quickly around her head and leaned in without letting go of her arm. “I want to do this,” he whispered into Meghan’s ear, and kissed her left cheek. “And this.” Her right cheek. “And this.” He kissed her lips, gently, chastely, but leaving, he hoped, no doubt

of what he wanted.

“You’re beautiful,” he said when he pulled away. Meghan’s eyes were still closed. “And smart, so smart. You make wonderful jokes, and you never let me think bad things about myself. I’m a better person when I’m with you. And think about everything we’ve shared. Helping my parents, and our nights together, you-know-where...” He stopped. “We haven’t been there in a while,” he said. “Do you want to go tonight? Just you and me?”

Meghan brought a hand up and rubbed at her eyes, then opened them. “You’re so nice,” she said in a small voice. “I’m not nice. I’m mean.”

“You have a temper. That’s not mean.”

“And you’re patient and careful and you work hard on everything you do.” Meghan seemed to have taken no notice. “I wish I was like you.”

“You do? Why?”

Meghan twisted a braid in one hand. “I’m scared,” she said. “I don’t want to be like my mum anymore. But I don’t think I can not be.”

“Why don’t you want to be like her?”

“She did a terrible thing! She made Tonks love Charlie!”

“Didn’t Tonks already love Charlie?”

“Yes, but what if she did it other times, when people didn’t already?” Meghan’s eyes were frightened now. “What if she did it to *you*?”

Neville hastily turned a laugh into a cough. Laughing would make things worse. “Love potions only last two months, Meghan,” he said. “Remember?”

“Yes, but she could be giving it to you over and over... first she was the Defense teacher, and then you stayed with us over the summer, and now you live so nearby...”

“No.” Neville put certainty into his voice, the way his father had talked about controlling nervous crowds. Meghan had obviously been thinking about this a long time. It had to end here.

“Meghan, do you know about love potions? What they do?”

Meghan nodded, twirling a bead between her fingers.

“Tell me.”

“They can’t make real love.” Meghan rubbed the bead against her lips before letting it go. “They just make the person who takes them obsessed with whoever the potion is for.”

“Obsessed how?”

“That person is all they think about, all they talk about... maybe not all, if it’s not too strong a potion, but it makes them think about that person a lot, and not be interested in anyone else.”

“Can it make someone happy, do you think?” Neville asked. “Really happy?”

Meghan shrugged, lines of misery creasing her face.

“Does a potion love make the person’s life better?”

Meghan shook her head. “Usually they give up their friends for the person,” she said.

“And I’ve made friends because of you.” Neville pressed Meghan’s arm lightly. “I met you first of all, that day on platform nine and three-quarters, before I met Harry or Draco or Ron or Hermione. I liked you before I even knew your name, because you were kind and you brought Trevor back to me. I liked you before your mum ever got close to me, before she even knew I existed, except as a baby. So unless she gave me a potion way back then, and it didn’t work until that day, I didn’t start liking you because of any potion.”

Hope was beginning to come into Meghan’s face. Neville pressed on. “When we wrote letters, through my first year, I liked you then, and your mum never gave me anything. I was happy to see you when you and everyone came to make the Pride with me, on my birthday that year. And I hadn’t been near your mum.”

The hope was there in full measure now, but uncertainty still lurked in the silver eyes. Neville decided to take a risk. “You can tell if people are sick just by touching them,” he said. “Do you think you could tell if they’d taken a potion too?”

“Of course,” Meghan said scornfully. “I always know when...” Her eyes widened. “Oh!”

Neville slid his hand down Meghan’s sleeve until he reached the bare flesh of her wrist. Her hand, seemingly of its own volition, turned and clasped his. Meghan’s eyes shut again, her breathing slowed, and she seemed less *there* for a long moment.

Then she was on his lap, in his arms, her face in his robes and her shoulders beginning to quiver.

Neville looked around and spotted an unoccupied corner. She could get the worst of it out there, and then they could go back to the common room together.

Sliding one arm under her shoulders and the other under her knees, he stood up and took a moment to get his balance before he started walking.

xXxXx

“You want to know what?”

“No, not what.” Tonks grinned. “I said I want to know why.”

Aletha glared at her but refrained from comment. “Why. You want the truth, I assume.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“All right.” Aletha shut her eyes and gathered her courage, then opened them and spoke three hard words. “I was afraid.”

“Afraid? Of what?”

“Trouble.” Aletha pressed down on the cushion of her chair, looking towards the other groups chatting in the living room of the Burrow – Charlie, Arthur, Remus, and Sirius in one corner, Danger and Molly in another – before returning her eyes to Tonks. “May I make a comparison?”

“If it’ll help me understand.”

“If you were a Seer, and you had Seen that someone you cared about was going to have an accident. If you knew they would suffer terrible pain, recover slowly, possibly never get over it fully. And you knew, or you thought you knew, that if you could just cast the Imperius on them to keep them doing something they enjoyed longer, so that the time when the accident should happen would go by, that it might never happen at all. Would you take that chance? Would you risk it?”

“I might,” Tonks said slowly. “But I don’t see...”

“I overreacted. I was wrong.” Odd how it hurt and healed at the same time, to say it. “I wanted to keep you from being embarrassed and hurt by what you felt for Remus. And I suppose I was also afraid for him. He’s a sensible, intelligent man, but men have had their heads turned before by attractive young women falling in love with them.”

Tonks frowned. “You think I’m attractive?”

“Your natural face is attractive, and you can make yourself more so if you like. Add to that, you’re intelligent and funny, strong and strong-willed.”

“Not a lot of men want that.”

“Then the ones who don’t are idiots.” Aletha leaned towards the men. “Sirius,” she called. “Do you prefer a strong-willed woman or a meek one?”

Sirius turned around in his chair. “What is this, a trick question?”

“Yes. Answer it anyway.”

“Strong-willed all the way. I like having a fight on my hands every now and again.”

“Yes, but how often do you like winning?” Remus put in.

“Sod off, Moony.”

“Thank you both,” Aletha said dryly. She turned back to Tonks. “Some men do want a woman to protect, and some women do want to be protected. But in my book, it’s better when you take turns doing the protecting. Everyone’s weak sometimes.” She spread her hands. “Q.E.D.”

“I understand.” Tonks’ smile was slightly brittle, but there was genuine warmth in it as well. “Thank you for what you were trying to do, but next time, could you please just talk to me?”

“Trust me, I will.” Aletha clenched her fingers around a handful of cushion, then let it go. “I realize I have no right to ask you this, but I’m going to anyway. Call it wanting to set my calendar. Are you going to report this?”

“No.” Tonks shook her head. “Even when I was maddest at you, I didn’t seriously think about reporting. Mum...” She swallowed and blinked hard a few times. “Mum always said you’d make a good Healer, and it was a shame you’d left the program. I know you started again after she died, and you finished the project she left behind. Even with what you did – what I thought you did – I didn’t want to hurt you that badly.” She smiled weakly. “I suppose some part of me knew you were trying to help me. Though you did pick the world’s worst way of doing it.”

“Thank you.” Aletha didn’t even try to keep the shaking out of her voice. “Thank you, Tonks, so much.”

“You’re welcome.” Tonks sneaked a look at Charlie. “I’ve been thinking over looks for the wedding,” she said conspiratorially, leaning in. “How do you like this one?” Her hair grew several feet and lightened to a golden yellow, her eyes became huge and limpid blue, her nose shrank into a button and her lips into a rosebud, and her skin paled until it was the color of porcelain.

Aletha considered it for a moment. “Too fairy-tale,” she said. “How did you look when you and Charlie first met?”

Tonks screwed up her face in concentration. A moment later, an eleven-year-old with short brown hair and a bruise on her cheek looked at Aletha solemnly. “I fell getting off the stool for the Sorting,” she said. “Charlie was right after me.”

“Something a little more recent, then. What about one of your everyday looks?”

“But I don’t want the wedding to be everyday...”

xXxXx

Remus opened a door he hadn’t seen in nearly eight years and walked into the front room belonging to John White and his wife Kelly. James and Jane were their twins, their nephew was Reggie, their dog was Padfoot, and their landlady lived next door with her daughter. There was nothing unusual about them at all.

Or so we hoped the neighbors thought.

Two Dangers occupied the room, sitting side by side, one reading over the other one's shoulder. Remus chuckled under his breath. *I suppose this counts as too much of a good thing.*

"Memories, love?" he said aloud.

The real Danger looked up from the book the dream-figure was still immersed in. "How could you tell?"

"You don't look like that any more. You're more... rounded nowadays."

Danger sniffed. "You haven't lost any weight yourself."

"Now, now, did I say it was a bad thing?" Remus caught and absorbed the fireball she hurled. "When is this?"

Danger was still glaring at him, but her answer was civil enough. "April of '87. The show put me in mind of it. If you'd like to stay, you're welcome."

"Thank you, I will." Remus quickly transformed, trotted across the room, and lay down at Danger's feet, angling his neck upwards to get his maned head under her hand. She sighed in mock-exasperation, then buried both hands in his mane and scratched behind his ears. A rumbling growl of content, the lion's answer to the housecat's purr, pervaded the room for a few moments, until the entrance via the stairs of two figures in trailing clothes, one laughing and one crying.

Remus retransformed and pulled himself up to the couch. "I think I do remember this," he said. "Though maybe only because you told me about it."

"I'll only ask you once more, pretty Wendy," growled Draco, on the fifth step up, poking the nightgowned Neenie with his coat-hanger hook. "Will you join my pirate crew, or will you walk the plank?"

"Neither!" Neenie lifted her chin at the pirate in his overlong uniform coat. "Peter Pan will save me!"

"Peter Pan is no more. He and his fool of a fairy have been blasted out of Neverland forever. Now, join me or die!"

"Die," Neenie declared bravely.

"Very well." Draco grabbed her hand and pulled her up several more stairs, then boosted her onto the banister.

"What are you doing?" the memory-Danger said without looking up from her book.

"It's okay, Danger," a green-clad Harry volunteered from the balcony above. "I swoop down and

save her.”

“Swoop now.” Danger waved him on. “Peter was waiting by the side of the ship, remember? He didn’t come down from above, because Captain Hook would have seen that. You have to start from down here.”

“I like how you did that,” Remus said as Harry flew over the balcony and guided his broomstick to a neat stop below the stairs. Meghan, in fluttery pink, followed more slowly.

“Trial and error, mostly,” Danger disclaimed. “Look, there she goes!”

Neenie plunged off the banister, and Harry caught her neatly and sat her on the broom in front of him. Tinker Bell flew around Wendy and pulled her hair, but gently, since Wendy had the longer reach. Meanwhile, Captain Hook was cackling to himself on the deck of the pirate ship.

“Gone, gone, all gone!” he laughed. “No one is left to fight me now!”

“I will fight you!” shouted Peter Pan, rising above the side of the ship with Wendy and Tinker Bell. “We all will fight you, and throw you off your ship for the crocodile!”

“No!” Hook clutched the rail. “Not the crocodile! Never!”

Harry caught the banister and hoisted himself onto the stairs, leaving Hermione in charge of the broom. “I think I remember now why we reinforced all the woodwork in the Den,” Remus said.

Peter Pan drew his small knife and Captain Hook his sword, and they fought a valiant fight, but Hook was at last forced down the stairs and into the sea, where the crocodile waited (Meghan making ticking sounds from under a green blanket). Hook howled in dismay and swam away at speed, with the crocodile in hot pursuit and Peter and Wendy cheering it on.

“Is it just me,” Danger said, watching Harry help Hermione back onto the broom so that Peter and Wendy could see the end of the chase in the den room, “or were they far too cute for their own good?”

“Yes.”

“You do know I hate it when you answer a multi-part question with a single answer.”

“Why else would I do it?”

Danger snapped her fingers –

And Remus was abruptly wide awake, staring at the ceiling.

Oh, if that’s how we’re going to play... He leaned over his still-sleeping wife and began to take a subtle revenge. You wake me up, I wake you up.

What makes you think that wasn't the point?

Remus rolled his eyes, his mouth being otherwise occupied. **You could have just asked.**

But where's the fun in that? Oh, right there... yes, yes, there...

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To the Pride's delight, all four Triwizard champions received full marks for their participation in *Joseph*, leaving the standings exactly where they had been before the show – Harry and Cedric tied for first place, Krum in second, and Fleur in third. Harry was less delighted with the side effects of playing Pharaoh, which included girls giggling and whispering when he passed them in the halls, girls squealing when he looked in their direction, and girls sending him things in the mail that he didn't want.

I may never open a package at breakfast again.

Professor McGonagall kept him back after class about a week after the show. “We can screen your mail if you like, Potter,” she told him.

Harry was tempted – he'd had three packages of suspicious size and a Howler singing his praises that morning – but shook his head. “They should get tired of it soon. I'll be all right.”

“Very well. My other reason for detaining you was to tell you to be on the Quidditch pitch at eight o'clock tonight. Mr. Bagman will be there to tell you and your fellow champions the nature of the third task.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

xXxXx

“... and if you say 'a-maze-ing,' I'll bite you,” Harry finished, glaring at Draco.

“Would I say something like that?”

“Yes,” said Harry, Hermione, Ron, Neville, and Meghan simultaneously, drawing a few looks from other Gryffindors in the common room.

“Well, if you're sure.”

“A maze is a good task,” said Luna. “You'll have all sorts of things to fight, along with just finding your way. The Four-Point Spell will help you again.”

Hermione nodded. “You can find out which way is the center of the maze, and work towards it.”

“As long as the maze doesn't change,” Harry said. “They could do that, with magic.”

Neville shook his head. “Not with hedges,” he said. “At least, not easily. Hagrid showed me the plants he’s using. It’s a magical cultivar of privet with deep roots. It would take either very powerful and sneaky magic or very strong magic to change where the hedges are.”

“But they could make you think they’ve changed it,” Ron put in. “They could make a gap look like it was filled in, or make you think there’s a gap where there isn’t... but no, that wouldn’t work, because you’d walk into it and know it was fake.”

“The first one would still work,” said Hermione. “Disguise the real passage with an illusion spell, or put something really nasty on it.”

“Do you think they’ll put all the worst things on the right path?” Ginny asked. “Because then, you’d know it was the right path, wouldn’t you? Just follow the nasties. If it was me, I’d put hard things and easy things on both kinds of paths, right and wrong. I’d save some really tough ones for very close by the Cup, of course, but I wouldn’t want to give it away like that.”

“Hang on, hang on, let me write this down,” Harry said, unrolling a fresh scroll and dipping his quill. “Watch for fake parts of hedge, don’t necessarily follow nastiest things, Four-Point Spell... I’ll need a lot of good spells, and help practicing. I want to learn the Stunner for sure, and the Shield Charm. What else?”

“Impediment Jinx,” Ron said. “Not as strong as a Stunner, not as long-lasting, but it works on some things Stunners don’t.”

“The Reductor Curse,” Meghan put in. “It blasts right through things.”

“What’s it called, the Globe Charm,” Draco said. “For trapping things, like a Shield around something else that you want to keep in.”

Harry scribbled down his Pride’s suggestions, adding his own as they occurred to him, and did his best to concentrate on the spells rather than on feeling nervous about the task. The task would come whether or not he was nervous or not, and whether or not he was ready.

He intended to be ready.

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“This is your last lesson with me,” Professor Moody said to the class of Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs. “So I’ve decided to make it an easy one. In principle, that is. Carrying out what I’m going to teach you today is one of the hardest things any witch or wizard ever learns.” He stumped around to the front of his desk and leaned on it. “Everyone take out your wands. Put ‘em on your desks.”

Harry set his wand on the table in front of him.

“Look at ‘em. Look hard.”

“Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple.” Mr. Ollivander’s voice echoed in Harry’s mind as he recalled the first day he’d held his wand, and the strange coincidence of its core being the same as Voldemort’s.

Do I have to think about him right now? For a change, Harry looked at the wand as a Muggle might. Just a polished stick, not quite a foot long, tapering to a blunt point, with a handgrip shaped into the wider end, and fingerprints all over it, as if it were often handled.

“That’s enough,” Moody growled, breaking Harry’s trance. “Now, in this room, at this moment, we have twenty-one deadly weapons.”

A few of the girls gasped. Hannah Abbott squealed.

“Point ‘em out, somebody.”

Hermione’s hand flew up. Moody nodded to her.

“On the desks, Professor,” Hermione said. “And yours, wherever you have it.”

Moody flicked his right wrist and was suddenly holding a dark wand. “Auror’s sleeve holster,” he said. “But that’s not important. What’s important is that you’re absolutely right, Miss Granger-Lupin. A wand is a deadly weapon. It’s also an indispensable tool, since almost all the magic we do is wanded, but I want you to get this in your heads and never let it get out. *A wand is a deadly weapon.* If someone can point a wand at you, that person can kill you. Like so.” Moody’s wand was suddenly centered on Dean’s chest. “Or so.” He spun and pointed it at Justin Finch-Fletchley. “Or so.”

Harry had been half-expecting this, and threw himself out of his chair in a sideways roll as Moody’s wand came to bear. He snatched his own wand off the desk as he went and brought it up into guard position as he came up on one knee.

The class broke into applause. Moody raised his wand in salute, then let it go, and it disappeared up his sleeve. “Ten points to Gryffindor,” he said. “Sit down, Potter. Save it for the task.”

Harry took his seat again, replacing his wand where it had been, and fought to keep a stupid grin off his face.

Mad-Eye Moody just saluted me.

“Yes, it looks very pretty,” Moody said. “No doubt you’re all daydreaming about being heroes and heroines, saving the world, getting rid of evil.” He tapped one of the scars on his face. “Not as easy as it looks. And about as pretty as me.”

A chuckle ran through the room.

“If you remember nothing else from this class, I want you to remember these three things,” Moody said, leaning forward. “First, as we’ve already covered, a wand is a deadly weapon.

Deadly. It can be used to deliver non-deadly force, but when you come down to it, there's only one way to make certain your enemy won't be back for more." A gnarled hand gripped the edge of the desk. "But certain doesn't make it right. And just because you're fighting for good things doesn't mean that everything you do is automatically good."

Harry saw out of the corner of his eye Hermione's lips moving, and could have laid a bet on what she was saying. *Good done in the name of Tash is still the work of Aslan. Evil done in the name of Aslan is still the work of Tash.*

"Second. Any spell can kill."

The room went deadly quiet.

"Let me say that again, to make sure you have it. Any. Spell. Can. Kill." Moody laid the words out delicately, as Hagrid might display a venomous monster he wanted the class to examine.

"Any spell, no matter what it was originally intended for, can be perverted. Any spell can be warped out of its original intent, whether by accident or by design. Any spell can hurt, any spell can maim, and any spell can kill. So think carefully before you do magic, and double that before you let someone else, *anyone* else, do magic on you."

Harry leaned forward a little, both to listen to Moody better and to feel the slight weight of the Pack-pendants as they swung forward on their chain.

"Third, and most important. I'll say this for you first, then put it on the board to make sure you have it clear. Copy it down, look at it whenever you have the chance. Especially if any of you are thinking of going into MLE or the Auror Office. You'll need to know it then. Here it is."

Moody looked around the room, making sure every eye was on him, before he began to speak again, in a careful and deliberate tone. "There is only one reason for using force, any kind of force, on another human being. That reason is that the other human being is doing something which must be stopped. The need to stop that person must be so great that it does not matter if that other person is hurt, if that other person dies, as a result of being stopped. That is the *only* just reason to use force, of any kind, in any degree."

The words lived in the air between professor and class for a few seconds.

"Remember it," Moody said finally. "If you do, as unlikely as that is, I'll know I've taught you something worth remembering."

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 49: The Third Task (Year 4)

Chapter 49: The Third Task

Wolf loped along the road at the easy, long-lasting pace of his kind. The portion of his mind which was Harry Potter noted that he was moving faster than the pounding of his paws would account for, and that there was a sense of misty unreality about the scene surrounding him, but Wolf dismissed this as unimportant. He was on a scent, and going to track it to its source.

What scent, though? Harry recalled the Pride's plans to share a dream, in spite of the officious seventh year who had placed a chair squarely against the entrance to the Hogwarts Den and announced his plans to stay there all night to finish studying for his N.E.W.T.s, which began the next day. Was he on the scent of his Pridemates?

No, this is different. This is something else. Heavy and bitter was this scent, and hard to get out of the nose once it was in. Wolf sneezed and turned his nose from the trail for a moment to get some relief before ploughing onward. *I'll find you, whatever you are,* he vowed as a village appeared on the horizon. *You are my predator and my prey, and we must hunt one another until the roles are clear...*

Harry shifted uneasily. *I don't like the sound of that.*

Don't care what you don't like, Wolf snapped back. *I don't stop a hunt.*

Not even when the prey is too big for you? Harry brought up an image of a full-grown stag, able to break ribs and smash skulls with its delicate-looking hooves, or spear through fur and flesh with its antlers. *This prey is too much for us now.*

No, this prey is weak and helpless now. Wolf sifted the scent to find the tantalizing factors of frailty within it. *This prey will fall before me. Stay out of my way!*

No way in hell!

The dark-furred wolf came to a halt on overgrown paths before a ruined house, shaking his head violently as two parts of his mind fought for control.

I am Wolf! I will hunt! No human will stop me!

You're Wolf, but you're me first. And I want my body back. Now.

Wolf held out one moment longer, then dropped to the path, whining in submission. Harry surged forward and took his body back, making sure he was in charge of every part. Once he was in full control, he changed back and looked up at the cheerless house before him. "Creepy," he said aloud.

“Tell me about it.”

Harry spun, snatching out his wand. Draco ducked. “Jumpy, aren’t you?” he remarked from the ground.

“Don’t scare me like that.” Harry stuck his wand into his waistband and offered his brother his hand. “So is this where we are?”

“No, this is where you are. And where we can’t seem to get you out of.”

“Sorry?”

“Neenie and I set up a nice place back home at the Den, with the Hogwarts lake right there. And we all showed up, but you didn’t. We kept trying to find you, pull you in, but you kept resisting.”

“Not on purpose,” Harry protested. “I didn’t even know you were there.”

Draco shook his head. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were dreamsculpting yourself. But if you didn’t do it on purpose... besides, why would you make something like this?” A wave took in the dark, dreary house and grounds.

“You know, normal people sometimes just have dreams,” Harry said. “Dreams that don’t mean anything, that aren’t playgrounds or warnings or anything like that.”

“Since when are you normal?” Draco ducked Harry’s half-hearted punch. “Besides, dreams draw from real life. They hardly ever make up places out of whole cloth. And Neenie and I should be able to pull people out of any normal dream. We couldn’t pull you, not even working together. I decided to come see what you were doing, and...” He spread his hands. “Here we are. Now, is there anything in there you just have to see, or do you think we can tempt you away?”

Harry turned slowly to inspect the house. “I think there is something,” he said, ignoring the sarcasm that had permeated Draco’s question. “When I was running the trail, Wolf told me that whatever I was tracking was my predator and my prey.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Doesn’t it?” Harry smiled one-sidedly. “Isn’t there someone who’s been hunting me since I was a baby, someone I have to hunt myself someday? Predator and prey, a two-edged hunt, and it can only end one of two ways...”

“Voldemort,” Draco breathed. “You think he’s in there?”

“I don’t know who else it would be.”

Draco stared at the house for one moment, then rounded on Harry. “You’re out of your mind if you think you’re going in there.”

“Draco, it’s a dream. What can he do to me?”

“Trap you in a nightmare until you go insane?”

“Not with you around. You said yourself you can break through any normal dream.”

“Yes, and right after that, I said that *this isn’t normal!*” Draco stamped his foot. “Look. Feel. The ground’s not soft.”

Harry stamped his own, feeling only the natural give of many years’ growth of plants underfoot. “Why should it be?”

“The ground’s always soft in dreams. This isn’t a normal dream. I don’t know what it is, but I think you should get out of here right now.”

“Scaredy-fox.”

“Har har. I mean it, Harry. This is bad. You shouldn’t be here.”

“Fine. You stay put. I’m going in.” Harry started for the front door.

“Wait.”

Harry turned back, his hand hovering near the grip of his wand. “What?”

“Will you at least let us come with you?” Draco held up his Zippophone. “I can get Neenie with this, and she can bring the others. If something does go wrong, you’ll have some backup.”

Harry vacillated for a moment. *It’s my danger... I shouldn’t expose them to it...*

Too late by years, Potter. Remember the Stone? Remember the Chamber? Remember every other freaking time? They’re going to follow you, no matter what you say. Might as well be in charge of it.

“Go ahead. I’ll wait.”

xXxXx

The Pride moved through the corridors of the house, wands out, ears and eyes straining. Harry had Meghan beside him, and the sour smell of fear and near-illness kept intruding on his senses.

We should have left her out of this. She’s too little, she’s too sensitive... she started looking sick the second she got here, but she wouldn’t go back and she wouldn’t let us leave her behind...

Neville doesn’t look so hot either. Harry sneaked a look over his left shoulder. He couldn’t be imagining the sallowness in Neville’s cheeks, the way the other boy kept swallowing as if against a bad taste. Whatever this is, it’s affecting them badly. I should have made them stay outside. If I

could have convinced Neville, Meghan would have stayed too... she listens to the Captain when she won't listen to anyone else...

Ron grabbed his arm. Harry blinked out of his dream. *What?* he asked in hand-sign.

Voices, Ron signaled with his free hand, pointing to a door ahead. *We should stop and listen.*

Harry signed a thanks to Ron and lowered both his hands, palms down. Cautiously, the Pride sank to the floor, Hermione and Ginny changing forms to sharpen their ears. Harry did the same, then hurriedly slammed back into his human form, Wolf's ecstatic cries still ringing inside his head. *Enemy! Here! Destroy!*

Meghan was gray and drawn-looking, her arms wrapped around something invisible in her lap. Luna edged up beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. Draco had Neenie in his arms, and Ron's legs were submerged under the front half of lynx-Ginny. *What's wrong?* he signed to Harry.

Wolf wants to fight.

Ron shrugged. *I know the feeling. But no fighting now. Listen!*

Harry focused his attention on the voices. *Two men. I've heard them both talk before, but I can't think of where...*

"I should have known you couldn't stay out of it," said a voice that seemed too full for its current subdued tone. "Whose idea was this, his or yours?"

"Don't change the subject." This voice was precise and clipped, used to command. "Do you have the job yet?"

"I'm trying to get it, but I think Dumbledore suspects. He didn't take the *Prophet*'s word that the boy was confused, and he's stepping up security on the last task."

"I can't imagine why he'd be doing that. When something's gone wrong with both the original tasks *and* the auxiliary, all targeted at Potter or one of his cronies..."

"You can't blame the first one on me. That was your own stupidity. Why didn't you put at least a warning spell on that door, so you'd know if anyone was in there? Why didn't you *lock* it?"

"What sort of fool do you take me for? Of course I locked it! Lupin must have unlocked it, bypassed my precautions somehow. At least I knew when he got into the trunk. And what about you? Your little friend can't claim he was under the Imperius forever..."

"In another week, it won't matter. The Dark Lord will be risen, and we won't need to hide any longer."

Harry saw Meghan's mouth open, but no cry came from it, and she pushed furiously at something

he couldn't see. *Good for Neville.*

"Quiet, both of you," ordered a third voice, this one calm and cold. "I tire of your endless bickering."

Harry shuddered all over, wrapping his arms around himself, feeling goose pimples on his arms.

I wasn't wrong.

He turned to check on the Pride. Ginny's fur stood on end, Neenie's tail was bushed out, Neville had become visible again. Meghan's teeth were clenched, Luna clutched at her left arm, Draco was pressed against the wall, staring wide-eyed at the door. Ron was breathing hard, but his hands were moving in a blur. *We have to get out of here. He's powerful. He might know we're here, he might try something...*

Harry nodded fervently. *Everyone, go, he signaled broadly. Get out of here.*

Hermione resumed human form, her hands already moving. *What about you? We can't take you out like we can the others.*

Harry shook his head furiously. *Don't bother about me. Get the others out. Now.*

Draco pulled himself away from the wall and nodded to Harry. His hands moved in a grand gesture, not a hand-sign but something bigger, and a doorway appeared in the air beside him, shimmering silver and gold. Hermione took her place at the other doorpost and waved the Pride through. *We'll be back, she signaled to Harry.*

Like hell you will. Stay out of here.

Neville was human again, half-carrying Meghan through the door. Ginny, still on four legs, leapt through without looking back. Harry scowled after her. *Fine, he thought irrationally. Be that way.*

Luna was through, and Ron. Hermione spun herself around the edge of the door and through, and Draco followed. His left hand stayed on Harry's side for one second before vanishing, to wink open and closed in one of the simplest signs.

Good luck.

Then the Pride was gone. Harry edged down the dusty corridor, his breathing and heartbeat resounding in his ears, the smell of the house filling his lungs and reminding him oddly of another night when he had dreamed of Voldemort...

This is a dream, he reminded himself. Or something like a dream. I'm not really here.

Can I will myself awake? I know it's a dream, so can I make myself wake up from it?

He concentrated on his bed in Gryffindor Tower, the red hangings that kept him warm in winter and private in summer, the nightly chorus of snores, the fuzziness that everything took on without his glasses, the small lump in the bed that his stuffed lion made... he wanted to be there, right now, safe at Hogwarts where nothing could touch him...

Something in him responded, sluggishly, but a response all the same. He was on his way, he could feel it –

Movement caught his eye. A snake, as big as the one Percy had described at Crouch's house, slithered along the hall; it would have to pass him to get to its master –

It stopped, dead even with Harry, and turned its head slowly to regard him.

“Nagini,” hissed a voice. *“What keeps you, my pet?”*

“Something I do not understand, master,” the snake replied, forked tongue sampling the air in front of Harry. He held completely still, breathing shallowly through his mouth. *“One who is here and not-here – he is not-here to my eyes and my tongue, but here to the sense you have awakened in me...”*

“Carry me to the hall, Wormtail,” the cold voice ordered in English. *“Nagini has sensed something.”*

“Go away,” Harry breathed in Parseltongue, the words slipping out before he could stop them.

The snake reared back. *“He speaks to me! The strange one speaks!”*

A shout came from within the room, wordless but filled with glee – Harry yelled as his scar exploded with pain, burning, searing into his brain – heavy weights pinned him to the wall, pressing on his arms and legs and chest – he couldn't breathe, his eyes were closing, the world was rotating around him –

Cold water drenched the upper half of his body. His eyes flew open.

He was flat on his back in his own bed in Gryffindor Tower, pinned down by Neville and Draco. Ron stood beside them, still holding an empty pitcher. All three were staring at him fearfully.

“Lemme up,” Harry mumbled around Draco's muffling hand. *“’m fine.”*

Draco took his hand away and shook it, spraying water droplets everywhere. *“You need to learn to aim,”* he told Ron.

“Fine, you can teach me. And you can show me how to do it when your best friend's having a nightmare.” Ron set the pitcher down on the nightstand and picked up Harry's glasses, holding them out. *“You sure you're all right?”* he asked.

Harry flexed his hand, then took the glasses. *“I'm fine,”* he repeated more forcefully.

“The hell’s goin’ on?” said Seamus sleepily, sitting half-up.

“Nothing,” said three voices together.

“I just had a nightmare,” said Harry. “And a headache. I’m going to the hospital wing.”

“Oh.” Seamus slumped back onto his pillow, asleep before he got there.

“Are you?” asked Neville.

“No. Why?”

“We could get into the Den from there.”

“Speaking of which, why don’t we go down to the common room,” said Draco quickly, as footsteps pounded on the staircase. “I don’t think Greene will mind.”

Ron nodded and went to the door, then jumped back just in time to miss being hit in the face with it as Meghan charged through. Harry quickly got out of line with his soggy bed and braced himself. Draco stepped behind him. “Thanks,” Harry muttered as Meghan hit him, rocking him back against his brother.

“He hurt you,” Meghan whispered into Harry’s shoulder. “He hurt you on purpose.”

“I’m all right, Pearl. I’m fine now.”

Meghan pulled away enough to shake her head hard. “You won’t be. Not if he gets you. He wants to *kill* you, Harry. I could taste it...” She shuddered, swallowing hard.

“He’s not going to get me tonight,” Harry said with all the firmness he could muster as Hermione, Ginny, and Luna appeared in the doorway, dressing gowns askew. “And we need to go back to bed.”

“What we need is to get into the Den,” Hermione said. “We know he can’t get in there.”

“We can’t get in from here,” said Ginny, waving everyone out onto the landing. “Greene’s still planted in front of it.”

“We could go to the hospital wing,” Neville said again.

“I don’t have a headache anymore,” said Harry. “And I don’t want any nasty potions.”

Meghan made a face at him.

“We could go down to the kitchens,” said Hermione doubtfully. “But Filch might catch us.”

“Or we could just convince Greene to move,” said Ron.

“Most of the ways you use for convincing people would wake the whole Tower,” said Draco. “As much fun as they might be at other times, we need to be quiet right now.”

“I’ll go talk to him,” said Luna, and started down the stairs.

“And say what?” Ginny asked. ““Excuse me, but you’re blocking the entrance to our secret hideout that was used by the Founders of Hogwarts?””

Luna looked back. “Yes,” she said simply.

Before anyone could think of a way to stop her, she was gone.

Draco shrugged. “You never know,” he said. “It might even work.”

xXxXx

“...and then we found the secret entrance in the hospital wing, the one that leads to the library – but not the Hogwarts library, the library down there – it has a tree in it, not a real tree but a wooden thing that looks like a tree. Hermione sits in it for reading. We can call her Neenie when we’re there. She doesn’t like anyone to call her that except Draco when we’re not there. Did you know she doesn’t like people to call her Neenie?”

“Uh...”

“And Harry found an entrance in the Hogwarts kitchens,” Luna went on blithely. “It leads to the kitchen there, which makes sense in a funny way, except that you’d expect the entrance in the library there to be in the library here, but not really, because the library is Ravenclaw’s room and Ravenclaw was a Healer, so she’d need to get to the hospital wing quickly, even if she was off resting or being with her family, which is what we think the place was for originally...”

“Er, thank you for telling me all this,” David Greene said, taking advantage of the girl’s pause for breath, “but I really do need to get to bed. Big day tomorrow, have to be ready for it...”

“But I thought you were studying all night,” said the girl, disappointment lining her face. “I thought you were just taking a break to refresh your mind, and I wanted to help, to give you something else to think about.”

“Well, I’ve changed my mind.” David flicked his wand at his books and parchments, sending them soaring into his bag. “I think bed sounds like a marvelous idea, and I’m sure to sleep well, thanks to your fine bedtime story. Thank you again, and good night.”

He hurried towards the boys’ stairs, praying the girl wasn’t going to follow. How such an odd person had become a Gryffindor was beyond his powers to comprehend. She’d have been much better off in Ravenclaw.

Where she can’t annoy me with her crazy made-up stories!

xXxXx

Luna pushed the chair away from the stone wall. “Thank you, Godric,” she murmured. There was no need for stealth mode now.

Footsteps on the stairs warned her of the Pride’s approach. She turned, her smile bright in the dimly-lit room. “And I didn’t even have to lie,” she told them.

Draco kissed her right there in the common room, and nobody so much as gagged.

xXxXx

“But who were they?” Ron asked the next morning, holding aside a tapestry for the rest of the Pride to enter. “Who’d be close enough to Dumbledore to know what he’s planning for the third task, but still close enough to...” He lowered his voice. “To *Voldemort* that he’d be in there with him?”

“Besides the obvious, you mean?” said Hermione. “The former Death Eater we *know* is here?”

“Which one?” Harry asked.

“Karkaroff, of course,” Hermione said impatiently. “I don’t know why Dumbledore hasn’t done anything about him already...”

“Because he doesn’t want to cause an international incident?” Draco suggested.

“Yes, well, I think Voldemort coming back would qualify too.”

“But he doesn’t know yet,” Ginny pointed out. “What we know, I mean.”

“He will in about thirty seconds,” said Luna. “As long as we know the password for his office. Do we?”

“No, but we can guess it,” said Harry. “Moony told me once it’s always some kind of candy. Everyone start thinking of the last time you were in Honeydukes.”

But Harry, at the head of the line, rounded the last corner just in time to see Dumbledore stepping off the staircase himself. “Professor,” he said quickly, catching the Headmaster’s attention. “Can we have a minute?”

“Certainly, Harry.” Dumbledore held out a hand to stop the gargoyle from moving back into place. “A disturbed night?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dumbledore sighed heavily. “As I feared,” he murmured.

Harry felt a moment's rush of anger. *If he thought something like this might happen, couldn't he have told me?*

The feeling burnt itself out quickly, to be replaced with realism. *Dumbledore has a lot on his mind. He can't tell me everything he thinks might happen.*

In the round office, Dumbledore conjured extra chairs, and the Pride took their seats. Harry gave a short account of the night just past, giving full credit to Ron for thinking of the perfect way to wake him quickly. "But I think I could have woken myself if the snake hadn't showed up," he said. "I felt something start to change when I concentrated on waking up."

"Good. Excellent." Dumbledore nodded several times. "Is there anything else you can tell me about this house where you found yourself?"

"Yes, sir." Harry hadn't told anyone about this yet, since it had come to him halfway through his recital of his dream. Still, he was almost certain of it. "I've been there before. Not in real life, but in another dream like this, last summer. I don't remember very much about it, but I remember the smell of the place. It was the same."

"I remember that!" Hermione exclaimed. "The night before we left for the Quidditch Cup, when we went outside to watch the sunrise!"

"And was Voldemort in this dream as well?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry nodded. "He killed an old Muggle," he said. "A caretaker, he said, but the house didn't look very taken care of."

"Which would make sense, if the caretaker has been dead these many months." Dumbledore steepled his fingers. "I would suggest that you sleep for the next few days where you slept last night," he said after a moment. "Mr. Filch will not bother you if you must find another entrance than that in Gryffindor Tower, and I need give no orders to the house-elves regarding you. They have considered you their proper masters for quite some time. Indeed, I should hate to try to countermand an order any of you had given to them."

"But you're the Headmaster," said Ginny. "Aren't they bound to you, through the school?"

"Yes, and therein lies the catch. Through the school. None of them are bound to me personally. If I were to leave my position as Headmaster, they would be equally bound to the next wizard or witch who took it up. However, you seem to have personally endeared yourselves to them." Dumbledore's smile reached his eyes. "It is a knack many wizards of our time have lost."

Draco snickered briefly and elbowed Neville. Neville shoved his arm away. Harry shot them a glare over his shoulder, then turned back to Dumbledore. "What about the third task, sir?"

"You may rest assured, Harry, I will be watching." Dumbledore paused, a flicker of emotion passing over his face too quickly for Harry to identify it. "But I must warn you," he said, "that

whatever I do may not be enough. You know well, all of you, that all people are fallible. You have also learned some of the arts of war. What is the trouble with a defensive fight?"

"You can't pick your battles," Ron answered. "You have to fight wherever the attacker wants, and he's not going to attack your strong points."

"Precisely." Dumbledore let his eyes rove over the Pride. "I speak to you as I would to adults," he said quietly. "This third task of the Triwizard Tournament is a weak point. Certain of the other judges of the Tournament have insisted that some of Hogwarts' defenses be lowered so that the champions can be, as they put it, 'properly tested.' I do not know if an attack will come, or what form it will take if it does. To borrow a phrase from Alastor, I would urge you all to maintain..."

"Constant vigilance," the Pride chorused, not quite in unison.

Dumbledore's smile was a bit smaller this time, and tinged with sadness. "Indeed. But even the best of vigilance cannot be forever constant." His gaze fixed on Harry. "Do your best, no matter what befalls, so that no one can speak ill of you with justice."

Harry met his Headmaster's eyes. "I will, sir."

They held the contact for a long moment. Dumbledore looked away first. "I believe I am keeping you from your breakfast," he said, opening the door with a flick of his wand. "Thank you for trusting me with this."

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Yes, thank you. Dumbledore leaned back in his chair when the Pride had gone, his eyes closed, seeing again the quiet strength in Harry's eyes, the determination and understanding, the simultaneous readiness and unwillingness to fight.

When I think of how little I deserve the trust you give to me so unthinkingly... how miserably I handled your affairs at the start, Harry, and what a poor friend I was to you and yours over the succeeding years. I have failed in your case more often than I have succeeded, and still you come to me with your news, trusting that I can do everything...

"Perhaps I cannot do everything," he said aloud. "But I can do something."

And something is better than nothing.

Even if it is only preparing you, readying you for your first steps on a path you must take alone... something is always better than nothing.

xXxXx

Neville finished writing the final M of *Mum* and blew on the ink to dry it. "I'm going to the Owlery," he said. "Anyone else?"

“Take something up for me?” Ron tossed a letter towards him. “Morpheus knows you, he’ll come if you call him.”

“Sure. Last call for mail.”

“No point,” Draco said, waving a dismissive hand. “Pack-parents’ll be here at the end of the week anyway.”

“That doesn’t mean we can’t write to them,” said Meghan snippily. “Can I come with you, Neville?”

“Of course.”

Meghan’s hand found Neville’s as they walked. “Can you tell me again the difference between levitating and flying?” she asked. “I keep forgetting it.”

“Levitating is just going straight up. Like this.” Neville handed Meghan the letters and drew his wand. “*Wingardium Leviosa!*” The letters lifted from Meghan’s hands and hovered in the air several feet above her head. Meghan jumped for the letters, giggling as she missed again and again.

Neville ended the spell after a moment or two, letting Meghan catch the letters. “Flying is moving. I don’t know if there are any charms to make things fly, other than the ones they use on broomsticks and magic carpets and things like that, and those are part of the making, so I don’t know if there’s any way to make a thing fly that’s already made. You’d have to give it wings, and that would be Transfiguration, not Charms.”

“What about the *Mobili* charms, though?”

“You won’t have those on the exam. Those are third year things.”

“I know, but what about them?”

“They’re not flying either. They’re for moving. Same with *Locomotor*. That makes things float where your wand is pointing.” Neville frowned. “I wonder what the difference is between them, then?” he said. “There wouldn’t be more than one if they all did exactly the same thing.”

“Maybe we can find out over the summer,” Meghan said. “After Harry wins the Tournament.” She laughed aloud. “Four days, four days, only four days left!”

“Meghan...” Neville looked at the girl skipping by his side and felt a strange reluctance to hurt her. She was so happy as she was. Why should he change her?

Because she has to know the truth.

“You know Harry may not win,” he said finally. “Or something might happen that shouldn’t.”

“Yes, I know.” Meghan met his eyes openly, and with understanding. “But it won’t help us to worry about it. Things come when they come, and the best we can do is be ready. And we are.”

Neville slid an arm around Meghan’s shoulders. “You’re too smart to be just twelve,” he said.

“I know.” Meghan leaned into him. “And you’re too nice to be just fourteen.”

“Rising fifteen.”

“Fine, you’re too nice to be rising fifteen...” Meghan’s modified protest was cut off.

“I take it back,” she said when she could speak again. “That wasn’t nice at all.”

“Didn’t you like it?” Neville asked anxiously, suddenly worried that he’d overstepped.

“It wasn’t about *liking*,” Meghan said, putting her hands on her hips. “It was about you doing it before I could! That wasn’t nice at all!”

Neville didn’t let his smile show on his face. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “If you want to take revenge.”

“I’ll show you revenge,” Meghan said haughtily. “Race you to the Owlery. Last one there has to pay a forfeit.”

“Agreed.” Neville caught Meghan’s hand and shook it once. “Ready, steady, go!”

“No fair!” Meghan shrieked as he raced off. “I was supposed to have the head start!”

“But I... need it,” Neville panted out over his shoulder. “You’re the... deer... aren’t you?”

“Not yet I’m not...” Meghan looked past Neville, and her eyes widened. “Look out!”

Neville turned his head front again just in time to crash headlong into another student. Both of them went down, and Meghan, unable to stop, fell heavily on top of both of them.

Good thing she’s still so little.

“Sorry,” Neville panted, disentangling himself. “Sorry, didn’t see you...”

“Weren’t looking, you mean,” growled the other boy, sitting up. His blond hair was a mess, and his violently red face clashed horribly with his green and silver tie.

“Dursley?” said Neville in surprise.

“Longbottom,” Dursley grunted back, hauling himself upright. “Look where you’re going, next time.”

“I will. Sorry.” Neville watched the Slytherin out of sight. “What was he doing up here at this

hour?” he said, standing up and holding his hand down for Meghan.

“Same thing we are,” Meghan suggested.

“Yes, but with who?”

Meghan stood on tiptoe to smack Neville’s ear. “Not *that!* Mailing a letter!”

“Oh, mailing a letter. Of course.” Neville grinned at her. “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

Meghan rolled her eyes, then grinned back. “Race isn’t over,” she said in a rush. “Ready, set, go!”

Neville groaned and took off after her.

xXxXx

“You could get him in trouble,” Ron offered the next morning at breakfast.

“Who?” Seamus asked, leaning over to get the salt.

“Dursley,” Neville said. “Met him last night up near the Owlery, just about curfew. I don’t think he could have made it back to Slytherin in time.”

Seamus made a face. “I don’t like him,” he said. “No offense, Harry.”

“None taken.” Harry looked over his shoulder at the Slytherin table. “It’s not like we’re a close family or anything.”

“He cornered me in the library the other day,” Seamus went on. “Kept asking all these strange questions about you. I told him to bugger off.”

Harry chuckled. “Thanks, Seamus.”

“You’re welcome. It’s no business of his if you had a headache the other night.”

Harry frowned. “Did you tell him I had a headache?”

“No, he asked. ‘Did Potter have a headache Saturday night?’ he kept asking. I...” Seamus stopped, looking worried. “Oh hell, Harry, I’m sorry. I might have told him by accident. I swear I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s all right.” Harry looked over at the Pride as Seamus returned to his porridge. “How would Dursley know about my headache?” he asked in a low voice. “None of us would tell him.”

“From the other side?” Draco suggested grimly. “He’s been with them before.”

“That’s a serious charge,” said Hermione. “We should be sure before we go telling anyone.”

“So give him extra time to figure out what he’s going to do?” Ron shot back. “He’s in with the Death Eaters, Hermione! How bloody long do you want to wait?”

“Don’t swear at me, and don’t jump to conclusions,” Hermione snapped.

“It’s not much of a jump,” Ginny said. “Can you tell me any other way Dursley would have known about what happened to Harry?”

“How do you know it was about that?” Hermione looked back at the Slytherin table herself. “Maybe Dursley put something in Harry’s food, and he wanted to know if it worked. Look, I’m not saying I trust him, I’m just saying I don’t want to make trouble. Not so soon before the third task. The other champions can’t stay much beyond the end of June, and they have to finish the Tournament or the contract isn’t fulfilled and that’s bad, that’s very bad...”

“Hermione, calm down,” Neville said soothingly, raising a hand. “We don’t want to make trouble either. But someone should know that Dursley’s been asking questions that make it seem like he knows too much. That way, someone can keep an eye on him.”

“We can write Professor Dumbledore a note,” said Luna. “The post should be here soon, and we can use one of the owls.”

Meghan pulled a quill and ink from her bag, and Draco produced parchment. Harry scribbled a few lines on it and folded it up, writing Professor Dumbledore’s name on the outside. “There,” he said. “No more worries.”

Judging by Hermione’s face, she didn’t agree, but Harry wasn’t about to argue the point any more.

xXxXx

Harry was grateful for Dumbledore’s request that they sleep in the Den on the night before the third task. If he’d been in his bed, he would have lain awake all night worrying. Even with the familiar sounds and smells of the Pride around him, he lay for a while staring up at the star-studded ceiling before sleep ambushed him.

The Gryffindor table was cheerful and noisy the next morning. “Bother,” said Draco as the post arrived, digging through his bag. “I can’t find my notes on Portkeys.”

“Invented in 1206 by Melinda Hastings,” Hermione recited, accepting her copy of the *Daily Prophet* from the post owl. “Improved in 1494 by Frederico Malombo. Created with the There-And-Back-Again Spell, incantation, *Portus ...*” Her voice trailed off as she opened the paper.

“What’s wrong?” said Ron, looking up.

“I’m going to kill her,” said Hermione conversationally. “I’m going to get a very large newspaper, and I’m going to smash her.”

“I thought your parents stopped Skeeter,” said Neville.

“They were supposed to have,” said Harry. “Hermione, she hasn’t written another article?”

“Not written,” said Hermione, glaring at the paper. “It’s not her name on it. Someone named Ursinus. But I’d bet my magic she’s involved. Look at this.” She turned the paper around.

“Nice fresh angle,” said Ginny, peering at it. “First Harry was a sad little orphan, now he’s ‘disturbed and dangerous.’”

“Ooga ooga,” said Harry, wiggling his fingers.

“Disturbed, no,” said Draco. “Disturbing, yes.”

“People are looking at us,” remarked Luna.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Harry muttered.

Meghan had been reading the article. “Dursley’s quoted in here,” she said. “Telling everyone that you speak Parseltongue, Harry.”

Harry clenched his teeth for a second, then released them. “Most everyone knew already,” he said. “People who had a child at Hogwarts, anyway.”

“No one who knows you will care about this, Harry,” said Hermione, throwing the newspaper down on the table. “You know that.”

Harry nodded. “I know.”

It’s the people who don’t know me that I’m worried about.

xXxXx

Blaise Zabini folded his copy of the *Daily Prophet*, his mind working overtime. Across the table, Theodore Nott was poking at a bowl of porridge.

“Nott.” The other boy looked up. “You used to run around with Dursley.”

“That was a long time ago, Zabini.” Nott looked up the table sullenly, to where Dursley was laughing with several other students over the article. “He doesn’t have time for me anymore.”

“I know. I just wanted to ask. Did he ever have anything with his initials on it?”

“Some,” said Nott. “But it was just DD.”

Which tells me nothing. “All right.”

“No, wait...” Nott had his face screwed up, thinking hard. “He had to sign something once, some form or other, with his full name, and I got a look at it. He was pissed, but I swore I wouldn’t

tell.”

Blaise leaned over the table. “Unswear.”

“Why? Why do you care?”

Blaise looked over his shoulder at the Gryffindor table, then back at Nott. “None of your business,” he said.

“You owe Potter, don’t you?” Nott sneered. “You should have let Pritchard get what he deserved. Then you wouldn’t be stuck with a debt to some stupid prissy *Gryffindor* – oh, but I forgot, you *love* Gryffindors, don’t you?”

Blaise leaned forward again and let some of his mother’s look come into his eyes, the one she used when her latest man was being refractory. “I don’t care what you think about Potter or his House,” he said coldly. “Talk.”

xXxXx

Harry was determined not to let the newspaper article bother him, and so, it seemed, were the Pack-parents. Certainly, they met him in the anteroom after breakfast with smiles and hugs. Only Danger seemed unsettled about something. “Nothing for you to worry about, Harry,” she said when he asked. “Just a bad dream last night.”

“Who’s for the Forest?” Padfoot asked.

Six hands went up, Harry using both of his. “I want you to meet Sangre,” he said. “You met her already, Moony, but nobody else has.”

“Speaking of meeting,” said Letha. “Incoming, and Sirius, don’t gush.”

“I’m not going to gush.” Padfoot scowled. “How old do you think I am?”

“When it comes to Quidditch? Fourteen.” Letha turned a polite smile on Viktor Krum.

Harry stepped forward quickly and made the introductions. Krum smiled when he was introduced to Danger. “You are very like Hermione,” he said, pronouncing the name carefully. “I almost did not believe vot she told me, but now I am convinced.”

Danger returned the smile, if a little weakly. “What did she tell you, Mr. Krum?”

“Ven I told her that she vos lovely, she said that her sister vos lovelier than herself.” Krum frowned thoughtfully. “You are, and you are not... your beauty is stronger, perhaps, because it has had more time to grow. But Hermione vill be very like you ven she is older.”

Letha caught Harry’s eye and signed to him. *Laying it on rather thick, aren’t we?*

Harry, trying not to laugh aloud, nodded.

Is he always like this? Padfoot wanted to know.

How should I know? Ask Hermione.

“Well, thank you very much, Mr. Krum,” Danger was saying now.

“Viktor, please. I am such good friends with Hermione already that I feel I know you all – and I will hope for other chances to make that true.”

And with a bow, Krum strode away to rejoin his parents.

“And just exactly how good of friends is he with Hermione?” Moony asked in a quietly pointed tone.

“I don’t know. But they did go off together at the cast party, and they didn’t come back for a while...” Harry tried to remember Hermione that night. “She looked really happy,” he said finally. “Like she just got a four hundred percent on a test.”

Moony and Danger locked eyes for one moment. “Never mind,” said Danger with a sigh, breaking away. “We can’t change what’s already happened. Shall we?”

The rest of the morning was filled with running, chasing, pouncing, laughing, and every other “ing” Harry had ever associated with the Pack, including denning – they rested in between times curled together in piles of fur, with Letha’s glossy feathers arched over them all. It could only have been more fun with the other cubs there, or with the whole Pride.

Someday, Harry promised Wolf. Someday we will romp all together.

His calls to Sangre were answered late in the morning, so that introductions to her were the last thing that happened before heading back to the castle for lunch. During the meal, Padfoot dangled Meghan over a tureen of soup by her ankles, Letha gently plaited together bits of Ginny and Luna’s hair as they sat side by side, and Moony enchanted the crumbs from Ron’s crisps to spell out rude words.

“I *told* you not to get them all wound up,” Hermione scolded Harry.

They toured the castle in the afternoon, Moony and Padfoot trying to outdo one another with old stories, Letha occasionally able to top them both. Danger listened and laughed, but it was clear her mind was elsewhere.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked during a quiet moment.

“Do you really want to know?” Danger flicked a bit of his hair off his forehead. “You can’t do anything about it, and you don’t need anything else to worry about right now–”

“And I’m worried about you,” Harry slid in smoothly. “Sharing trouble makes it easier, you taught me that. What’s wrong?”

“Brat,” Danger said without rancor. “Turning my own words back on me. All right, I’ll tell you.” She chewed her lip for a moment. “I dreamed of my parents last night, Harry,” she said. “Of their deaths. I’ve seen many things, but never that.”

Harry’s breath caught. He knew the story from den-nights, knew the bare minimum of what had happened to the Grangers, and could fill in some of the rest from what he now knew of Death Eaters and his own imagination.

Which is officially nastier than I ever thought it was.

“I listened to the voices, and took the scents,” Danger went on, her own voice flat and neutral, her eyes solid brown. “I watched to see which of them did what. I will know those men again. One of them I already knew.” Her lips twitched up, too quickly to be a true smile, but the start of one. “There is justice in the world, Harry. Lucius Malfoy killed my father.”

Harry held back a smile of his own. *Yeah, that’s justice. “Kill my father, will you? I’m going to steal your kid, turn you into a werewolf, and generally screw up your life.”*

“I don’t know the man who killed my mother. But I know that he still lives, and that it is in my power to find him. And I will find him.” Danger’s lips drew back from her teeth for an instant. “I will find him, and justice will be done.”

Suddenly I know where I get the nasty streak. Daring greatly, Harry laid his hand on Danger’s arm. “We’re getting left behind,” he said. “We should catch up.”

Danger blinked, and blue swirled into her eyes again. “Yes, we should. They’re two floors above us – good Lord, I did go off. Don’t mind me, Harry, I was just a bit shaken up by that.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Harry said dryly, making Danger laugh a little. “Can I ask you something about dreams? Not that one,” he added quickly, “but dreams in general. And dreamsculpting. Could I be a dreamsculpter? Without knowing it, I mean?”

“It’s possible,” said Danger thoughtfully. “But not likely. It can be learned, but you haven’t been trying, so that’s out. Most people who have natural talent for it know about it, if only at a ‘well-can’t-everyone-do-that’ level, the way I did before I met Remus. That was how I knew my prophetic dreams were so unusual, because I couldn’t control them.”

“So if a dreamsculpter can’t affect a dream, it’s prophetic?”

“Not necessarily.” Danger looked piercingly at him. “Give it up, Greeneyes, what happened? I know there was something Saturday last, but not what. Let’s have it.”

Harry grimaced inwardly, but told Danger the whole story, not bothering to leave anything out. His Pack-mother was almost as good a truth detector as Veritaserum, and if she didn’t catch him,

Moony certainly would. Danger listened carefully, asking a question or two in various places. They'd caught up with the other Pack-parents by the time Harry finished.

"Moony's been keeping us updated," Padfoot said, checking inside a classroom. "Empty. Good." He waved everyone inside. "So being the Heir isn't enough, eh, Harry? You have to walk a little farther on the weird side?"

Harry growled. "I didn't ask for this," he said. "I didn't ask for *any* of this. And if you're going to make it harder for me..." His hand-sign was not Marauder, but universal.

"You too," said Padfoot cheerily. "Sideways."

"Gentlemen," said Letha coolly.

"Wishful thinking," said Danger.

"A girl can dream, can't she?" Letha pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I did some reading on dreamsculpting last year," Moony said, sitting down himself. "It belongs to a class of talents sometimes called the mental arts, or mind-magic. There is evidence that these talents are not strictly speaking magical, since they occasionally pop up in Muggles, and are usually strongest in witches and wizards with recent Muggle ancestry."

"Is it an all-or-nothing shot like magic?" Harry asked. "Danger just said something about learning to dreamsculpt."

"You can learn them," Moony admitted. "It takes time and patience if you're not naturally gifted, but they can be learned. There were quite a few of them, but of course, I was most interested in dreamsculpting, and in related things. And that's how I read about astral travel."

"It's like dreamsculpting, in that you do it when you're asleep," Danger said. "But instead of going to a place that your mind invents, you go to a real place, and see real people and events. Sound familiar?"

"It was real, then?" Harry shivered briefly, thinking of the dank corridor and the snake. "The house and Voldemort and everything?"

"If you've been to the same place twice, I'd tend to think it was real," said Letha. "Especially considering the similar casts of unsavory characters."

"Unsavory characters?" Padfoot snorted. "Letha, my villains are unsavory characters. This is Voldemort we're talking about. He's not unsavory. He's evil. Unsavory has a slightly positive ring to it. A pirate might be unsavory, but you still like him. I don't think anybody besides the Death Eaters likes Voldemort."

"Death Eater wannabes," Harry suggested.

“Who asked you?” Padfoot leaned back in his chair. “I will be so damned glad when this is over,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve had a full night’s sleep since you got into this tournament, Harry.”

“Yes, you have,” said Letha. “I get to hear you snore.”

Padfoot glared at her, then looked back at Harry. “Never get married,” he said.

Harry made a sad face. “Not ever?”

“Well, be very, very sure about her temper before you ask her. And don’t ever let *her* ask *you*. That’s certain death. Ow!” Padfoot rubbed the back of his head. “See what I mean?”

Moony and Danger wore identical satisfied smiles, and their eyes were equal parts brown and blue. “That’s just scary,” Harry told them.

“I know,” said Moony in Danger’s voice.

Harry let his head fall into his hands. “Why couldn’t I have had a normal family?” he asked the floor.

“Trust me, Harry, even if you’d had a normal family, you wouldn’t have had a normal family,” Letha said. “You think Sirius is bad; James was worse. And Lily had her troublemaking side.”

“You really want to get rid of us, Harry?” Danger asked.

“No. Not unless I could have you all.” Harry sat up and stretched his back. “A really *big* Pack.”

Now it was Moony and Padfoot who looked exactly alike. Both of them were grinning.

“Merlin on roller skates,” groaned Letha. “I don’t even want to imagine that.”

“Don’t worry, Letha,” Danger said. “If it had happened, I’m sure the outcome would have been exactly the same as it is now.”

“We run everything.”

“You got it.”

“So, getting back to astral travel,” said Moony. “If you really can do it, Harry, you ought to practice it. Learn to do it consistently, maybe even learn some tricks for falling asleep quickly so you can do it whenever you need to. It could come in handy.”

“All right. But after the Tournament.”

“I don’t think you have a choice,” said Danger. “Unless you’re going to take a nap.”

Harry shook his head. “I couldn’t sleep now.”

“Last night?” Letha asked.

“We were down where we den. I was fine.”

“Good,” said Padfoot. “I’d hate to see you miss the Triwizard Cup because you fell asleep on the job.”

xXxXx

I don’t care how tired I was. There’s no way I could sleep in here.

Harry’s nerves were keyed up to a pitch higher than any Draco could reach on his flute, half with fear, half with excitement. He was doing well, and he knew he was close. The sphinx had told him so.

I hope Fleur’s all right. That still worried him. He’d heard her scream, but no red sparks had followed it. She had either extracted herself from trouble and gone on, or got into trouble so completely that she couldn’t send up the distress signal.

I like the first option better. Even if it does mean more competition. There were some nasty things in here. He shook off images of Fleur unconscious, bleeding, her wand flung away from her, exacerbated by what he’d had to stop a few moments before...

What the hell was Krum thinking? How would putting the Cruciatus on Cedric help him? Unless he was going to Obliviate him, or kill him to stop him telling...

Harry sped up, turning right. He could see light now, he was almost there –

He saw the Triwizard Cup, Cedric, and the acromantula simultaneously.

“Cedric! On your left!”

xXxXx

Albus Dumbledore looked serene, but that was only by dint of many years of practice. In fact, he was nervous, and beyond nervous, frightened. This would be a perfect time for an attack, not only on Harry, but on Hogwarts itself.

But without Voldemort, the Death Eaters are disorganized, unconsolidated. They would never figure that out, nor would they dare to try anything without their Dark master to pass out rewards.

Still, he prided himself that he had a few tricks left. Harry’s family shared his worries, and had promised to signal him if Harry was at any time in serious danger of death. He was keeping careful track of Igor Karkaroff, and had not let him near any of the creatures or objects which entered the maze.

And for my final trick...

Dumbledore smiled to himself. As Headmaster, he had a certain bond with Hogwarts, not as deep as the bond of the Founders and their Heirs, but it would do. He had magically sensitized himself, on this special night, to the entrances and exits from the castle grounds. Should anything attempt to enter or leave, by any means, he would know of it, and be able to counter it if necessary –

With the typical irony of the universe, his nerves tightened painfully before he had finished the thought. He lashed out with magic, catching the feeling before it fled and holding it to identify. *Portkey. Unauthorized, obviously – what, and who –*

Two people, taken by surprise. Two boys. Harry – his mind’s feel was unmistakable – and Cedric.

I have caught them – but can I keep them?

He reached out another tendril of magic, looping it around the boys, but the Portkey would not be denied. It refused his touch, shoving him away. He could not shut it down.

And if I merely pull them back, the Portkey will pull them forward at the same time, and the result –

He swallowed against his dry mouth. He had seen people torn apart by improperly made Portkeys, once by accident, again in the war against Grindelwald. There would be no bodies left to speak of, merely bits of flesh and blood scattered between here and the arrival point.

I have no choice.

Dumbledore let go.

Forgive me.

xXxXx

Harry and Cedric stood in a graveyard, wands out, watching the approaching figure. Harry squinted at him. Why was his walk familiar...?

A deep breath brought him the answer, borne on the wind, the scent of rat and man and fear all blended into one. “Cedric, *run!*” he screamed, just before his scar split his head in two with agony.

Twelve golden necklaces burned cold.

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 50: Life and Death (Year 4)

Chapter 50: Life and Death

“No.” Hermione shook her head. “No, Viktor, you must be wrong. You can’t mean this.”

“I am sorry, Herm-own-ninny – Hermione.” Viktor rubbed his forehead. “I am sure. It vos your brother who attacked me. His spell ended my chances for the Cup.”

“I understand this must be terrible for you, Miss Granger-Lupin,” said Karkaroff from Viktor’s other side, reaching over him to pat Hermione’s shoulder. “But I’m sure you’ll do the right thing.”

Hermione moved back a little to avoid Karkaroff’s hand, and lost her balance as her collarbone suddenly seemed to contract. *Cold – God, it’s right through me, what –*

Her breath deserted her as she understood. “No,” she panted, pushing herself up to sitting. “No, no, no...”

“No? You won’t do the right thing?” Karkaroff sounded puzzled, but Hermione barely heard him. She was on her knees now, then on her feet, staring towards the section of the stands she’d abandoned when Hagrid had brought Viktor from the maze, unconscious. People were hurrying about it purposefully, and as she watched, Padfoot turned towards her and waved her in.

“I’m sorry,” she babbled. “I’m sorry, but I have to go – something’s wrong – it’s Harry – I have to go–”

“Herm-own-ninny, vait,” Viktor called, but Hermione was already four steps away from him and moving fast.

Harry was in trouble.

xXxXx

“What in Merlin’s name is going on over there?” asked Cornelius Fudge, craning his neck from the teachers’ and judges’ section to peer at a section of the stands. “Someone just screamed, a girl – and there’s something coming this way, an animal of some sort – Dumbledore, what’s going on?”

“Something has gone wrong, Cornelius.”

“Wrong? How?”

Dumbledore was spared having to answer by the arrival of the tan wolf, which reared up and was Danger again. “What is it?” she said without preamble.

“A Portkey,” Dumbledore said. “I could not stop it.”

“Understood.” Danger’s eyes swirled. “You can track it, though.”

“Of course.” Dumbledore rose.

“Track it – Portkey – what are you talking about?” Fudge demanded. “What Portkey is this?”

“One I did not expect, Cornelius. Perhaps I should have, but I did not.”

Fudge looked from Dumbledore to the maze and back again. “Dumbledore, are you saying someone placed a Portkey on Hogwarts grounds without your knowledge?”

“That’d seem to be it, wouldn’t it?” said Moody from the row below without bothering to turn. “I can get started tracking it, Dumbledore, if you’ve other things to do.”

“Thank you, Alastor. Call on a house-elf if you need one.”

“Who was taken?” Minerva asked as Moody started to the ground level.

“Harry and Cedric.”

“No news of Fleur?” said Madame Maxime, frowning. “It is not like ‘er.”

“Dumbledore, you can’t mean this,” Fudge blustered. “How could anyone get onto these grounds, set a Portkey, without being seen? It goes against common sense—”

“It also goes against common sense,” said Bartemius Crouch unexpectedly, “that anyone would force their way into a man’s house and hold him hostage, not because he knows anything or does anything that would help them, but just because they like to have power. And yet it happened.” He looked Fudge in the eye, and Dumbledore allowed himself a tiny spike of satisfaction at Fudge’s shuddering recoil. “Things happen you’re not ready for, Cornelius. Things go wrong.” He turned to Dumbledore. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I hesitate to ask—”

“Don’t.”

“The Diggorys.”

Crouch nodded and started down the stairs after Moody.

“Dumbledore, this is ridiculous. Who would possibly—”

“Excuse me,” Danger broke in. She was kneeling in front of an empty seat, one between Dumbledore’s own and Madame Maxime’s. “Who was sitting here?”

“Karkaroff, of course,” said Fudge irritably, then turned back to Dumbledore. “You’re fear-mongering, Dumbledore, and I won’t have it. The Tournament’s had its troubles, but—”

Danger cut him off again. “Where did he go?”

“He is on the field,” Dumbledore said, then looked. Krum sat alone, bewildered. “Or perhaps not. Do you need him?”

“I want to talk to him.” The velvet steel in Danger’s voice drew every eye to her. Even Fudge stopped griping for a moment. “About something that happened a long time ago. Pardon me.”

The woman became the wolf, the wolf lowered its nose and vanished down the stairs. Fudge stared after her for a moment, then looked up and squawked. “Dumbledore!”

“Animagus, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore, though he could appreciate Fudge’s feelings, and the gasps and screams running through the crowd. Not even at Hogwarts were lions a usual part of the scenery, and a lion galloping straight towards one did tend to inspire fear.

“What did you say to her?” Remus demanded almost before he’d retransformed. “I can barely feel her, I have no idea where she is—”

“Karkaroff,” said Madame Maxime, looking down at Remus in puzzlement. “What do you mean by ‘feel ‘er’?”

“She’s been fretting all day over a dream she had last night,” Remus said, ignoring this. “About the Death Eaters who killed her parents – Malfoy killed her father, but she didn’t know the one who killed her mother—”

Dumbledore held up a hand. “Does she want revenge on him?” he asked.

“I – I don’t know. Maybe. Yes.” Remus’ eyes widened, entirely blue. “God, Albus, she could be anywhere, doing anything—”

“But she will not.” Dumbledore twitched his wand around his head, giving himself the ability to see Danger’s trail as a glowing line. “Remus, listen to me,” he said, following the line of light with his eyes. “You must be in charge of finding Harry and Cedric. Alastor is tracking the Portkey that took them, and you will know other ways better than I. Leave Danger to me. Do not try to break through to her, do not even try to touch her, if you value her life. Wait for her to call to you, and then do what you think best.”

“But—”

Dumbledore was already moving, following Danger’s path, praying he was not already too late.

No. I would know if I were. Remus would have reacted. I will be in time.

He pushed away thoughts of Harry and Cedric, so young, so unprepared for what he feared had

befallen them. *And we cannot help them until we know where they have gone, and constructing a Portkey trace takes at least five minutes...*

But I cannot worry about them now. I must trust that others will help them, and concentrate on the task in front of me.

Will I be able to reach her? And will I be in time?

xXxXx

Heat throbbed in Harry's forehead, cold beat against his chest, the tombstone to which he was bound chilled the rest of him. He forced himself to draw each breath, to keep his eyes open against the pain in his head and his leg, to watch and listen.

Wormtail had vanished around the side of the stone after tying and gagging Harry. The golden Triwizard Cup lay several yards away, among the other tombstones. There was no sign of Cedric.

He must have run. I hope he gets away.

The bundle of cloth Wormtail had been carrying stirred on the ground. Harry gagged as the smell from it reached him, and another pulse of pain shot through his scar.

Voldemort... but how...?

A rustle at his feet, and the giant snake Voldemort had called Nagini slithered out of the grass to regard him. *"I will have you soon, frightened boy,"* she hissed, her tongue flicking to taste his scent. *"My master has promised."*

Wormtail's gasping breaths grew louder in Harry's right ear, along with an intermittent dragging sound and a splashing. Harry strained his eyes to the right and was rewarded with a glimpse of Wormtail, throwing himself against an enormous stone cauldron, big enough that Harry could have hidden inside it. The liquid within it slopped around as Wormtail shoved it to the foot of the headstone where Harry was bound.

"Hurry!" whispered a cold voice, and the bundle on the ground stirred again, as if something within wanted to be free. Harry almost retched, but held it back. He couldn't be sick, not here, not now.

Wormtail had lit a fire under the cauldron, the shimmering liquid within was starting to steam and bubble, boiling unnaturally fast even for a potion. Nagini slipped away around the side of the tombstone. Harry's head pounded harder than ever.

"It is ready, Master," Wormtail breathed.

"Now..."

Wormtail pulled open the bundle of cloth on the ground, and a sound that was half yell, half howl

escaped from Harry. The thing crouching on the ground horrified his wolf instincts and his human mind equally. It was the size and shape of a human toddler, but its arms and legs were too thin for its body, its skin was red and raw, covered with scabs –

Or scales?

Harry's eyes fell on its face, and he shrank back against the tombstone. Red eyes, hungry and slitted, gleamed above a flat place where a nose should have been and a gash of a mouth. It opened, and a pale tongue traced invisible lips.

"Now," Voldemort repeated, and Wormtail bent, taking his master in his arms in a parody of a father's tenderness. Harry watched Wormtail's face twist in disgust as he carried the creature to the cauldron, watched it straighten out again as he lowered it down and let it go. A small splash, and the roiling surface of the potion was again unmarked.

The pain in Harry's head was blotting out everything else, he was starting to see red and black. He bit his lip until he tasted blood and focused on that, on the salt-copper-iron flavor, forcing the pain back. *I have to stay awake... stay awake...*

xXxXx

Igor Karkaroff moved silently through the undergrowth at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, hidden by his demiguise-fur-lined cloak and the gathering darkness. He could follow the Forest to the school wall, and from there to the gate – Dumbledore shouldn't be too interested in one man leaving, not with his golden boy missing –

He suspected me, but I outfoxed him, the old fool. He smirked as he thought of how easy it had been. Barty Crouch had fallen under the Imperius easily, his mind and body recalling old habits, and under that Imperius had carried the carefully vetted Triwizard Cup into the maze. And there – ah, there...

Karkaroff chuckled in his throat. *I knew Dumbledore had a spell-watch out on the maze, checking to make sure no one set any traps. Poor, clumsy Bartemius, dropping the cup. And such shoddy workmanship, for both its handles to fall off. Good thing old Barty could fix them back on. Or rather, fix on the replacements I gave him – the replacements, already turned into Portkeys...*

His chuckle grew louder. Why not? No one had noticed his going, no one but Viktor, and Viktor wouldn't betray him. Besides, in a few moments it would no longer matter. Any minute, any second, he would know again the exultation of agony that was his master's call.

I was a fool to think that I could ever escape from him – no, I was a fool to wish to escape from him. Running from him means only death. But I gave him what he wanted, what his other servants couldn't give – I gave him Harry Potter. For that, I will be honored above all others, even the ones who remained faithful –

Something caught him in the stomach, and he doubled up, wheezing. His brain screamed for air,

but his lungs seemed to have forgotten how to function –

“Hello,” said a quiet voice from the darkness ahead, a woman’s voice, chilling in its utter lack of inflection. “Do you know me?”

A light flickered into existence at waist-level. Gasping, Karkaroff looked up.

“My name is Danger,” the woman said, the dancing flames in her hand shedding an unearthly pattern of light and shadows over her features. “You killed my mother.”

“No,” Karkaroff forced out with his first half-breath. “I never... I was forced...”

“You lie.” A flip of her fingers, and his cloak was aflame. He ripped it from his back, coughing with the smoke, and flung it from him, towards her. Her eyes flicked up to it, and it flared and was gone, raining ash down upon them.

He’d seen her face more clearly in the flash of light. “Granger-Lupin,” he breathed.

“You know my name.” Her eyes held his without mercy. “Do you remember hers? Or did you never bother to learn it?”

“I swear, on my honor–”

“You have no honor.” Her voice dripped contempt now. “Changing sides every time the wind blows a different way – what is your true face? Where does your allegiance lie? Or is it only to yourself?”

Karkaroff fell to his knees, sliding his right hand unobtrusively into a pocket. If he could just get his hand on his wand without her noticing... “Spare me, please,” he babbled. “I regret what I did – I had no choice – let me face justice, I will make restitution–”

“Liar!” The woman pointed at his reaching hand. Karkaroff screamed as flames wreathed it, burning into his skin. “You regret nothing! I watched you! You laughed while they screamed, you begged for a chance to kill one of them!” Her voice lowered into a growl. “Now beg *me*.”

“Let me live,” Karkaroff whimpered. His hand throbbed in pain, and he cradled it to his chest. “Please, let me live...”

xXxXx

“*Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!*” cried Wormtail in a shaking voice, the wand in his hand pointing towards Harry’s feet. The ground cracked, and a fine stream of dust rose up. Wormtail waved the wand, and the dust fell softly into the cauldron. The liquid within hissed and sparked, bubbled up to the lip of the cauldron, and turned a vivid, poisonous blue before returning to its original furious boil.

Let it boil over, Harry thought desperately. *Let it put out the fire...*

Wormtail stepped closer to the cauldron, pulling a silver dagger from his robes, longer and thinner than Harry's own. His voice shook almost as much as his hands. *"Flesh – of the servant – willingly given – you will – revive – your master."*

Harry watched the dagger's upswing in Wormtail's left hand, watched it glow brilliantly red, realized in that instant what Wormtail was about to do – he clenched his eyes shut, but he had no way to block the scream that shattered the night, or the splash as something fell into the cauldron – the red light of the potion penetrated his eyelids, and a hiss from the fire told him that a little of the potion, at least, had boiled over, but obviously not enough to put the fire out –

Put the fire out. The fire.

I'm supposed to be the Heir of Gryffindor. I'm supposed to have power over fire.

And I know I can put fires out. I've done it before.

Harry opened his eyes. Wormtail was bent over next to the cauldron, but he was straightening up, coming towards Harry, the dagger still in his left hand, his breath sobbing in his throat. Behind him, the cauldron still boiled, the fire under it still danced –

Not for long.

Harry aimed his will at the fire, feeding all his pain, all his anger, all his disgust and horror into the command. *Go out*, he ordered it. *Go out now.*

Wormtail was right in front of him, blocking his view, but it didn't, it couldn't matter. This was his only chance, his only hope. *Go out, fire. Stop burning. Die.*

"B-blood of the enemy... forcibly taken... you will... resurrect your foe."

Harry's concentration almost broke. He snatched the new fear and pushed it into the magic. *This is the only way to stop him. The only way. The only...*

Pain in the crook of his left elbow. Harry snarled. *Stop fighting me! Go out NOW!*

The light in the clearing died. Wormtail whirled, dropping the dagger. "Master!" he shrieked.

Harry sagged against his bonds, breathing hard.

I did it. I did it. I don't believe it.

Now I have to get free...

xXxXx

Remus watched the hedges of the maze slowly shrink into the ground. Madame Maxime, worried about Fleur, and Fudge, unable or unwilling to believe what Dumbledore had said, had asked if

there were some way to take the maze down and see what was within.

It may not help Harry, but it feels better to be doing something.

Or rather, to have asked someone else to do something.

Remus' eyes moved to the two figures side by side on the field, sitting cross-legged with their hands planted on the ground, one slightly larger than the other, both glowing ever so faintly golden-yellow. *I just hope no one else sees it. But they won't – Bagman told everyone there was some innate enchantment in the hedges to make them come down, so that's what everyone believes. For once, gullibility is on our side.*

Minerva, Hagrid, and the other teachers, along with a few audience volunteers (notably Charlie Weasley and Tonks) were spread out around the perimeter of the maze, ready to capture the creatures and dispel the enchantments. Moody was off to one side, mapping the Portkey trace. Krum sat in the stands watching. There was still no sign of Dumbledore, Karkaroff, or Danger.

And the rest of the Pack, and the Pride, are going quietly berserk.

xXxXx

Ginny was sure she'd permanently imprinted her palm with the carvings on her pendants, and she didn't care. They were her only link to Harry. She wasn't going to let go until he was found.

Mum was a few seats away with Bill and the twins, watching the field intently. Below her, Ron was pacing the stands, his fists clenched as he tried to work off his nervous energy. Hermione twisted handfuls of her robe into knots, then untwisted them. Draco sat very still, his knuckles white where they gripped the edge of the bench. Meghan was watching the distant figure of Neville, sitting beside his father, working to lower the hedges of the maze where Harry had vanished. Luna was a seat or two above them all, surrounded by her father and Mr. Padfoot and Mrs. Letha, all talking quietly about something. *Whatever it is, it had better be about helping Harry...*

A wave of anger swamped her, and she clenched her hand more tightly still around her pendants. *Nobody is doing anything! Nobody is even trying! If I had any way to help Harry, I'd do it, I don't care if it hurt or if it was hard or if it took something away I could never get back! I'd do it no matter what it took!*

She could feel the blood pulsing through her hand now, could practically see it, rushing red through her fingers. *I'd bleed if I had to. If it would get Harry back here safely, I'd bleed. I'd bleed until my heart couldn't beat anymore –*

Thoughts of Harry and heartbeats rushed together into a memory, and Ginny was on her feet, dropping the pendants. "Everyone come here!" she cried. "I know what we can do!"

xXxXx

Wait a minute. I'm tied with rope. Rope burns. Can I burn the rope off me?

A flash of heat shot through his pendants, and tiny flares erupted at multiple points down his body.

That would be a yes.

Automatically, Harry shifted forms as he fell, landing softly on three legs and suppressing a yelp. He couldn't afford to attract Wormtail's attention, even for a second. Tail down, his bad leg curled under him, he crept around the tombstone, spat out the gag, and turned –

To come face to face with Nagini.

"Master!" the snake hissed out. *"Mas –"*

Wolf had her by the throat before she could finish the word. He bit down harder and harder, snarling under his breath, until he felt her go limp in his jaws. *"Who has who now?"* he growled around her body. *"So much for promises."*

The smell of fire and a flash of white light from the other side of the tombstone recalled Harry to himself. It seemed Wormtail had managed to start the fire again.

And I don't really want to find out whether it still works or not.

Freeing himself of the snake's body, he started to run.

xXxXx

The woman's lip curled as she stared at Karkaroff. "You don't deserve life," she said coldly.

"And that is why you must give it to him," a new voice said, firm and clear. A bright light shone into Karkaroff's eyes from one side, nearly blinding him.

The woman turned to face the light. "Stay out of this, Albus," she warned. "This is my business, not yours."

"Not true, Danger." Albus Dumbledore moved a few steps closer, his wand directed at Karkaroff. "I have made it my life's business to stop those who do not understand what they are doing."

"I understand what I'm doing. I'm ridding the world of a parasite."

"Are you?" Dumbledore's eyes raked Karkaroff coolly before returning to the woman. "Or are you seeking revenge for your mother's death?"

The woman sucked air through clenched teeth. "I told you to get out," she said, lifting a hand. "Or it won't be just him I flame next."

Dumbledore smiled slightly. “If you attack me, dear Danger, I must defend myself, and whilst we fight, Igor may escape, something I am sure you are eager to prevent. Stop for a moment and think about what you are doing. Really think. What has Igor Karkaroff done to you that would give you the right to kill him?”

“He killed my mother!”

“I do not deny it. But that was nearly fifteen years ago. What has he done more recently?”

“Harry,” the woman said certainly. “He’s behind what’s happened to Harry, he must be—”

“Perhaps,” Dumbledore acknowledged. “But killing him will not return Harry to us.”

The woman’s face creased in an animal snarl. “He deserves to die!” she shouted.

“Can you say that?” Dumbledore’s wand never wavered from Karkaroff’s chest as he spoke to the woman. “It is more than I would say, and I have lived much longer than you, and seen much more of life. Answer me this. What benefit, here and now, will killing this man bring to you, or to anyone?”

The woman’s breath was coming fast and hard, her fists were balled. “I want his life,” she growled. “I want to watch him die, and I want him to know why.”

“You wish to murder him.”

“I want justice!”

Karkaroff tried to edge away. Dumbledore’s wand stabbed at him, and he was frozen in place. “You want to murder him,” the old man repeated. “You want to kill him without giving him any chance to defend himself. To this end, you attacked him, without warning and with superior power. And you have cut yourself off from your husband, who would stop you from doing this if he knew. Can you deny this?”

The woman tipped her head back and screamed. Karkaroff’s paralysis ended, and he fell to the ground, jarring his hand. He never even heard his own cry of pain in the endless scream that filled his ears and his mind and left no room for anything else.

xXxXx

Remus shuddered as Danger’s sense, shielded as it was, twisted in rage. To keep his mind off her, he peered over the stands. *What are Sirius and Aletha doing with Luna? It looks like they’re trying to talk her into something, and she doesn’t want to.*

Curiosity got the better of him, and he ran up the stands to the passages between sections, coming down again directly above the little knot of people. “Do you really think I should?” Luna was saying as Remus got close enough to hear. “Really?”

“You’re our best hope, Luna,” Aletha said, pressing the girl’s hand. “You’re Harry’s best hope. You don’t have to, but if you would...”

“I know it frightens you to see, baby,” Gerald Lovegood told his daughter, embracing her briefly with one arm. “But Mrs. Letha’s right. If you could see where Harry is, then maybe somebody could go and help him. And I know you could see where he is. You’re just that smart.”

“Please, Luna,” Sirius said hoarsely. “Please.”

Luna lifted her pendants and looked at them for a moment or two. Then she selected one with a blue jewel and closed her fingers around it. “*Volo videre novi,*” she said carefully.

Blue light flared and faded.

xXxXx

Karkaroff stared up at the woman, her face twisted in fury and surrounded by flames. She lifted her hand high, then slammed it down towards him –

And a pillar of flame crashed into the ground a bare inch from his nose and disappeared.

“I can’t,” the woman said softly. The fire around her flickered and went out. “You’re right. You’re so right...” She backed away from him, staring at her hands. “Albus, what have I done?”

“Nothing,” said Dumbledore, moving quickly to her side. “Nothing, dear heart. Nothing that you will regret now.”

“Thanks to you.” She embraced him, burying her face in his shoulder for a moment. Dumbledore stroked her wild hair, murmuring to her, but his eyes were still on Karkaroff, and his wand was loose in his hand, ready to move.

“I must return to the stadium,” the old Headmaster said after a moment. “They may need me. Will you be all right here?”

“I think so.” She pushed away from him. “Yes. I’ll be all right now.”

Her eyes closed and opened, and Dumbledore smiled at what he saw. “Yes, you will be,” he said. “I leave you, then.” He turned and hurried away.

The woman turned back to Karkaroff, a smile touching her lips. “So you get what you asked for,” she said. “I’ll hand you over to the Ministry after all. And I don’t think you have anything to bargain with this time.”

Karkaroff gritted his teeth. *This is not the way it was supposed to go.*

xXxXx

Remus caught a grateful breath as Danger's touch opened to him again. **You're all right.**

Yes, I'm fine. You?

Likewise. Remus let the last few minutes' worth of happenings spill into Danger's mind, while he caught sight through her eyes of a kneeling, defeated Karkaroff. **Luna's looking for him right now,** he finished.

xXxXx

Wolf dodged between tombstones, favoring his bad leg, hoping he was still going in the right direction. He'd hide behind the tombstones, wait for help to come –

A dark shape erupted from behind a nearby stone. Wolf snarled and leapt at it.

“Harry, no, it's me!” the shape babbled as it went down under Wolf's weight. “Harry, don't–”

Harry changed back. “Sorry,” he breathed, rolling off Cedric. “Did I hurt you?”

“No – what was that back there?” Cedric looked pale and shocked. “What's going on?”

“Voldemort's here.” Harry leaned against a tombstone, feeling drained. It had never hit him so hard before that the Animagus transformation took a lot of energy to do. “He's trying to come back to life all the way. I don't know if it worked or not.”

“V-V-You-Know-Who? *Here?*” Cedric stared back the way Harry had come, appalled. “I thought he was dead!”

“I wish.” If it was only his head or only his leg, Harry thought, he could stand it. Or even if they hurt in the same rhythm, but his leg throbbed to his heartbeat and his head was just getting steadily worse. “No, he's... he's...”

“Harry!”

xXxXx

Ron and Meghan spun to face Ginny, Hermione and Draco jumped up. “What?” “What is it?” “What can we do?”

“Join up. The way we did with the Longbottoms.” Ginny leapt down a bench and sat, and the others closed in around her. “Harry will need magic, and we have magic. We can send it to him!”

Hermione held out her hands eagerly, and Draco and Ron each clasped one. Ginny took Ron's other hand, and Meghan nipped in between Ginny and Draco. “There's only five of us,” the little girl pointed out.

“Five will have to be enough,” said Hermione, dropping into her alpha female voice. “In the name

of the Pride, I convene this gathering. Pride together.”

“Pride forever,” the others answered.

“We have power,” Hermione said quietly. “We know we have power. We combine that power now, all of us together, and send it to our alpha, who is fighting for his life far away. So we speak, so we intend.”

“And so let it be done,” the Pride murmured.

Ginny sank into herself and listened for the nearest heartbeat, Ron’s. Carefully, she slowed hers, then speeded it up again until they matched. Hermione and Draco were already together and reaching for Meghan.

Hang on, Harry, Ginny willed. Hang on. We’re coming.

xXxXx

Cedric’s face swam out of focus as Harry’s eyelids drooped. From far away, he recognized this as a bad thing, knew he should try to get up and keep going, but it felt so good to lie still, to smell nothing but clean grass in the night, to listen to his heart beating...

Or was it his heartbeat he could hear? Harry concentrated.

Yes, that’s me. My heart. His hand kept time with it on the ground. But what’s that other beat? Where is it coming from?

Could he be hearing Cedric’s heart? No, Cedric wasn’t close enough. And whatever it was, it was getting closer, close enough to smell. Harry sniffed. Flowers and spices, parchment and pine –

A smile spread across Harry’s lips. He knew what this was.

We have to match up. A little slower, a little longer between beats, a little more...

His tiredness vanished as the power of the linked Pride poured into him. He sent an acknowledgement of the link towards his friends, and opened his eyes to see Cedric hovering anxiously above him. “I’m all right now,” he said, sitting up. “But we have to get out of here.”

As if reinforcing this, the power link wobbled. Harry swayed but stayed upright. *What the hell?*

xXxXx

Luna shrieked and dropped into a huddle. “Mummy,” she sobbed, her hands covering her face. “Mummy, Mummy, no. No.”

“Baby?” Gerald touched her tentatively. “Luna, love?”

Luna raised her face. “Daddy, I know now,” she said, suddenly calm. “I know what happened to Mummy. I know why she died.”

Gerald paled. “Tell me,” he whispered.

“She saw him.” Luna looked around at the three Pack-adults. “She saw Voldemort.”

xXxXx

“Any ideas?” Cedric asked, helping Harry to go from sitting to crouching.

“Can you Apparate?”

“Yes, but I’ve never done Side-Along. I’d probably splinch us.”

“Go yourself, then. Get help. I can hide for a little while.”

Cedric shook his head. “I’m not leaving you here alone. Not with *him*.”

As if to reinforce this decision, Wormtail screamed. Harry winced as his scar burned again, but cool violet power drifted through him and the pain receded. “We should hide,” he said when he could speak. “He’ll be after us as soon as he’s done with Wormtail...”

xXxXx

“Can I let go?” Draco asked.

“I think so.” Hermione released his hand, and they carefully separated. “Are we still linked?”

Ron nodded. “We’re good.”

“Perfect.” Draco ran up the stands. “Keep going,” he called back. “I’ll get Luna in with us.”

xXxXx

Karkaroff’s arm suddenly burned, and his teeth clenched harder. It had worked. The Dark Lord was risen again, and calling for his followers.

And only one woman stands between me and him, and the rewards he promised me.

“Do you want my wand?” he asked, trying to sound beaten and dispirited.

“Yes, I think so. Thumb and forefinger, and don’t make any sudden moves.” The woman’s smile grew. “I don’t have to tell you which hand to use, do I?”

Karkaroff didn’t bother to reply to this. Instead, he worked his left hand carefully into his wand pocket and withdrew it as the woman had ordered, slowly, carefully, between thumb and forefinger.

And let it be your downfall, stupid bitch...

xXxXx

“Harry Potter,” called a cool, mocking voice over Wormtail’s sobs. “Where are you, Harry?”

“And he’s done right now,” Harry finished. “Help me?”

“Where to?”

“Anywhere away from him.”

“Good idea.”

Cedric helped Harry up, but Harry waved off more assistance. “I’ll be all right,” he said, testing his leg. It would hold him, he could even run on it, but it was still weaker than the other. *Don’t try to do everything*, he thought towards the violet power. *Just keep me moving.*

Acknowledgement, and a new power slipped into the link, white and mildly shocking. Harry caught his breath a little.

“All right?” Cedric asked beside him.

“Fine. Let’s keep going.”

xXxXx

Luna had returned to her half-trance state with Draco beside her, Aletha and Gerald holding them. Sirius had gone down to sit with Meghan, and the other Weasley brothers had joined the circle as well. Alice Longbottom brushed past Remus as he started back to the teachers’ section, her destination obviously the field, now smooth and green again, where Hagrid was helping Frank to his feet.

And this would be just great, if we weren’t all scared stiff...

Dumbledore’s silver head appeared at the top of the stairs in the teachers’ section. Remus waved, catching the Headmaster’s attention, and hurried to his side. “It’s Voldemort,” he said shortly. “Luna’s seen him.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Harry?”

“She’s looking now—” Remus gasped in pain. A crashing blow to the side of the head, and darkness –

“Danger!” he shouted aloud, knowing what must have happened. Karkaroff had conjured something, tricked her and knocked her out, but he wouldn’t stop there, he could easily kill or kidnap her now –

And I can't do anything if I can't see what I'm doing –

He was running flat-out down the stairs, towards the Forest, but even with four legs he'd never get there in time to save her –

No, that's not quite right. There's one thing I can manage without seeing.

Hating himself, hating what he was about to do, Remus surrounded Danger's unconscious body with hungry flames and let them go.

xXxXx

Sirius held Meghan on his lap, feeling his daughter's pulse beat under his fingers, schooling his own heart to that beat as she'd told him. "Are you sure this will work?" he asked doubtfully.

It worked with Fred and George, and Luna and her dad, so it should work with you, Meghan assured him. **And it is. I can tell. I'm stronger now because I can pull from you. Harry needs me strong. He's hurt in a couple of different places.**

"And if I were him, I wouldn't go to those places anymore," Sirius muttered. "All right, I believe you."

"Deliv'ry," said a large voice, and Hagrid loomed up behind the twins. "He insisted on comin' over," the gamekeeper went on, sliding a limp bundle off his shoulder. "Wouldn' take no fer an answer."

"Hey, Captain," said Ron as Neville landed on the bench beside him. "Nice work out there."

"Thanks." Neville's voice was whispery, his eyes sunken – and were there white hairs at his temples? Sirius couldn't be sure in the dim light. "Can I come in?"

"The more, the better," Hermione said.

"If you're sure... I might pull power out instead of putting it in..."

"If you need it that badly, you can have it," said Ginny. "Here." She took his hand as Meghan blew him a kiss.

Sirius blinked. "Now that I felt," he said, then switched to silent speech with Meghan. **That is Neville, isn't it? That... solid feeling?**

Yes, that's him. And do you feel the prickly green? That's Draco.

Oh, I see. Sirius spent a moment or two matching Pride member to magic, until he came to one that stumped him. Clear blue, silken soft, and smelling of rosemary and clean clothing...

Someone cleared their throat, and he looked around for the source.

Three rows up, his wife waved at him.

Sirius thumped a hand against his forehead melodramatically.

“So what are we going to do?” Ron asked out loud. “Even with all of us, Harry can’t beat You-Know – *Voldemort* – in a fair fight.”

“So we’ll do what we always do,” said Sirius. “Make the fight unfair.” He caught Aletha’s eye again and waved her closer. *All of you, come down here*, he signed. *Join up with us.*

You have an idea? Aletha’s hands asked.

Oh yes.

xXxXx

Harry crouched behind a large monument, Cedric beside him. They had circled around until they were close to where they had come in. The Triwizard Cup lay a few gravestones away, and the cauldron with Wormtail huddled moaning beside it closer than that.

Harry breathed deeply, tasting the Pride-power within him, more complex and stronger than it had been a few moments before, making him stronger with it. *Thank you*, he sent over the power link.

As if in response, a burst of cream-colored magic washed over him, bringing with it a scent like salty meat. Harry frowned. Why did Hermione want him to think about bacon?

“I think he went the other way,” Cedric whispered. “Maybe if we get back...”

“Or maybe not.”

Harry’s breath froze in his throat. His pendants chilled again, to the point of pain. Voldemort’s unnatural smell overwhelmed him, though Cedric’s, acrid with fear, was just behind it.

“Turn around.”

Both boys slowly did so. Harry’s heart hammered so fast he was afraid he’d lose the link, but the Pride seemed to have no trouble keeping up.

Red eyes regarded Harry and Cedric, set in a white, flat face with slit nostrils. “Two of you,” said Lord Voldemort finally. “How unexpected.”

Harry saw one of Voldemort’s long-fingered hands dip into his pocket. “No,” he said aloud, his voice shaking. “Don’t.”

“Don’t?” Voldemort withdrew his hand, empty. “Don’t what, Harry?”

“Don’t... do anything to Cedric. He’s not supposed to be here. It was a mistake. You meant this

for me, didn't you?"

"Clever Harry." Voldemort's smile stretched his thin lips unpleasantly. "Yes, a mistake, but a fortunate one for you. Or it would have been, if you and... Cedric, is it? If you had not hesitated when he cut your bonds, if you had run immediately, before Wormtail lit the fire again and allowed my transformation to finish, before I arose and found you gone. But as it is, you have denied my hospitality, and I am very put out. And you have killed my dear Nagini... there is a reckoning to be paid for that, as well..."

"I did that," Harry said quickly. "I did all of it. I doused the fire, I got myself free, I killed your snake. Cedric didn't do anything. Let him go."

"Why?" Voldemort's hand dropped to his pocket again. "Why should I let Cedric go, Harry?"

"What do you want?" Harry countered. His scar throbbed, but violet magic kept it to a level he could live with. "Why did you want me here?"

"For your blood, of course." Voldemort caressed his face. "I have not forgotten what passed between us underneath Hogwarts three years ago. The pain, the pain I could not stand... your mother's last gift to you... but now that blood runs in me, as well as in you, and that gift will protect both of us..."

"What else?" Harry pressed his hands against the marble of the monument behind him, feeling the Pride-power running through him. "Why else did you want me here?"

Voldemort's eyes flashed. "For proof," he said coldly. "Proof that you are no match for me, Harry Potter. Proof that it was only luck, and your mother's *generous* gift, that has spared your life these thirteen years." His smile returned, cold and burning all at once. "A duel. You, me, and our wands. Nothing and no one else to interfere..."

"Agreed."

Voldemort's nonexistent eyebrows rose. "What?"

"What?" Cedric echoed in a whisper. "You're mad."

"Agreed," Harry repeated. The Pride-link roiled in his mind, but he ignored it. "Let Cedric go, and I'll duel with you."

"No!" Cedric hissed at him. "Harry, don't do this!"

Voldemort peered at him, looking puzzled. "You agree to duel with me," he said slowly, "so long as I let Cedric go?"

"Yes," Harry said firmly.

"No!"

“Agreed,” Voldemort said genially. “Off you go, Cedric. Run away like a good little lad. Harry and I have some business to take care of.”

“I’m not leaving Harry here alone,” Cedric said stiffly.

Voldemort inspected his fingernails. “What a pity. I’ll simply have to kill you where you stand, then.”

“Go!” Harry mouthed frantically. “Go on!”

Cedric hesitated one second, then turned and ran. Past the cauldron, past Wormtail, past the Triwizard Cup...

Voldemort’s hand was in his pocket and out again faster than Harry’s eye could follow. “*Avada Kedavra!*”

xXxXx

Everyone in the circle cried out together as Harry’s disbelieving rage exploded through them, hands flying up to temples and foreheads. Sirius caught Meghan as she collapsed.

“Luna,” he said roughly. “Now.”

xXxXx

The pain in Harry’s scar was back full-force, blinding him. From a great distance, he heard Voldemort’s laughter. “Let him go,” the Dark Lord repeated. “I let him go.”

Harry’s eyes cleared just in time for him to see Voldemort bending over him. A long, white hand caught his chin and lifted it, forcing a sob of pain out of Harry as his scar gave a fresh throb.

“I never said how far I would let him go,” Voldemort mocked, staring into Harry’s eyes. His own red slits widened. “But what’s this...”

An upheaval inside Harry’s head, and then the only magic feelings besides his own were the hot orange spicy-sweet that meant Ron and an inundation of slimy bilious green. “How marvelous,” Voldemort purred, and the green slime purred with him. “You have a friend with you. I wonder how that happened.”

Get out! Harry shouted at Ron. *Don’t stay here!*

Ron didn’t move. Voldemort laughed softly. “How well the alpha is obeyed by his Pride,” he taunted. “And how well...” He stopped, turning away. “Who is there?” he demanded, looking around. “Who is looking at me? Where are you?”

A soft blue curtain drifted between Harry and his pain, and the burst of cream magic and salt meat smell reappeared, followed quickly by green-pine magic and cooked eggs.

What does it mean? Harry shut his eyes to think. *Hermione. Draco. Breakfast. This morning...*

Inch by inch, he dragged the memory from its hole. Draco had lost his notes on Portkeys, and Hermione had recited them back to him, when they were invented, who had done it, and what the spell was called that made them...

Harry opened his eyes. Voldemort turned in circles, peering around at the air. "I will find you, little girl," he said softly. "You ran from me once, but now you persist. Foolish of you."

A new magic surged into Harry's mind, brown and firm and smelling of earth and sweat. *Get him,* it urged. *Now.*

"You taste rather like another invader I had the pleasure of entertaining in my Albanian home," Voldemort went on, still looking here and there in the empty air, as Harry slipped his hand into his pocket. "Shall I show you what happened to her? Or do you, perhaps, already know...?"

"*Stupefy!*" Harry shouted at the top of his lungs, swinging his wand into line with Voldemort.

The Dark Lord fell like a defeated boggart. Harry was already running. Cedric, he had to get to Cedric, he couldn't leave him here for the Death Eaters –

"Potter!" wheezed Wormtail's voice as small snapping noises began behind Harry. "Get Potter!"

Harry fell to his knees beside Cedric and aimed his wand at the Triwizard Cup. "*Accio!*"

He had just time to see the first of the Death Eaters, cloaked and masked, start to point a wand at him before he caught the Cup by the handle.

Twelve golden necklaces lost their chill.

xXxXx

The augmented Pride-link fell apart, its members gasping for breath, holding onto each other, crying and laughing at the same time as they realized they'd done the impossible.

Luna caught her breath and looked out over the Quidditch pitch. "Harry's going to be right there," she remarked, pointing at a spot near the entrance. "As soon as he gets back. And he's almost here."

Sirius set Meghan down on the bench and stood up. He reeled for a second, but recovered in time to catch Aletha's hand and pull her to her feet. "Let's go meet him," he said.

xXxXx

Remus, holding Danger in his arms behind the Quidditch pitch, felt his pendants warm. He checked her pulse, then drew his wand. "*Ennervate.*"

She roused slowly at first, then suddenly catapulted upright, nearly catching Remus on the chin. **Karkaroff ! His wand –**

Expanded to a staff when he said a trigger word, Remus finished. I know.

You do? But –

Remus gestured. Danger turned to look.

Several yards away, the burned corpse of Igor Karkaroff lay staring sightlessly at the sky.

But – I didn't –

No. Remus raised his head to meet his wife's eyes. **I did.**

You?

I was too far away to see what I was doing, and I had one chance to stop him from hurting you. Remus gripped his head with both hands, then let it go. **I never wanted to kill him. But it was the only way to be sure.**

"I know." Danger turned away from the body and reached out her hand. "Thank you."

"For killing him?"

"No. For saving my life."

Remus lifted his hand and met hers halfway. **You're welcome. And thank you in return.**

And you're welcome in return. Danger let Remus help her to her feet, and support her once she was there. **Let's go see Harry.**

xXxXx

Harry slammed into the ground, face first, arms outstretched. His left hand was curled around Cedric's wrist, his right around the smooth handle of the Triwizard Cup. People were shouting and screaming around him; he couldn't make out anything they were saying, and didn't want to try. His leg still hurt terribly, and his left arm had begun to throb where Wormtail had cut him, but he could notice them because the pain in his scar had subsided to a dull burning sensation.

"Harry," breathed a voice beside him. "Harry... oh, God, Harry..."

"Don't," said another voice, sharper, higher. "Let me check him first." A hand on his shoulder, cool, smooth skin against his, soft and soothing to all his pains, and a scent he knew.

"Letha," he whispered. "Voldemort. He's back..."

“You’ll be all right now, Harry,” the first voice said, and another hand touched the side of his face, this skin rougher, calloused. “You’re safe.”

“No. No one’s safe.” Harry caught at the hand, gripped it, knew it. “Padfoot, no, no one’s safe now...”

“Go ahead,” Letha said, and took her hand away from his shoulder. Harry tried to protest, but Padfoot’s hands were already turning him over, pulling him upright. He let go of the cup, but clutched Cedric’s wrist more tightly than ever.

“Harry, you have to let go now,” Letha coaxed. “You have to let him go.”

“No!” Harry opened his eyes, winced against the light, but tried to explain anyway. “He wouldn’t leave me. I tried to make him go. But he wouldn’t leave me with Voldemort. Voldemort killed him. I couldn’t leave him.”

“And you didn’t leave him, Harry,” Padfoot said close to his ear. “You didn’t leave him. You brought him back. You’ve done all you can.” A hand found the back of Harry’s neck and rested there. “You did well, Harry. Let him go now.”

Harry uncurled his fingers from Cedric’s wrist and let his eyes fall shut. The noises around him blurred and stretched like water running down the drain. It almost felt like riding another Portkey, except he was holding onto Padfoot and Padfoot wouldn’t let him fall.

“I got him,” he told his godfather sleepily. “Just like you said.”

“I know you did.” Padfoot’s arms tightened around him. “I know.”

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 51: Healing Touch (Year 4)

Chapter 51: Healing Touch

“How is he?”

Harry opened his eyes and got them focused with an effort. Professor Dumbledore was kneeling beside him, looking drawn.

“I think he’s all right,” Padfoot answered. “Harry?”

Another moment of effort, and Harry recalled how his mouth worked. “’m OK,” he said fuzzily. “Couple things hurt.” He couldn’t talk and keep his eyes open at the same time, so he let them fall shut again. “Don’t want to do that again.”

“I am sorry you had to do it at all,” said Dumbledore. “Do you feel well enough to tell me what happened?”

“Not really.”

“I think a restorative might be in order,” said Letha from somewhere nearby. “Harry? Look at me, baby.”

Harry opened his eyes again. Letha smiled at him. “That’s my boy. Can you make it up to the castle with help?”

“I’ll try.”

“Will you await me in the hospital wing?” Dumbledore asked Letha as Padfoot helped Harry stand up. “I should deal with a few things here before joining you.”

“We’ll do that.” Letha hurried off towards the castle.

“I’d levitate you if I could, Greeneyes,” Padfoot murmured to Harry, “but people would take it the wrong way. Just keep going until we’re inside.”

Harry gave a little nod, most of his concentration on putting one foot in front of the other. Every time he stepped on the leg that had run into the spider’s pincers, pain shot up through his groin and torso and into the opposite ear, and his head seemed to have a small man inside it determined to break out by splitting it open along the line of his scar.

They were off the grass now, going up stairs, through a door which closed behind them with a loud boom. Padfoot stopped and changed his grip on Harry, and Harry, understanding dimly what was going on, put his arms around his godfather’s neck, as if he were three again.

“That’s my boy,” Padfoot murmured to him. “That’s my Harry. Just hold on, now. You don’t have to do any more tonight.”

Harry sighed in relief as his feet left the ground and his injured leg reduced its complaints to a pulsing ache. “Thanks,” he mumbled, then let his head fall to Padfoot’s shoulder and watched the stairs go by. There were other people he should be thinking about, he was sure of it, but he couldn’t think of any of their names...

xXxXx

Ron rinsed his mouth out with the water Mum had conjured for him and spat again into the basin Bill had hastily provided. “I think I was stupid,” he said shakily.

“What was your first clue?” Draco asked without looking away from Luna, whose hand he was holding.

“I think it was brave,” said Hermione huffily. “Stupid, yes, but brave.”

“That’s our Ronniekins,” said George. “Stupid, yet brave.”

“So what did he do, exactly?” Fred inquired. “I’m still not entirely clear on all this.”

“Neither are we,” said Neville, rubbing Meghan’s wrists as she lay on the bench. “And we live with it.”

“Ron shielded us,” Ginny said. “We were all connected to each other, and to Harry, and Voldemort got into Harry’s mind.”

Mum gasped, whether from Ginny’s saying the name or from the concept Ron couldn’t tell. The twins and Bill stared at Ginny respectfully.

“If Ron hadn’t shielded us, *he* would have known we were all there,” Ginny went on. “This way, he only knows about Ron.”

“So You-Know-Who’s after your arse, little brother,” said Fred, shaking his head. “I’d say that’s pretty stupid.”

“Watch your language,” Mum scolded, smacking Fred on the ear.

“Is that really what you did?” George asked Ron.

“Yeah.” Ron swallowed experimentally. His stomach seemed to be calming down, as long as he didn’t think too hard about what it felt like to have that slimy green stuff inside his mind, touching him...

All right, think about something else. Anything else. Purple quintaped, purple quintaped, purple quintaped.

“Ron, I’m so proud of you,” Mum said, and Ron looked up, startled, just in time to be enveloped by one of his mother’s patented hugs. “What a brave thing to have done... shielding your sister, and all your friends, from You-Know-Who... are you sure it was him, Ron?” She pulled away to look him in the face. “Are you really sure?”

Ron nodded, then gulped. “I’m sure,” he said, clenching his jaw after the words.

“Oh, dear.” Mum hugged him again. “I never wanted you to know war,” she said over his shoulder. “But I suppose now we won’t be able to avoid it.”

“We’ll meet it together,” Bill said. “Weasleys can do anything together.”

“Weasley power,” the twins chorused. “Power to the redheads!”

“Don’t forget about us,” said Hermione. “We’re in this too.”

“Of course you are.” Mum let go of Ron with one arm to hug Hermione briefly. “Who better?”

xXxXx

Harry wiped his eyes, which were watering from the heat of the potion Madam Pomfrey had just given him. His head was starting to clear. He wished it weren’t.

“He’s back,” he said, looking up at Padfoot. “Voldemort’s back.”

“I know.” Padfoot sat down beside Harry’s bed. Letha didn’t look up from cleaning out the spider-inflicted wound on Harry’s leg. “You told us that much out on the field. Hold on to the rest until Dumbledore can hear it. I don’t think you want to tell it twice.”

Harry shook his head. He didn’t want to tell it once – telling it would be like living it over again – but he had to tell. People deserved to know. Cedric’s parents deserved to know...

“Cedric,” he said, or thought he said. It came out as a raspy croak, and he had to stop and force his throat open before he could go on. “What’s happened with Cedric?”

“Everything’s been taken care of, Harry,” Letha said. “Pomona’s with his parents right now, and Hagrid’s taken charge of... the other arrangements.”

“Just say it,” Harry said angrily. “Hagrid has his body. I know what it is. I saw it, I touched it. I’m not four years old anymore.”

“I know.” Letha lifted her head and met his eyes. “But it still hurts me to see you hurt this way.” Her hand rested on his leg, now healed. “Because I love you.”

“Funny way to show it,” Harry mumbled, turning away. “Playing stupid word games.” His throat was closing again, but he was not going to cry. He hadn’t cried when it happened; why should he cry now?

He pushed Padfoot's hand off his shoulder. He didn't need his family smothering him. Coddling was for babies, and he had to be grown-up now, he couldn't let them shelter him anymore...

The hospital wing doors opened quietly, and people started trickling in, few by few. Mrs. Weasley was first, her arm around a tearful Ginny, and Harry felt a slight lurch in his stomach. Was Ginny crying over Cedric?

Bill and Ron were just behind the two witches, the older Weasley hovering protectively near his younger brother, who looked rather green. "Lo, Harry," Ron said hoarsely, waving. "All right now, mate?"

Harry shrugged. "I guess. What about you?"

"Tossed his cookies," said Fred, coming in behind Ron. "Harry, is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"Was Ron really in your head?" George asked. "With You-Know-Who?"

Ginny rounded on the twins with a feline snarl. "Shut up! What's wrong with you? Leave him alone!"

"It's all right, Ginny," Harry said, feeling oddly contradictory. Part of him wanted to smile at her protectiveness, but another part wanted nothing to do with her – she, and the rest of the Pride, had abandoned him when Voldemort entered his mind... "Yeah, it's true. He stuck with me."

"I blocked him off from seeing anybody else," Ron put in, sitting down on the bed next to Harry's. "Figured he was coming in anyway, so it'd be better if he didn't know about all of us."

Harry blinked. "Oh."

Hermione raced into the room and practically threw herself on Harry, pulling back just enough that she didn't bowl him over. "You're alive," she panted. "Oh, Harry, you're alive..."

"Won't be if you keep choking me," Harry gasped.

Hermione let go hastily. "Sorry." She sat down on the edge of Ron's bed, watching him oddly. "Harry... did you do anything to any of the other champions? While you were in the maze, I mean?"

"Don't talk around it, Hermione, just say it out. What did Krum tell you?"

"He said your spell had ended his chances for the Cup," Hermione recited quickly. "But I can't believe you'd do something like that..."

"No, he's right," said Harry, looking his sister in the eye. "I Stunned him. And you want to know why? Because he was casting the Cruciatus on Cedric! That's why! I stopped him using an

Unforgivable Curse, and he has the bloody *balls* to go and accuse *me* ..." Fury choked him off as Hermione stared at him, aghast.

"No one's accusing you of anything, Harry," said Moony from the door. "Thank you, Letha," he added as Letha slid her arm around Danger's waist, freeing him.

Hermione turned quickly away from Harry. "Danger, what's wrong?"

"Nothing terrible, sweetheart," Danger said, smiling weakly as she sank onto an empty bed. "I just got hit on the head, through my own carelessness. Harry, are you all right?"

"I'm *fine*." Harry sat down, wondering when he'd stood up. The hospital wing, though no smaller than usual, suddenly seemed stuffy and airless. He wanted to get out and run, run forever, leave behind the memories of the graveyard and the terror and Cedric's limp hand in his as he Summoned the Cup and prayed he was right about Portkeys...

At the end of the room, Moony opened a window and casually flicked his wand at it, creating a breeze. Harry breathed deeply, catching the bouquet of smells coming from the grounds and the Forest, and relaxed a little.

"Sorry, everyone," he said without looking up from his hands.

"Nothing to apologize for, Harry," Padfoot said behind him. A hand rested on his back for a moment before being withdrawn.

Harry drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. A sudden sting in the crook of his left arm made him hiss. He'd almost forgotten about the place Wormtail had cut him.

"What is it?" Letha said from the end of the bed.

Harry turned his head away. "Nothing."

"Harry, I understand you don't want me to treat you like a child, but if you act like one I have no other choice." Letha moved closer to him and tapped his knee, and Harry grudgingly looked back at her. "Please show me where you're hurt."

Harry wanted to snap at his Pack-mother, but her tone was calm and reasonable, and he couldn't find the energy to pretend it had been anything else. "On my left arm," he said. "But it's part of the story Dumbledore wanted to hear. I don't know if you should do anything yet."

"May I look at it, then?"

Harry nodded, and Letha peeled back his sleeve carefully. "Not too bad," she said, looking at the small gash near the inside of his elbow. "But as you like, I'll leave it for the moment."

"Speaking of Dumbledore, where is he?" Moony said, pulling up a chair. "I thought he'd be here before this."

“He said he had things to take care of down on the pitch,” Padfoot said. “Merlin only knows what.”

“He’ll be here soon,” said Luna. Harry looked up, startled, to see the girl sitting on the bed across from his, with her father on one side of her and Draco on the other. “He had to talk to Krum.”

“Why, is something wrong?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t know,” Luna said. “But I think so. Krum kept asking where the snow was, and what was going on, and if he’d missed the second task.”

“Second task?” Ron repeated.

Draco shrugged. “That’s what it sounded like.”

The adults exchanged knowing looks. Harry clenched his fists. *They think we’re still babies, they don’t tell us anything, they don’t think we can handle it...*

“It sounds like the Imperius Curse to me,” said Mrs. Weasley. “Abruptly broken, at that. But who would have put Viktor Krum under Imperius?”

“Igor Karkaroff,” said Danger, sitting up. “He was a Death Eater once, and I’m sure he planned to be one again.”

“But he named names,” Padfoot objected. “They wouldn’t take him back.”

“They’d take him if he brought them something Voldemort couldn’t do without,” said Moony. “Something no one else could bring.”

Harry twisted his head to look at his Pack-fathers. “Something like me?”

“Yes, Harry.” Moony’s face was grave. “Something exactly like you.”

“You sound sure,” said Letha. “And you both disappeared not long after Harry did, and Danger smells of smoke. What happened?”

Moony opened his mouth to speak, but Danger forestalled him. “Karkaroff is dead,” she said bluntly. “He tried to kill me, and I panicked and killed him instead.”

A small laugh found its way through the confusion in Harry’s feelings. He couldn’t help it. Moony was usually so poised that it was delightful, in a terribly mean way, to see him sitting with his mouth hanging open. A moment later, Moony winced and shut his eyes, but Harry had seen the telltale swirls of brown start in them. He had no idea what his Pack-mum was shouting about, but he didn’t doubt that was what she was doing.

Mrs. Weasley was fussing over Danger at the other end of the room, while Padfoot and Letha looked skeptically at one another. Hermione was curled up on the bed with her face in her hands,

and Ron and Ginny were talking quietly with Bill.

The doors of the hospital wing opened once more, admitting Mr. and Mrs. Longbottom with Neville and a wobbly-looking Meghan. Letha got up hastily. “Frank, Alice, thank you,” she said, hugging Meghan. “I’m so sorry we left her on your hands.”

“It’s what friends are for,” Mrs. Longbottom said, helping Neville sit down on an unoccupied bed. “You’ve taken care of Neville often enough when we couldn’t.”

Harry squinted at his friend. Neville looked different... something about his hair, but Harry couldn’t pinpoint it...

“Dumbledore’s on his way up,” said Mr. Longbottom, finding a chair. “How’s Harry?”

Harry gritted his teeth. If one more person talked *about* him, as if he were a baby or a chair or not even in the room...

“Nothing wrong with his ears,” said Padfoot. “Or his mouth.”

“Old habits,” said Mr. Longbottom apologetically. “Part of me still sees you as a year old, Harry, I am sorry. How are you?”

“Fine.” Mr. Longbottom’s apology, though it had cooled Harry’s anger, hadn’t made it go away. He was still seething inside, burning like a too-hot fire in an oven, ready to explode and burn up everything in sight, burn up the entire world, burn up all the pain and the confusion and the grief and guilt that were the fuel for the fire in the first place...

“My apologies for the wait, everyone,” said a quiet voice, and Albus Dumbledore stepped into the hospital wing. “Harry, especially to you. However, I now know more than I did about the events of this past year, enough to place blame where it is due for what has happened tonight. Danger, what has become of Igor Karkaroff?”

“I killed him,” Danger said again. “In self-defense, when he tried to kill me.”

Dumbledore, who had stiffened at the first phrase, let his shoulders relax at the second. “Go on.”

“He had a special modification made to his wand,” Danger said. “All he had to do was hold it and say a trigger word, and it would turn into a staff. He hit me with it. I remember panicking, and I must have shouted a spell, or part of one, because when Remus found me, he also found Karkaroff, burned to death.”

“I see,” Dumbledore said slowly. “It is... not a catastrophe.”

“But you wish it hadn’t happened,” said Moony with some bitterness in his voice. Harry looked from one Pack-parent to the other, and suspicion began to creep into his mind. Danger needed no spell to create fire, but Harry remembered the horror she’d displayed when she’d had to kill Quirrell in his first year. She wouldn’t have done that again, possibly not even to save her own

life. Moony, on the other hand... especially if Danger were in trouble...

"I do wish that, but no one can reclaim the past," Dumbledore said. "And Danger's death would have been far worse, for everyone." He came down the aisle between the beds and stopped in front of Harry's.

Harry looked dully up at his Headmaster. The fire inside him had disappeared, leaving an empty ache in its place.

"I would not ask you to do this if I thought there were any easier way, Harry," Dumbledore said quietly. "But putting off the pain will make it worse, not better. What you have done tonight proves beyond all doubt that you are worthy to be what I named you soon after the second task. Now I must ask you to display one more sign of courage. I must ask you to tell me what happened." His eyes moved left and right, then came back to Harry. "We can be private for it, if you wish."

"No," Harry said without thinking, then let his brain catch up with his mouth. "No. They deserve to know too." He smiled a little. "This way, I don't have to tell it twice."

"True enough." Dumbledore drew up a chair and seated himself. "Begin when you are ready."

Harry shut his eyes and reached inside himself for the courage Dumbledore had talked about, but it seemed to have disappeared with the fire of anger he'd felt earlier. All he could find now was tiredness, and a wish to rest, to sleep, to make it all go away...

But I can't make Voldemort go away by wishing. He's not a bad dream. He's back, and he wants me dead. Dumbledore has to know as much as I can tell him.

He felt Padfoot's hand on his back again, and twitched angrily to shrug it off. *Would you just leave me alone? You don't want to know me. I'm bad luck to know. People die around me.*

For a second, he watched Cedric fall again, felt again the disbelieving fury that had filled him at the sight. *Maybe if I tell about it, it'll leave me alone.*

Opening his eyes, he began. "The Triwizard Cup was a Portkey. It took us to a graveyard..."

xXxXx

Silence filled the hospital wing, thick and tangible, for a few moments after Harry finished. Then Dumbledore slowly rose. "I must repeat myself, Harry," he said. "You have shown courage beyond anything I could have dared to hope this night. You have done what few grown wizards have done or could do. I ask you to speak with me privately for one moment, and then I will leave you in peace."

Harry slid off the bed to follow Dumbledore to the end of the room, behind one of the screens and a Privacy Spell.

“I saw you reject Sirius’ touch,” Dumbledore began. Harry looked up, surprised by the topic of conversation. “And you were unusually drawn-in while you spoke. The Harry I know would have been seeking comfort from those around him during such a harrowing tale.”

“Well, maybe the Harry you know was a whiny little brat,” Harry said bitterly. “I can’t let people baby me anymore. I have to grow up now.”

“Grow up, yes. But must you reject all ties to the life you had before?”

“It’s not about that!” Harry shouted, suddenly desperate for someone to understand. “I can’t let them be close to me! People who are close to me die! Cedric died because of me! I made Ron ill, and I hurt everyone when I was so angry – Meghan fainted because I hurt her so much! And now they’re all targets, he can go after them to hurt me, and I don’t want them to be!” He ran out of anger abruptly, and sagged where he sat. “I can’t,” he repeated feebly. “I can’t let them.”

“Mmm.” Dumbledore seemed to be thinking hard. “Tell me something, Harry,” he said after a few moments. “If you did not know these people – if, through some odd set of circumstances, you had never met any of them – do you think they would still choose to fight against Lord Voldemort?”

“Huh? Of course.”

“Even though they know that fighting in a war is dangerous, that they might die?”

“They wouldn’t care.” Harry stopped. “No, they’d care. But they’d do it anyway. That’s how they are.”

“That is how they are,” Dumbledore repeated. “Exactly. They know what they want, and do it without overmuch thought to how dangerous it might be. And even were you not involved, they would still be fighting, risking their lives for what they believe is right. So why will you deny yourself their companionship, their love, when that is what they want and part of what they will fight for?”

“But...” Harry struggled to find the words. “I don’t want to be the reason anyone else dies,” he said finally.

“No one does, Harry, but if you cut yourself off from all human ties because you fear pain, then Voldemort has already won.”

“What?”

“Hear me out,” said Dumbledore, raising a hand to still Harry’s amazed outburst. “Voldemort cares for nothing and no one, apart from what they can do for him. He would dispose of all his Death Eaters—”

“Don’t talk down to me!” Harry shouted. “Just say it, just say what you mean!”

“Very well. Voldemort would kill all his Death Eaters, even the most devoted, if doing so would benefit him more than not doing so. He believes that anyone who does not take this view of life, anyone who values another person for more than that person’s extrinsic value, is a fool. He may be right. But he lives without love, without care, without hope or joy beyond that which his twisted goals bring him, and that, to me, seems a fair definition of hell on earth. Do you agree?”

Silently, Harry nodded.

“You know the beginning of the prophecy about yourself already,” Dumbledore said. “I will tell you another part. *He* – the one who may vanquish the Dark Lord – *he will have power the Dark Lord knows not*. Lord Voldemort is well acquainted with all forms of power, Harry. All forms, save one. He knows nothing, nor does he wish to know, of the power of love. And it is that power which holds your Pack and your Pride together, which has allowed you to do the impossible many times over, which has brought you safely thus far. I think it is no bad thing to trust in that same power to lead you home.”

Harry’s throat twisted, and he had to look away before the burning in his eyes spilled out.

“May I fetch them?” Dumbledore asked gently.

Harry didn’t say anything, couldn’t say anything, but he heard Dumbledore stand up, heard the Headmaster leave the Privacy Spell, and moments later, felt strong, gentle arms around him, two pairs, one from each side. “We’re here, Harry,” Danger’s voice whispered over Letha’s quiet humming. “Let it out, now.”

Harry buried his face against Letha’s shoulder, and a great wail of misery clawed its way out of his throat as everything he’d seen, everything he’d done, and everything he hadn’t done that night came crashing down around him. The only things left were the arms holding him and the voice that was humming an old lullaby, one it seemed he’d always known.

Oh my love, you are my child...

xXxXx

A long, long time later, or perhaps only a little while, Harry ran out of tears, and his sobs died away into stillness. Danger held him now, rocking him gently in her arms. Letha’s hands were warm on his back, rubbing away the tightness in his muscles as she crooned softly to him.

“Nowhere’s safe anymore,” Harry mumbled. “We’re not even safe here.”

“Probably true,” said Danger without stopping what she was doing. “But every warrior needs rest, and people he can trust, and times to be happy. Without that, what are we fighting for?”

Harry sighed deeply, and pulled away, sitting up. “You’re too smart,” he said. “You keep beating me.”

“Give yourself some time, Harry. I’ve lived more than twice as long as you have.”

“Yes, you have that on your side,” said Letha. “A hundred and forty combined years of experience among the four of us.”

“Not even the Great Lord of Darkness has been around that long,” said Danger, bowing slightly to Letha. “And that’s not even counting the rest of you, young in years but old in sneakiness.”

“We’ll get through this, Harry,” Letha said, holding out her hand. Harry took it. “I won’t make any promises I can’t keep, like swearing that we’ll all make it, but we will get through this. And we will win.”

Harry smiled half-heartedly. “Promise?”

“That, I promise. We will win.” Letha pressed his hand and released it.

Danger cocked her head as if listening, though no sound passed through the Privacy Spell. “Something’s going on out there,” she said. “Someone arguing...” Her eyebrows went up. “Oh my. I think maybe we should see this.”

Letha drew her wand and removed the Privacy Spell, and an angry man’s voice was suddenly revealed.

“—think that *maybe* he has no *reason* to lie? That he’s *not* after your precious job, and he’s *not* out to make trouble – for Merlin’s sake, Cornelius, he wants to *prevent* trouble!”

“Prevent trouble?” Fudge sounded totally incredulous. “Bartemius, surely you don’t believe...”

“I do.”

Harry peered around the end of the screen. The hospital wing contained most of the same people who had been there when he’d left, though they’d shifted around some. The Weasley twins were gone, and Neville was sitting in a bed near the screen, looking much restored –

But he does have white hair by his ears. What happened to him?

“I do believe it, as I think I’ve made quite clear,” Crouch went on, staring Fudge down near the entrance to the hospital wing. The door was still swinging, probably after Madam Pomfrey’s hasty exit to go get Dumbledore and have him remove the noisy people from her domain, Harry thought in amusement.

Neville had noticed Harry now, and when he saw that he had Harry’s attention in return, he made a gesture down in front of his eyes. *Do you want me to un-notice you?* he was asking.

Harry nodded, and Neville’s lips moved for a moment, though he looked tired again when he’d finished. Harry threw him an apology, but Neville waved it off. *I’m all right*, he signed. *Listen to this!*

Harry slipped out from behind the screen and found a bed to sit on, listening.

“–spoken a falsehood in his life, and has done his utmost to fight evil. Why would a man like Albus Dumbledore lower himself to a foolish lie that no child would believe, unless it were true? I’ve spoken with Viktor Krum, as you obviously haven’t bothered to. I’ve heard all the things he’s recalled being forced to do under the Imperius – taking the spell off Potter’s hostage in the middle of the second task, cutting the cables on a backdrop during the play, using an Unforgivable Curse tonight...”

Ron was goggling at Crouch. So, as the words sank in, was Harry. *Krum was the one. He took the spell off Ron, he nearly killed me with the backdrop...*

“And there’s what I’ve recalled myself,” Crouch went on over Fudge’s attempts to get a word in. “Karkaroff used the Imperius on me, Cornelius. I fell under it very nicely. Probably a remnant of the months I spent under it while no one but my secretary thought enough of it to come to my house looking for me.” He glared at Fudge. “I placed false handles on the Triwizard Cup, handles Karkaroff gave me, handles that were probably already Portkeys. It’s as much my fault the Diggory boy is dead as it is anyone else’s.”

“But – but – Bartemius, you must see how this looks. Bad enough Karkaroff is dead, worse that it’s in suspicious circumstances, but accusing him of being in league with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? And as good as saying – no, saying, outright saying – that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has *returned*?” Fudge held out his hands helplessly. “I’ll be a laughingstock! They’ll claim I’m trying to cover up for the woman who killed him, that she’s my mistress or some such absurd thing!”

“In your dreams,” Harry heard Danger mutter, and had to stifle a laugh.

The doors to the hospital wing opened wide. Madam Pomfrey bustled in, followed by Dumbledore and Snape. “Here,” she said curtly to the two Ministry officials. “Here’s the Headmaster, now do your business and be done with it! And call me when you’re finished, so that I can do *my* business!” She stomped into her office and shut the door.

Harry kicked his shoes off and slid his feet under the covers of the bed he was sitting on. He caught Neville’s eye. *Take it off me?* he signed.

Neville nodded, and after a moment various eyes in the room flickered to him. Dumbledore’s were among them, and Snape’s, but neither Crouch’s nor Fudge’s were.

“In deference to Madam Pomfrey, gentlemen, and to the students and parents present, perhaps we can keep our business brief, and quiet,” Dumbledore said. “What was it you needed to ask me, Cornelius?”

Fudge fiddled with his hat. “I wanted to know,” he said, “what you’re going to do about this absurd rumor.”

“What rumor is this?”

“The rumor that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has returned – that he was behind all the disruptions of the Triwizard Tournament – that he was behind Diggory’s death! For heaven’s sake, Dumbledore, you can’t go around saying things like that!”

“Not even if they happen to be true?”

“But it can’t be true!” Fudge objected. “The man is dead! He’s been dead for thirteen years!”

“Not dead, Cornelius. Missing. Lord Voldemort was unlike other men...” Dumbledore ignored Fudge’s violent start and Crouch’s shiver. “...by his own design, in many ways. It is not surprising that what would have killed another man merely... how shall I say it? Disembodied him. Nor that he struggled, with all that was left to him, to restore himself to a body. And as of tonight, he has succeeded.”

“And on whose authority do you have that?” demanded Fudge, drawing himself up to his full height. “Who witnessed this... this... re-embodiment?”

Dumbledore’s eyes flicked down the ward again before he answered. “Harry Potter.”

“Ah, of course.” Fudge sounded oddly pleased. “And who else? Did anyone else see it?”

“No one living.” Dumbledore’s voice held quiet grief, and Harry knew in that moment how much it had hurt him to see Cedric dead, how much the Headmaster must have hoped that he would never lose another of his students to Lord Voldemort. “But we have the evidence of Viktor Krum, who is regaining the memories of the months he spent under Igor Karkaroff’s Imperius Curse, and the things Karkaroff said to him while it was happening. Karkaroff seems to have mentioned ‘the Dark Lord’ repeatedly, and to occasionally have given Viktor a chance to join the Death Eaters of his own free will.”

“But, of course, Karkaroff is dead, so we can’t question him.” Fudge had a little smile on his face.

Harry balled up a fist, then let go. Hitting the Minister of Magic would not be a good way to end his day.

“We have no evidence at all that he wasn’t merely a lunatic, reliving his so-called ‘glory days’ – I won’t argue that he was once affiliated with the Death Eaters, it’s a matter of record, but think about it, Dumbledore. Off in that lonely castle, with no decent society whatsoever, and the sort of curriculum that place teaches, would it be so surprising if the man had simply snapped?”

“Do you then doubt Harry Potter’s story, Cornelius?” Dumbledore asked evenly.

“Yes, Dumbledore, to put it quite plainly, I do. Or are you going to deny the article that ran in the *Prophet* this morning? Is Potter, or is he not, a Parselmouth?”

Danger snapped her fingers at Harry, then shook her head firmly. Harry pouted, but he knew she was right.

Though he still thought it would have been funny to say, “*Sure I am, why d’you care?*” in Parseltongue.

“He is,” Dumbledore said. “But that has nothing to do with his intelligence, his sanity, or his truthfulness, all of which are excellent.”

Fudge sniffed. “And I suppose you’re also going to tell me his screaming nightmares and funny turns have ‘nothing to do with it?’” he said. “Still cries for his parents at night – not surprising, considering who raised him–”

“That’s not true,” Harry said, suddenly unable to stay quiet for another instant. “Stop insulting my family.”

Fudge jumped, turned, and stared at Harry. “Where – how – were you–” He turned back to Dumbledore and Crouch. “Was he there?” he demanded.

“Harry has been in this room since I entered it,” Dumbledore said gravely. “You could ask someone who has been here longer, perhaps.” He gestured to the silent watchers on the beds, Mrs. Weasley, Bill, and Ginny on Ron’s, Mr. Lovegood and Draco on Luna’s, Padfoot and Letha on Meghan’s and Neville’s parents on his, and Moony and Hermione and Danger sitting together on an empty bed.

Fudge ignored this. “Dumbledore, you can’t ignore the facts. Potter’s unbalanced, and Karkaroff was a lunatic, and whatever he thought he was doing, wherever he sent those boys, it pushed Potter over the edge–”

The Pride gasped almost as one. Harry was about to shout when a Silencing Spell caught him in the mouth, and a Sticking Charm landed on his legs the instant after that. Stuck to the bed, unable to make a sound, all he could do was glare at Moony. *You’ll be sorry*, he signed.

You’d be sorrier, Moony signed back curtly. *Stay put*.

“How dare you!” Mrs. Weasley cried out. “Harry Potter is as sane as any child I know!”

“Thank you, Molly,” Dumbledore said quietly, then turned back to Fudge. “Are you suggesting, Cornelius, that Harry Potter killed Cedric Diggory?”

Fudge seemed to realize, for the first time, that he was in a room full of people who cared about Harry Potter, and that most of those people were fingering their wands meaningfully. “I – well, I – no, I suppose I don’t,” he finished weakly. “But neither do I believe that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did it!” He looked around again, finally coming back to the Headmaster. “What is it you want from me, Dumbledore?” he asked plaintively. “Perhaps, a few reasonable things...”

Dumbledore shook his head. “What you would call reasonable, Cornelius, would not be effective. I have only two immediate suggestions, as it happens, though I doubt you will like either.”

“Well, let’s hear them.” Fudge was suddenly jolly again, like an uncle with a favorite, though

demanding, nephew. “We can’t know until we’ve tried, can we?”

“The first one pertains to Azkaban prison. The dementors must be removed from guard duty there immediately—”

“What?” Fudge’s eyes popped. “Have you lost your mind, Dumbledore? The dementors are the only thing keeping that prison safe! Without them there, we’d lose half our law enforcement to mere guarding duties—”

“And with them there, you have handed over your wand to your opponent,” Dumbledore broke in. “Dementors are creatures of darkness, Cornelius, and they will join Lord Voldemort the instant he asks them! And when they do, not only will Azkaban, and the Death Eaters within, be unguarded, but Voldemort will have a fighting force whose very existence destroys morale, and which is especially dangerous to Muggles, who cannot see dementors!”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure, but all this is presupposing—”

“The other thing you must do immediately,” Dumbledore went on, “is find the giants of Britain, and make alliance with them.”

“Ally with – with giants?”

“If you do not, Voldemort certainly will, and giants excel at destruction. Unless you reach them first, it is on Voldemort’s commands that they will destroy, and spread their destruction across more of the land than ever before.” Dumbledore’s excitement was gone; he spoke calmly now, as he might to a student who failed to grasp an error in classwork.

“Is it proof you want, Minister?” Snape asked roughly. “Proof that the Dark Lord has returned? Here.” He pulled back his left sleeve and thrust his arm into Fudge’s face. “The Dark Mark. When the Dark Lord was defeated by the infant Potter, the Mark faded from the arm of every Death Eater. It has been growing clearer all year. Tonight it burned black with his summons. He has returned.”

Harry saw Crouch’s eyes widen, his lips tremble, as he looked at Snape’s arm. Fudge was shrinking back from it, swallowing hard. Dumbledore seemed unmoved.

“Not even you ever called me a fool, Cornelius,” Crouch said after a moment. “And I believe what I’m hearing. So should you. Think of the risk if you’re wrong. Do you want to be remembered in history as the weak Minister who let a Dark wizard rise to power unchecked?”

Fudge backed away. “I’ve given you a lot of latitude over the years, both of you,” he said. “Let you do your jobs, even when you did some things I didn’t agree with. But banding together against me—”

“I am not against you, Cornelius,” said Dumbledore gently. “I am against Lord Voldemort. As long as you are also against him, we are still at one.”

“I cannot be against what no longer exists,” Fudge snapped. “Here.” He pulled a sack from his pocket and handed it to Crouch, who was closest to him. “See that Potter gets this. I will owl you tomorrow, Dumbledore, about the way this school is being run.”

Clapping his lime-green bowler hat onto his head, Cornelius Fudge hurried from the hospital wing.

Harry felt Moony’s spells dissolve away from him. “Thanks,” he said, rubbing at his lips. “I think.”

“Consider what could happen, Harry, if the Minister of Magic thought you were insane,” said Moony quietly, for Harry’s ears alone. “He even has power to override parental rights, for cases where parents can’t accept that their child is a danger to others.”

Harry shivered. “If you’re trying to scare me, it’s working,” he said.

“Not scare you. Just warn you.” Moony swung his legs over the bed and came to sit on Harry’s. “I don’t want you ever living through anything worse than tonight.”

“We must still act, even if Cornelius refuses to help us,” Dumbledore was saying. “Molly, may I depend on you and Arthur?”

“Of course,” Mrs. Weasley said immediately. She was pale, but her shoulders were set. “Fudge is the reason Arthur’s never gone any farther than Misuse of Muggle Artifacts. He thinks Arthur’s hobby shows a weakness for Muggles that shouldn’t be encouraged.”

“I thank you both. But Arthur must be discreet. One open rebel in the Ministry is enough.” Dumbledore looked at Crouch. “Thank you for your support, Bartemius, but was it necessary to be so very antagonistic to Cornelius?”

Crouch sighed. “Perhaps I was a little harsh with him,” he said. “But I have some strong feelings on this subject, Dumbledore. And to see him there, concocting any excuse, any flimsy bulwark against the possibility of the... of the return of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named...” He stared at the door through which Fudge had fled. “I can only do my duty,” he said finally. “And my duty is to my people, not a power-hungry Minister. I’m with you, Dumbledore, every step of the way. And Cornelius may hate me for this, but he won’t dare try to tear me down. I know where too many bodies are buried for that.”

Dumbledore nodded, then turned to Bill. “Will you go to your father for me?” he said. “Tell him what has passed, and ask for his help?”

“Of course, sir.” Bill stood up. “We’re all with you,” he said. “Dad and Mum, me, Charlie and Tonks, even Percy, I think.”

“If he knows what’s good for him,” muttered Crouch, making Bill grin. The eldest Weasley kissed his mother, nodded to the other adults in the room, rubbed Ron’s head and pulled a hank of

Ginny's hair, and hurried out the door.

"You have my support, for what that's worth," said Mr. Lovegood. "I've just had an excellent article come in about Fudge; it seems he's up to his old tricks with the goblins..."

"Could we discuss that tomorrow, perhaps, Gerald?" Dumbledore asked, a small semblance of his usual twinkle suddenly appearing in his eyes. "I would, naturally, never ask you to print anything but the truth, but there may well be some truths over the next few months that will not appear in the *Daily Prophet*."

"Of course. Ten o'clock?"

"Ten it is." Dumbledore turned to the Longbottoms. "I am sorry you have had so little peace," he said. "If I have your help, this war may be shorter than the last."

"I certainly hope so," said Mrs. Longbottom. "You didn't have to ask, Dumbledore. You know we're with you."

"If only so no one else ever has to deal with twelve missing years of their lives," Mr. Longbottom added.

Quietly, Harry drummed his fingers against the frame of his bed, a quick rolled series of four, then a tap all together. Ron took up the beat moments later. Ginny tapped her foot in the same rhythm, then Draco and Luna took it up, squeezing each other's hands in time. Hermione's fingers drummed on her thigh, Neville's hand patted his bedclothes, Meghan's fingers moved on the back of her other hand.

Dumbledore turned to look at the Pack-parents.

Moony met the Headmaster's eyes. "How could we not?" he asked simply.

The Pride-bond wavered into life. Harry let his feelings move out over it, give a rough picture of what he felt and what he wanted, and waited. In less than a breath's time, the answers returned to him.

Yes. Yes. We are with you. Lead, and we will follow.

Blinking away the afterimages of the affirmation, Harry slid his legs out from under the covers. "Harry, is there something you need?" Dumbledore asked, looking at him in concern.

"Something I need to do, sir." Harry stepped out into the aisle and faced his Headmaster. He could hear, could feel, the Pride assembling behind him, Ron and Ginny and Luna and Neville at his left shoulder, Hermione and Draco and Meghan at his right.

They were all there. It was time.

Reaching into his pocket, Harry took out his wand, then pulled his robes tight over his right hip

and drew the silver dagger he'd once used to destroy a memory of Voldemort. Suddenly realizing he couldn't do what he wanted by himself, he turned to the left, hoping he could ask Ron to do it for him.

Without a word, Ginny took his hands in hers and arranged dagger and wand just the way he wanted. *She must have picked it up from the link... funny, I didn't think I was broadcasting that much.* "Thanks," Harry mouthed to her, then turned back to Dumbledore and lifted his hands to chest level.

The dagger and the wand lay across them, dagger on his left palm, wand on his right, hilt and grip both facing the Headmaster.

Dumbledore laid his hands across Harry's and met his eyes. *Are you sure?* the older wizard asked silently. *Are you truly sure?*

Harry gave the question to the Pride-bond. *We are sure,* answered eight voices together. *We are all sure.*

Dumbledore closed his eyes for a long moment, then opened them, brighter than they had been. "I thank you," he said quietly. "May the gift never be needed, but it is appreciated."

The bond fractured and slid away. Harry concentrated on staying upright long enough to put dagger and wand away, then moved quickly back to his bed. Tiredness was washing over him now in large, foamy waves, and his ability to care had deteriorated to the point that it didn't bother him that most of the adults in the room were in a huddle in its center, talking quietly and urgently together.

"Mr. Potter," said Crouch, coming to stand beside him. In his hands he held a sack, which jingled – the sack Fudge had given him, Harry recalled, with orders to give it to –

To me. What is it?

"The Tournament purse," said Crouch, setting it down on the nightstand. "One thousand Galleons."

"I don't want it," Harry said. "I didn't win."

"You did. Perhaps not quite the way it was intended, but you faced... you faced He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and returned alive. That makes you a winner in most people's opinions."

"The ones who believe me," Harry muttered.

"Those may be more than you think," Crouch countered. "And there is a way you could change people's minds quickly."

Harry looked up.

“If He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named were seen in public,” Crouch said casually. “Ideally, by Cornelius Fudge himself, or if not by him, by enough people that hallucinations or tricks cannot be claimed. You realize, of course, that this secrecy, this denial by the administration, is perfect for him. He can build a large power base, set spies and flunkies into positions of power, so that by the time the government removes its blinkers, it is already too late. The sooner he is seen, the better for you, and for everyone who loves order and peace.”

“I can’t make him come out,” Harry said inanely.

“Can’t you?” Crouch shook his head. “Never mind, Potter, I’ll take it up with Dumbledore. Don’t worry about it. Get some rest.”

Harry stared at the man’s back as he walked away.

“What was that?” asked Hermione from the next bed over. “What was he telling you?”

“Nothing important. Just...” Harry yawned hugely. “Never mind,” he said when he could speak again. “It doesn’t matter.”

Madam Pomfrey, making the rounds of the room, got to Harry at this moment. “Here, Potter,” she said, handing him a corked flask. “Drink this when you get to where you’re going. It’s Dreamless Sleep, you’ll need it.”

“But I’m not going anywhere.”

“Aren’t you?” Madam Pomfrey moved aside to make room for Danger.

“Harry, Dumbledore thinks you should go... well, he called it the Heart of Hogwarts,” Danger said, shrugging. “Whatever it is, he wants you there for tonight. We can come with you too, if you’ll let us, and as many of the Pride as want to.”

“I think we all will,” said Hermione. “Let me check.” She got up and went across the room to Ron’s bed.

“You can come,” Harry said, watching Hermione moving through the Pride with quiet efficiency. “If you want. It’s where we den, when we’re here. You saw us come out when Draco almost died last year, with the globe.”

“I thought it might be that.” Danger had her hand near his leg, not touching but offering touch. “We can stick our fingers in our ears and hum while you say the password.”

“No, you can know it.” Harry found a little smile somewhere among his ever-increasing yawns. “I think you’ll think it’s funny.”

“Good luck,” Dumbledore’s voice rang out clearly over the hushed babble in the infirmary. Harry looked up in time to see Snape striding out the door.

“Good luck?” he repeated. “Good luck with what?”

“Oh, come on now,” said Danger. “Use those brains, Harry James.”

Harry only had to think for a moment, even tired as he was. “He’s a spy,” he breathed. “He’s going to spy on the Death Eaters...”

“Or so we believe,” Danger said, her tone light. “So he wants us to believe.”

Hermione hurried back across the aisle. “Everyone’s in,” she said. “I think we should go now.”

“Now sounds good.” Harry let Danger help him up, and guided her across the room to the fireplace. “Stealth mode,” he murmured, then waved at Draco, reminding him to lead the other Pack-parents to the opening which they now wouldn’t be able to see until they were in it. “Thank you, Rowena.”

Danger looked impressed as the stone panel moved smoothly aside. “It seems Salazar came by a love of secret passages honestly,” she said. “You first, or me?”

“It doesn’t matter. It comes out in a library. A section of the bookshelf swings out.” Harry felt the flask of potion nearly slip from his hand and rescued it just in time. “I’d better go,” he said. “Before I fall asleep here.”

The last thing he heard from the hospital wing was Padfoot’s voice. “What do you mean, over by the fireplace? There isn’t anything over by the – oh.”

Despite everything that had happened over the past few hours, Harry Potter entered the Hogwarts Den with a smile on his face.

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 52: Goodbye and Hello (Year 4)

Chapter 52: Goodbye and Hello

A fierce itching inside his nose brought Harry awake. He rubbed at it furiously, wiping his eyes with his other hand. *Gahh. What is that?*

When his eyes were clear, he opened them and saw immediately what it was. A slender, furry, tri-colored back was pressed against his face. He must have inhaled some loose fur.

Harry stifled a sneeze and sat up. The Pride sprawled around him, some in animal form, some human. Lynx-Ginny was draped across his legs, cat-Neenie, as he'd discovered, had snuggled up to his face, and Meghan had cuddled close to his back, with Neville shimmering in and out of visibility in her arms. Ron was stretched out a foot or so away, one hand lingering near Ginny's paw, and Draco and Luna lay back to back on Harry's other side.

Huh. No Pack-parents. Wonder where they went.

Harry carefully withdrew his legs from under Ginny, then stood up and stepped over Neenie to make it out of the huddle. Meghan made a little noise, but a half-seen silver hand touched her shoulder and she settled. No one else even stirred.

The events of the night just past danced around the borders of Harry's mind, cackling wickedly. He turned and went into the kitchen, took the teakettle from the stove, and started filling it at the sink. *I have to keep busy. It'll keep my mind off...*

Well, thinking about what it would keep his mind off would still be thinking about it.

I can make breakfast. That's something else to think about.

Harry set the kettle on the stove and lit a burner under it. As he turned to summon a house-elf, a note on the table caught his eye. He picked it up. Letha had written it.

Dear Harry and everyone,

Good morning. We've gone to talk to Albus, but we should be back before noon. Please stay where you are until we come back; I suspect we'll have a lot to tell you. Call the house-elves if you need anything.

Underneath was a sketch of someone's right hand, thumb, forefinger, and little finger extended. Harry ran a finger over it and smiled.

You too, Letha.

He summoned a house-elf and asked it to bring the materials needed to make breakfast for eight.

Then it took a few minutes to convince the creature that there was nothing wrong with Hogwarts cooking, that he liked Hogwarts cooking, that he just wanted to cook for himself and his friends for today. When the elf had finally gone, Harry slumped at the table.

I'm starting to understand why most purebloods aren't very nice to house-elves. They're kind of hard to put up with.

Someone tapped at the kitchen door.

"C'min," Harry said without lifting his head from the table.

Two sets of footsteps entered the kitchen, both light and feminine. Harry sniffed. "Morning, Ginny," he said. "Morning, Luna."

"Good morning," both girls answered, Ginny a half-beat ahead of Luna.

Part of Harry's memories of last night came forward, and he sat up, looking at Luna. "You can see again," he said. "Magically see, I mean."

Luna nodded. "I looked at Voldemort," she said calmly. "It was frightening, but I kept switching where I was looking, and he couldn't get hold of me."

Harry got up, came around the table, and hugged Luna. "You saved my life," he told her. "Twice now, with what you told me about Lupisces in February. I don't think thank you is good enough any more." Pulling away from her, he knelt and bowed his head, laying her hand on the back of his neck.

"You'd better not do that in front of Draco," Luna said, pressing down lightly, then taking her hand away. "He wouldn't like it. Ginny doesn't like it either."

Harry turned to see Ginny, but she had turned away so that all he could see was the curve of her shoulder, half-hidden by red hair. "What's wrong?" he asked, standing up.

"Nothing." Ginny pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. "Not really."

Harry was about to pursue the question further, but several house-elves appeared at that moment, their arms filled with food, and that took precedence.

The sound and smell of breakfast cooking attracted the rest of the Pride. After the third time Harry stepped on someone's foot, he ordered them all out of the kitchen. "I'll be done when I'm done," he said. "If you're that hungry, you can call a house-elf yourself and get something to start with."

When he brought the porridge out, no one had.

The normality of eating elbow-to-elbow with Draco and Hermione managed to keep Harry's memories away until he was buttering his second slice of toast. The sound suddenly reminded

him of the swish of Nagini's scales over stone, and her satisfied voice, telling him what Voldemort had promised her...

Harry gulped as breakfast tried to back up on him. Dropping his knife, he shoved his chair back and stumbled across the room, looking for a door, any door...

There. The knob was in his hand, it turned, he was on the other side, alone. He dropped to his knees on the grass, breathing fast and hard, swallowing over and over against the memories – the taste of snake blood in his mouth, scales crunching under his teeth, worrying his prey back and forth until it stopped fighting him, went limp in his mouth, limp like Cedric's wrist in his grasp...

You had to think about that, didn't you.

His last swallow froze halfway down, then reversed course.

When it was over, Harry sagged on all fours, his elbows shaking, barely able to hold his weight. Tears dripped from his eyes as he coughed. The foul mess had gone up his nose, he could smell it and taste it and feel it, and in a second he'd fall into it...

Hands closed on his shoulders, holding him up, pulling him gently backwards into a sitting position so he wouldn't fall. One hand wiggled in the corner of his field of view. It held a small white handkerchief.

Gratefully, Harry pulled the handkerchief free and wiped his streaming eyes. A glass of water appeared on his other side, and he took that too and rinsed his mouth out, then snorted some up his nose and spit repeatedly until the taste and smell were gone. Wiping his eyes again, he turned to thank whoever had helped him.

The Quidditch pitch was empty.

Weird.

The memories tried to surge in again, but Harry forced his mind to other things. *Who could that have been? I didn't get a scent, my nose was... yeah.* He scooted away from the pile of sick on the ground. *Little white hands, that's all I know. Too little to be Ron or Draco, too light to be Meghan, don't think it was Neville or Hermione...*

The door of the Quidditch pitch opened, and Padfoot and Letha entered, Letha hurrying to him while Padfoot moved to the side to Vanish the sickness behind them. "Bad thoughts?" Letha asked, kneeling beside him.

Harry nodded.

"I thought as much. That's why I brought this." Letha pulled a flask from her pocket. "It should help to settle your stomach, and make up for what you lost. Only take it when you're ready, though."

“I think I can handle it now.” Harry accepted the flask and sipped at the potion cautiously. A sweet grape taste spread out over his mouth, removing the lingering traces of breakfast and soothing his raw throat as it went down. He took a larger drink, then another, and finished the flask in the third. “Thanks,” he said, handing Letha back the flask. “What happens now?”

“We need to tell you about the new rules, now that Lord Snake-face is back,” Padfoot said, sitting down beside them. “Advance warning, you won’t like them.”

Harry sighed. “What else is new?”

“You can decide if you want to be alone to hear it,” Letha said. “Or if you want the Pride to know it too.”

“Do they have to follow the rules, or are they just for me?”

“Some of them are just for you,” Padfoot said. “But some of them are for everyone.”

Harry considered it. “I want them to hear,” he said finally. “I don’t want to have a lot of secrets.”

“They’re not secrets, exactly,” said Letha. “But if you want the Pride to hear it as well, then they will. Just bear in mind, the more people who know, the more people who can tell.”

“We’re not blabbermouths,” Harry said hotly. “When did we ever...” He stopped. “All right, we told a couple of secrets,” he admitted grudgingly. “But we’ll be careful about these ones. Everyone will.”

“You’d better be,” said Padfoot. “Should we start, or do you want to wait longer?”

“Let’s get it over with.” Harry started to stand up. Letha’s hand closed around his and pulled. Once he was upright, Pack-son and Pack-mother looked at each other in mutual surprise, ignoring Padfoot’s sniggering in the background.

“You’re bigger than you used to be,” Letha said finally, rubbing her arm.

“You’re stronger than you look,” said Harry, shaking his out.

“Healers have to be in shape. There are some patients who shouldn’t have magic used around them, so we tend them by hand. What’s your excuse?”

Harry grinned lopsidedly. “You’re the one who keeps on feeding me.”

“I’ll stop immediately. Shall we?” Letha indicated the door.

xXxXx

“Having him after my arse wasn’t bad enough,” said Harry some time later, leaning on the table. “Now he can get into my head, too. That’s just bloody great.”

“But you can fight it,” said Hermione encouragingly. “You know what it feels like when he’s touching you. You can fight him, and shut him out.”

“And he can’t get to you here,” said Luna. “Nothing bad can come here.”

“Can I stay here, then?” Harry was only being half facetious. A hideaway, where nothing bad could get at him, seemed the most desirable thing in the world at this point, though he suspected he’d feel differently soon enough.

“Afraid not,” said Padfoot. “Albus’s planning on redoing all the Hogwarts wards while the students are home for the summer. And he’s asked for help from most of the current members of the…” He broke off.

“The Order?” said Meghan.

“Order what?” Ron asked.

Letha sighed. “Meghan,” she said wearily.

“Sorry.”

“You’d all know within a few weeks anyway,” said Danger. “But even so, it’s a den-secret. During the war – the first war – Professor Dumbledore led a group of people dedicated to fighting Voldemort and the Death Eaters. They called themselves the Order of the Phoenix. Remus and Sirius and Aletha were all part of it, as were the Longbottoms, and your mum’s brothers Gideon and Fabian,” she added to Ron and Ginny. “Since all your families have agreed to help Albus, we’ll all be a part of it this time around as well.”

“Some of us will be helping to rebuild the wards here at Hogwarts,” Moony took up the story. “Others will be looking for a place to set up Order Headquarters, somewhere well-hidden. We worked out a tentative timetable this morning with Albus.”

“Where do we come in?” asked Neville.

“Because all your parents are members of the Order now, Albus will need their help as much as possible,” said Letha. “Also – forgive me, Harry, but this is true – since you’re known to be Harry’s friends, Voldemort may try to come after you. Our Den has the strongest wards, so you’ll all be staying there for the time being. Fred and George as well.”

“Remember, you break it, you pay for it,” Padfoot added.

“We’ll be rotating in and out, to make sure you have one adult there with you at all times,” Letha continued. “The twins may be legally adult, but I don’t trust them farther than I can throw them.”

Ginny snorted. “No one does,” she said. “Or no one should.”

The words washed over Harry, finding their way into his brain at odd moments. The Order of the

Phoenix would fight Voldemort. They would set up Headquarters somewhere safe. The Pride and the Weasley twins would stay at the Den until then. “We’re always all in the same house anyway,” he said. “This just means we’re all sleeping there. Like extended den.”

The Pack-parents exchanged looks. Harry sat up. He knew those expressions. “What aren’t you saying?” he demanded.

“Harry, you may not be with everyone else,” said Danger. “We’re not sure yet – Albus is looking into it – but you might be going to stay somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“It’s not our idea,” Padfoot said. “We don’t like it any more than you do.”

Harry clenched his hand around his robes. “I don’t know if I like it or not if you won’t tell me where it is!”

“With your relatives,” said Moony. “With your aunt and uncle.”

Harry let his head fall to the table again. “You’re right,” he said into the wood. “I don’t like it.”

“Harry can’t go back there,” Draco protested. “He nearly died!”

“He was twenty months old then,” said Danger. “I think he can take a little better care of himself now. Greeneyes?”

Harry grunted.

“That means yes,” said Meghan. “Either that or he’s sitting on a pin.”

Girls giggled. Harry raised his head just enough to glare at his little sister. She smiled sweetly at him. “Are you?” she asked.

Harry put his head down again. “Go jump in the lake, Meghan.”

“OK. Anybody else want to go swimming?”

Harry kept his head down as the rest of the Pride chattered around him. He wanted to go back to sleep, to lose himself and forget all of this had ever happened... he wanted to wake up and find out it was still the morning before the third task and none of this had ever happened at all...

Most of all, though, he wanted to stay with the Pack and Pride. He wanted to stay with people he knew, people who cared what happened to him. The thought of going back to the Dursleys, to the people who had put him in a cupboard and left him there, stirred deep terrors within him, fears he’d been almost unaware of until this moment.

He slid off his chair and under the table, changing forms as he went.

Wolf curled into a little ball and hid his nose under the fringe of his tail, closing his eyes. But the comfort he sought from the pose eluded him, slipping through his jaws and going to ground, and another feeling replaced it, filling him so completely that he lost track of where he was and fell into his memory.

Darkness and silence surrounded him, except for his own whimpers. His stomach and arms hurt, and even lying still, his head swam. He wanted to move, wanted to cry louder, but he couldn't find the energy, and besides, it wouldn't help. There had been noises earlier, and he had cried and cried, but no one had answered him. No one would come now, when it was silent.

The darkness pressed in on him, but all he could muster in response was a weary semi-terror that was part longing. Darkness didn't hurt, and darkness couldn't be lonely. Maybe if the darkness covered him, filled him up, made him part of it, that would be better...

A chill on the side of his neck. Harry jerked and opened his eyes.

Wolf-Danger took her nose away from him. Silly cub, she chided, beginning to wash his face. Hunt your prey, not your own tail.

Wolf squirmed under the merciless tongue. Stop it, he whined. I'm clean already, I'm clean!

Danger gave him a final lick and changed forms. "Are you back with us?" she asked, looking him in the eye. "Not hiding inside your own head?"

Harry changed likewise. "I didn't mean to," he said. "It just happened. And then I was sort of stuck."

"Well, come out and we can talk about how you can get unstuck if this happens again." Danger leaned down and held him. "They can't do that to you anymore, Harry," she whispered to him. "You're strong now, strong in more ways than one. I bet you can fool them."

"How?"

"Play the omega. Pretend you'll roll over and let them bite you. Just never let the bites land. Do what they tell you, don't make trouble—"

Harry snorted.

"Yes, I know that's a lot to ask." Danger thought for a moment. "How about 'don't make trouble they can trace to you'?"

"I think I can do that."

"Fine. And be helpful. You know how to do housework, you're a fine cook... unless your aunt loves to cook herself, she'll be overjoyed to have someone take some of that off her hands. They may not love you, they may not even like you, but they can't possibly lock you up like they did when you were a baby, and you can deal with anything else they try."

“But why?” Harry twisted free and looked into Danger’s face. “Why do I have to go back? I’m not whining,” he added quickly. “I just want to know.”

“And you deserve to know.” Danger’s smile was wry. “After everything we’ve been through... but you won’t like the answer.”

“I haven’t liked anything so far today. I think I can handle one more thing.”

“It’s Voldemort again. Voldemort, and the connection between your minds. You’d be just as safe, bodily, at the Den – safer, actually – but if you’re with the Dursleys, Voldemort won’t be able to deliberately invade your mind. There might be some accidental bleedover, but he can’t attack you that way while you’re with them.” Danger sighed. “Not that this makes me like the idea, nor any of us. You should have been there, Harry, we had most of the portraits in Albus’ office running for cover.”

Harry cracked a smile at the image, but it faded as he recalled what that image related to. “But he still talked you around.”

“Because, unfortunately, in this instance he’s right.” Danger’s lips curled up off her teeth for a moment. “We don’t have to like it, Harry. But I’m convinced that we do have to put up with it. If you’re completely and utterly opposed, we won’t do it, but Albus thinks that if you’re there for a month, while Voldemort is trying out this new connection, he may assume that he can’t ever get at you that way, and stop trying. And you are strong enough, and smart enough, to get through this, Harry. I’m sure of it.”

Harry took some of Danger’s certainty and made it his own. He had dealt with Voldemort, with Voldemort’s Death Eaters, with the Pride and all their personality clashes, with his own fears and uncertainties... he could handle a pair of Muggles who didn’t much like him. He might even be able to handle their wizard son.

Besides, if I do any underage magic there, Dursley gets in trouble for it.

That prospect made him smile.

“Ready to face the world again?” Danger asked. “Or at least a little more of it than the underside of the table?”

Harry shrugged one shoulder. “I guess.”

“That’ll do for now.”

Moony was waiting for them when they crawled out from under the table. “Sirius and Aletha went with the others,” he told Danger. “Albus wanted to see Sirius alone, and Letha’s gone down to the lake with the Pride.”

“I’d better go and give her a hand, then. Love you. Both of you.” Danger kissed Moony, scent-touched Harry, and vanished into the red bedroom.

Harry stared at the floor. "I don't want to do this," he said under his breath.

"Don't want to do what?"

Harry glanced up. "Your ears are too good."

"You knew that. What is it you don't want to do?"

"Anything."

"Yes, it would be nice just to hide for a while," said Moony. "But I don't know if you'll get the chance. Why were you ill this morning, Harry?"

Harry returned his gaze to the floor. "Thought about it," he said indistinctly. "Last night. Cedric."

"Did you try to stop thinking about it?"

Harry jerked his head up and down once without looking up. "Couldn't."

"Would you like to learn a technique that might help?"

What he wanted was to be left alone. But if he was alone, the memories might come back. And if he learned this, then maybe he could be alone...

"Fine."

Moony pulled out two chairs from the table and set them facing each other. "This is just the beginning," he warned. "You'll need to practice this a lot, and there are other techniques you'll learn as you get better at it. You know what this is called. We talked about it earlier."

"Occlumency." Harry sat down. "The magical defense of the mind against outside penetration."

Moony looked around in mock surprise. "Is Hermione still here? No, that wasn't her voice... you do sometimes pay attention, then. Amazing."

Harry scowled. "Har har."

"Now I don't know much about Occlumency," said Moony, leaning back in his chair. "I learned a little of it for curiosity's sake, but I've never had any real secrets to guard, except the one, and I've never had anyone intent on invading my mind. But I can teach you what I do know, and when you've gone beyond what I can help you with, we can arrange for you to keep learning with someone better."

"Okay. How do I start?"

"I can tell you what works for me. There's no guarantee it will help you as much. It's a very

personal art, you see. Most people use a visualization to begin with, something that makes them feel protected. I tend to think of a wall of fire surrounding my inner thoughts, so that anyone who tries to reach them gets burned. That might work for you, considering your heritage, but if you can think of something that would work better, feel free to use it.”

Harry closed his eyes and tried to imagine it. Fire in his mind, dividing those things that didn't matter from those that did... fire that would accept him, but burn anyone else who came near... fire all around him, on all sides...

He imagined himself on a broomstick, flying high and free, with a fiery shield all around him. It was thin enough that he could see through it, but no spell and no missile could reach him inside it. He was protected and free, all at the same time.

“Now, make a separate section inside your wall,” Moony's voice murmured, working itself into Harry's thoughts without breaking him out of his half-trance. “Remember, no thoughts can cross that barrier unless you want them to. Put all the memories that are bothering you into that separate section and seal it off.”

Within his mind, Harry raised his wand to his temple and drew off silver strands of memory, as he had once seen Professor Slughorn do. Nagini's gloating, Voldemort's laugh, Cedric's doomed run threatened to take him over, but he forced himself to see only the silver threads dangling from his wand. With a flip of his wrist, he tossed them free, and waved his left hand to seal them into their own section of fiery shield.

The memories writhed and twisted, trying to break through the fire. Harry watched them knot and twine around each other, forming a silver surface like a mirror. In the mirror rose an image – Voldemort's face, his twisted smile widening as he saw Harry looking at him – his wand was coming up, he was about to blast through Harry's pitiful shield –

With a gasp, Harry's eyes flew open. He was sitting in the main room of the Hogwarts Den. “It didn't work,” he said angrily, shaking his head. “I remembered anyway.”

Moony shook his head. “That doesn't mean it didn't work, Harry. It just means you need more practice. You can't do things perfectly the first time you try. Do you remember how long it took you to learn to dance? Or what some of your first cooking tasted like?”

Harry made a face. “Ugh, don't remind me.”

“But today you cook very well, and dance well too. You kept trying. You practiced, and you learned. Did it work at all?”

“Some,” Harry admitted. “I was on my broom, and there was fire all around me. I could move, but it kept me safe.”

“Excellent. You'll keep practicing, and you'll get better. Eventually, you may not even have to think of the fire. A truly accomplished Occlumens can simply blank his mind, emptying out all

thoughts and emotions, thinking of nothing at all.”

Harry frowned. “That’s impossible.”

“No, it’s not. You know someone who can do it. Your future tutor in Occlumency, to be exact. One of the best there is.” Moony’s look turned grim. “Considering who he has to fool, he needs to be.”

Who do I know...?

“Occlumency is often linked with Legilimency,” Moony added casually. “They’re different sides of the same coin.”

All right, someone who can read minds, or at least emotions and memories. Someone I know. And someone who has to fool someone who’s hard to fool...

Harry groaned. “No.”

“No, what?”

“No, I am not taking extra lessons with Grumpy.”

“Professor Grumpy,” Moony corrected blandly. “And yes, you are, when you’re ready.” He studied Harry’s face for a moment. “Unless you like having Voldemort able to invade your mind, and being kept out of important discussions because he might be able to listen in. I can’t teach you Occlumency at the level that will keep him out, and the only person other than Severus Snape who might be able to do so is Albus Dumbledore.”

“Who can’t come near me, because Voldemort might try and attack one of us,” Harry finished dully. That detail had been part of the talk earlier as well. “How do you know Snape – Professor Snape,” he added quickly before Moony could, “will actually teach me Occlumency? How do you know he won’t botch it up and let Voldemort get into my mind?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Moony admitted. “But I trust him, Harry.”

“Why, because Dumbledore trusts him? Dumbledore’s been wrong before. He trusted Wormtail.”

“That is true. But I have my own reasons.” Moony reached into his robes and produced his Pack-pendants. “One of them is here.”

Harry looked at the indicated pendant. It was the third one, showing the side with the two birds – the phoenix, for Dumbledore, and the bird that looked like a crow...

“A raven,” said Moony quietly. “Severus Snape’s Animagus form, if he should ever decide to try for the ability.”

“That doesn’t mean much.”

Moony smiled one-sidedly. “Would a prophecy convince you better?”

“There’s a prophecy about Snape?”

“There is a prophecy about Professor Snape. Danger gave it to me while we were packing to leave for America. Do you want to hear it?”

Harry nodded.

“In time, the raven will take his place with honor beside the dragon, the phoenix, and the cat.” Moony tapped the pendant. “He’s a Pack-friend, Harry. As much as we may not like him, he holds that place. I do believe that he will ultimately be on our side.”

“Great,” Harry said. “Before ultimately, he could do a lot of damage.”

Moony tucked his pendants back in. “Has anyone told you lately you’re a very cynical young man?”

Harry grinned. “You just did.”

“So I did. Cynicism aside, let’s try this again. This time, with your permission, of course, I’ll try to enter your mind while you have it protected, to break through your shield. Don’t let me if you can help it.”

Harry couldn’t help it. Two shoves and Moony was in, a hot red rush of wind smelling of smoke and black pepper curling all around him. Harry sneezed and his broomstick vanished, and memories rushed past him as he fell.

He was chasing Draco down the hall of the London Den – Kreacher the house-elf stared at him in the basement of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place – snow crunched under his paws as he raced towards the Burrow – he approached the wall in the Chamber of Secrets, his mouth open to speak the Parseltongue password –

A sharp pain seared through his hand, and he yelped and opened his eyes. Moony looked startled and a touch guilty. “It seems your powers aren’t quite as awake as I might have thought,” he said, taking out his wand. “Hold still.”

Harry got a glimpse of an angry, red area on the back of his hand before Moony’s wand tip touched it and it was covered by a bandage. “I thought the Heir of Gryffindor couldn’t get burned,” he said.

“That’s what the stories say. But you’ve been burned before, and even now...” Moony frowned. “My best guess would be that the bindings on your magic still aren’t completely gone. I’m so sorry, Harry, I wouldn’t have used fire if I thought it would actually hurt you.”

“But I used the power. In the graveyard. Shouldn’t I be able to use it now, all the time?”

Moony shrugged. “We don’t know,” he said. “And the only people who do, either can’t talk, or aren’t talking.”

Harry looked up at the ceiling.

“Exactly.” Moony stood up. “Come on, I want Letha to take a look at that hand. We can keep going with this another day.”

Harry buried the thought that he wouldn’t mind never trying it again under a layer of fire and followed his Pack-father into the red bedroom.

xXxXx

“Incomplete unbinding is possible,” said Letha down by the lake, watching the Pride splash one another. “Another possibility is that you’re self-blocking, Harry. That some part of you doesn’t believe you have this power, or doesn’t want it.”

“But I do want it!”

“Rationally, yes. But you may feel that it’s just something else setting you apart from everyone else. You may feel being Heir of Gryffindor is another trap of destiny you’re caught in. You might even feel that your having the fire magic caused Cedric’s death.” Letha held up her hand to stop Harry’s disbelieving splutter. “You know and I know that’s ridiculous. But understanding something with your mind and accepting it with your heart are two different things, and it’s your heart that’s involved here. You can’t force this, Harry. It’ll happen on its own time, or not at all.”

“Just like everything else around here,” Harry grumbled, slumping down on the grass. “Out of my control, nothing I can do about it.”

“No, that’s not true,” said Moony. “There’s one thing you can control about it. The same thing you can control about everything else.”

“What?”

“Your reaction to it. Are you going to let this make you cranky and mean, or are you going to shrug your shoulders and keep going anyway?”

“Cranky and mean,” Harry said promptly.

“All right, then.” Letha smiled. “We’ll just have to treat that the old-fashioned way.”

Before Harry knew what was happening, she had grabbed one of his wrists, and Moony had the other. They hoisted him to his feet and shoved.

Ginny and Neville dived out of the way.

Harry surfaced, spitting lakeweed. “No fair,” he gasped out. “Ambush.”

“You should have been ready,” said Draco cheerily, coming up in front of him. “Constant vigilance.”

Harry spit out one final piece of greenery. “Constant vigilance this,” he said, and hooked a foot around Draco’s ankles.

xXxXx

At least he still has this. He can still forget with them.

Yes, but the rest of the world won’t let him forget for long. Remus looked over his shoulder at the passing students, most of whom were ostentatiously not looking at the water fight in the shallows. **Some of them have to have believed that idiot who wrote for the *Prophet*. And most of them won’t want to believe that Voldemort’s back. So they’ll make Harry the scapegoat, and their neat little lives can go on.**

Don’t scoff too hard at neat little lives, my love. Your life has never been able to be neat, so you don’t know how comforting it can be to have everything defined and under control. Danger opened a door in her mind. **Feel.**

Remus slid a restrained mental hand into the memories, and experienced a quiet, contented peace. Everything was good, and everything would go on being good. There were no great threats, no troubles, only new pleasures to be experienced. It could have become stultifying easily, but he could understand the desire for it. **When was this?**

Before my parents died. In that last year after Hermione was born. I had everything I wanted, and I was sure that I would go on having everything I wanted forever. And I can’t say what I would or wouldn’t have done, or believed, to make sure it would go on that way. Danger sighed. **We fight so hard for peace, and then people like it too much, and refuse to believe that it can end.**

Which is why the ones who do believe have to do the fighting. Because if we don’t, who will? Remus watched Harry and Ron ganging up on Draco, rubbing sand into his hair. **We’ll fight to defend them, until they wake up and realize they have to defend themselves.**

And if they never do? Danger asked quietly. **If they keep on insisting it’s unnecessary, even as their homes are being overrun?**

Then we still fight. Because it’s what we have to do.

An ironic chuckle. **I was afraid you were going to say that.**

xXxXx

“Herm-own-ninny!”

Hermione swallowed a small chill before she turned. "Mr. Krum."

"I..." Viktor frowned. "Haff I done something?"

Hermione pressed a hand to her chest, praying silently for strength. "You tried to hurt my friend and my brother," she said. "You said all those lovely things to me, and you kissed me, and all the time... I know you were under the Imperius, but couldn't you have fought it? Couldn't you have tried?" Angry tears began to sting her eyes. "Or did you want to do what he made you do? It's easiest to put the Imperius on someone to do something they already want to do, did you know that? Did you want to hurt Ron and Harry?"

Something flashed for an instant within Viktor's eyes, but was quickly swamped by hurt. "No, Herm-own-ninny," he said, holding out his hand to her. "I would never hurt somevon dear to you."

Hermione stepped back. "I think you're lying," she said. "I think you wanted to do some of that. I don't know how much, or if you'd have done it if Karkaroff hadn't made you, but I think at least some of it you wanted."

Viktor drew himself up. "And vot is it you vant from me?" he demanded.

"I want the truth, Viktor. How much of it was an act? How much of what you said to me was a lie?"

Am I really more beautiful in the moonlight?

Viktor sighed, letting his shoulders droop. "The truth," he said sadly. "You deserve it. I will tell you. I did not vant to hurt Harry, and I do not know vy Karkaroff did. It should not haff been part of his plan. But Ron... you are sure you vant the truth?"

Hermione's hands hurt from clenching handfuls of her robe so tight. "I'm sure."

"Part of me did vant to hurt him," Viktor admitted. "That is vy, as you said, it vos so easy for Karkaroff to place the Imperius on me and make me vake him under the vater."

"Why?" Hermione asked incredulously. "Why would you ever want to hurt Ron?"

"Would you believe... jealousy?"

"*Jealousy?*" Hermione laughed in amazement. "What in the world does Ron have that you don't?"

"At the moment, your esteem. Your good vishes." Viktor smiled tightly. "And I haff seen the vay he looks at you, ven you are not vatching, and the vay you look at him. I think perhaps he holds your heart, and I vos merely... how do you say it... a fling." He bowed. "Goodbye, *Hermione*. Think more kindly of me ven I am gone."

He had left before Hermione could even open her mouth.

xXxXx

The water fight in the lake stayed with Harry over the next few days, lingering in his mind, a reminder that not everything had changed. The Pride was still the Pride, and fun and laughter still existed in the world.

He needed that reminder the next morning, when he met with the Diggorys. Mr. Diggory couldn't seem to stop crying. Mrs. Diggory seemed calm, but Harry could see the grief behind her eyes. He'd been afraid they would be angry, that they would blame him for Cedric's death, but instead Mrs. Diggory asked him to tell her what had happened.

Harry left out some of the details of Voldemort's resurrection, but stressed what Cedric had done for him. "He wouldn't leave me behind," he told them. "He could have run away anytime, but he stayed to help me. And I tried to make Voldemort leave him alone." His throat closed, and he had to look away. "I tried," he repeated chokily.

"Thank you for trying," said Mrs. Diggory. "And for telling us." Her voice turned distant. "He'd just won the tournament, and he was doing the right thing..."

Harry realized that she was trying to find some meaning, some heroism, in Cedric's death, and his throat clenched again. *It wasn't heroic!* he screamed inside his mind. *It wasn't brave, or noble, or anything! It was stupid and pointless, and if he'd gone to get help as soon as he knew something was wrong, Voldemort might never have risen and Cedric might still be alive!*

Aloud, he said nothing.

xXxXx

"I'll miss you this summer," Meghan told Natalie and Graham as they sat in the library, looking out over the grounds.

"Why?" Graham asked. "You have your Pack, and your Pride." He said the words a trifle awkwardly, but got them out. "Why would you miss us?"

"Having friends doesn't mean you can't have other friends." Meghan smiled. "The Pack is just a family, and the Pride is just friends."

"Is your brother going to be all right?" Natalie asked before Graham could respond to this. "I felt so awful for him, having to bring back Diggory's body like that."

"I think he'll be okay, but it's hard for him right now." Meghan looked out the window. "People think he's mad, because of that article in the *Daily Prophet*..." She suddenly turned back to them, her face worried. "You didn't believe that, did you? Either of you?"

Slytherin and Gryffindor shook their heads. "I knew he was a Parselmouth, because you told us about his snake friend," said Graham. "But just that doesn't make him Dark."

“And if you say he’s not mad, then I believe you,” Natalie said. “You know him better than almost anyone.”

Meghan smiled again and hugged both of them close. “I’ll really miss you,” she said. “Write a lot. I promise I will too.”

xXxXx

Harry sat on the low wall in the courtyard and watched the world pass by, until one piece of it didn’t. “Hello, Harry.”

“Hello, Cho.”

“Can I sit down?”

“Sure.”

Cho seated herself next to him. “I talked to Cedric’s parents,” she said. “They said you said Cedric wouldn’t leave you there.”

“Whatever they told you, it’s probably true,” Harry said roughly. *I really don’t want to talk about this right now.*

“They said you tried to help him.”

“Yeah.”

“Harry...”

The pause was so long that Harry had to look around. Tears were flowing freely down Cho’s face, but she still wore a small smile. “Thank you,” she whispered, then leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

Harry stared after her as she got up and hurried away. One hand rose to touch the place her lips had brushed.

xXxXx

Colleen Lamb approached Ginny in the Gryffindor common room. “I’d give this to Hermione, but she’s not talking to anyone,” she said nervously, proffering an envelope. “It needs to get to Harry Potter’s parents. Can you give it to them, please?”

“Of course... but you could just give it to Harry, you know.”

“Oh, no, no, I couldn’t do that.” Colleen’s eyes were wide. “I don’t want to bother him.”

Ginny sat up and sighed. “He won’t bite,” she said. “I promise.”

“Thank you, but I have to be somewhere.” Colleen was already halfway out the portrait hole. “Please, make sure that gets delivered. I promised.”

Ginny lay back down in her armchair and sighed. A quick sniff of the envelope revealed only two scents, one Colleen’s and another male and unfamiliar.

And I don’t know the handwriting, either... maybe that Slytherin she’s always running around with?

She shrugged. It was none of her business.

xXxXx

A day or two before the Leaving Feast, the Pride visited Hagrid. He was sitting on his back steps when they arrived, polishing something black and vaguely shield-shaped. “Skrewt armor,” he said sadly. “The last of ‘em just died.”

“Oh, good,” said Draco. “I mean, how sad.”

“Don’ try that on me, I’ve known yeh too long,” Hagrid grumbled, thumping Draco lightly (for him) on the chest. Draco sat down hard, fighting for breath. “Harry, good ter see yeh.”

Harry accepted Hagrid’s one-armed hug. “You too,” he said.

“Yeh just missed Olympe,” Hagrid said, waving towards the Beauxbatons carriage. “Madame Maxime ter you lot. She’d’ve liked ter see yeh... I’ll tell her yer all right, though. We’ll be seein’ each other over the summer.”

“What will you be doing?” Meghan asked.

“Sorry, can’ tell yeh,” said Hagrid quickly. “Bird business, yeh know.”

“We know,” said Neville. “We’re all junior bird-lovers.”

Hagrid chuckled. “Good way ter put it. Come in an’ have a cuppa with me?”

Harry walked slowly around the cabin, touching things as he went, while Hagrid made tea. Here was Hagrid’s big chair, where he’d sat on the gamekeeper’s knee when he was four... here the big bed he’d hidden under when he was seven... this table was the one Wormtail’s cage had rested on, the night Ron and Meghan brought him here...

“Harry.”

Harry jumped. From Hagrid’s tone, this wasn’t the first time he’d called his name. “Yeah.”

“You all righ’?”

Harry nodded.

“No, yeh’re not,” said Hagrid. “But yeh will be. Trust me.” He lifted the whistling kettle from the hob and poured water into the mugs on the table. “Knew he’d come back someday. It had ter happen, an’ now it has. We’ll jus’ get on with what we were doin’, and maybe stop him before he gets too far this time.”

“Stop him before he gets too far,” Ron repeated in a tone of disbelief. “That ought to be easy.”

“That’s Dumbledore’s plan.” Hagrid hung the kettle back on the hob. “An’ no one ever said it’d be easy, Ron.” He grinned. “If it were easy, where’d be the fun in it?”

“You think it’s fun?” Harry asked stiffly. “You think what I did was fun?”

“Not what you did, Harry, I didn’ mean that.” Hagrid sounded genuinely sorry, and Harry relaxed a little. “But there’s no good worryin’ about it. If it’s goin’ ter happen anyway, why can’ we find summat ter enjoy in it? There’ll be some good things come outter this. You’ll see.”

“More bad than good at first,” said Luna, looking into her mug. “But more good than bad in the end.” She blew gently on the tea. “Sorrows deep and long, but easing for all in time. For if joy does not live, what does it matter if sorrow dies?”

She stared into the mug for a long moment, then lifted it to her lips and took a long drink.

“Like I was sayin’,” said Hagrid. “What’s comin’ will come, an’ we’ll meet it when it does.”

“That’s beautiful,” said Meghan quietly.

“This isn’t,” said Ginny, who was standing by the window. “Hagrid, Fred and George are coming. I think they need to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“They have little furry things biting them.” Ginny giggled. “I don’t think they’ll be able to use a quill for a while.”

Hagrid rolled his eyes and got up, rummaging in a drawer. “I tell ‘em an’ tell ‘em, stay out o’ that part o’ the Forest. The centaurs don’ like it, an’ neither do...”

Draco pulled the door open for the twins, who looked surprised to find themselves awaited. Luna got to her feet and drifted towards them as most of the Pride stifled chuckles at the small creatures latched onto all but two of the twins’ twenty fingers (Fred’s left ring and George’s right thumb). “Dentadacts,” she said with certainty. “They only live in woods where centaurs are found.”

Hagrid approached them with a pot of salve in his hand. “Draco, baskets in th’ closet – catch ‘em fer me?” he asked, opening the pot and dipping a large finger in. “They fall righ’ off when they feel this stuff, an’ I don’ want them chewin’ on the floor...”

Luna gasped and dropped her mug.

Draco flung up a hand to protect his face, but was beside Luna as soon as the slivers had stopped flying. “What’s wrong? Were you burned?”

“No.” Luna was breathing hard. “No, I wasn’t burned. I’m all right.”

“You got us pretty good,” said Fred, indicating a scrape along the back of his hand.

George winced as he pulled a piece from his calf. “Hagrid, you all right?” he asked.

“Just a scratch,” said Hagrid, rubbing the salve on his own arm rather than on the creatures on the twins’ fingers. “Little blood, but no foul. Draco, lemme see yer hand.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s bleedin’, that’s not fine.”

“Luna, what’s the matter with you?” Hermione asked, standing up. “You don’t look good.”

“I think I need to go back to the castle,” said Luna shakily. “I’ll be all right in a little while.”

“Can I help?” Meghan asked.

Luna smiled. “I don’t think so,” she said. “But thank you for asking.”

xXxXx

“Potter.”

Harry turned, one hand on the corridor wall. “Professor Snape.”

“We may be seeing more of one another next year,” said Snape sourly. “If you can swallow your usual attitude and show some proper respect for once in your life, perhaps we can navigate through it with as little pain as possible for both of us.”

Harry bit his tongue to hold back his first, profane, response, and answered calmly. “I’ll give you as much respect as you give me. Sir.”

Snape’s eyebrows went up. “Is that a threat, Potter?”

“No, sir. A statement of fact.”

If Harry didn’t know better, he’d think Snape looked impressed. “Very well. I shall keep it in mind. However, I did not seek you out merely for the marginal pleasure of making conversation with you. The Headmaster wishes me, for reasons unknown to me, to give to you some of the intelligence I have gathered.”

“From Voldemort?”

“Do *not* say his name,” Snape hissed.

Harry filed this under guaranteed ways to get a rise out of the Potions Master and merely inclined his head. “I’m listening. Sir.”

“It seems that your little escapade in the graveyard has allowed the Dark Lord to fuse two of his passions – death and snakes. He is now attended by a snake Inferius. You know what that is, I trust.”

Harry shuddered.

“I see you do.” Snape turned to go, then pivoted again, his cloak flaring. “One other thing the Headmaster feels that you should know, Potter. The Dark Lord is very interested to discover the method by which his snake was killed, since he doubts that a fourth year student could conjure or transfigure a living creature of sufficient size and power.”

Harry leaned against the wall and took a deep breath. Snape’s scent was complex, heavily layered with negative emotions, but there were a few positive tinges in it. Amusement and... could it be hope?

“Do you know how I killed the snake?” he asked.

Snape looked him up and down. “I do,” he admitted. “Your guardians and the Headmaster see fit to keep me updated on certain events, due to their unaccountable penchant for calling me a ‘Pack-friend.’” His tone was contemptuous, but Harry caught a hint of something else in his scent. Something old, something still negative, but negative towards Snape’s own self rather than others, and connected with the Pack...

“I have no desire to know what you do among yourselves,” Snape finished. “All that I ask of you, Potter, is proper respect when we must work together, and to be otherwise left alone. Is this too much to ask?”

Harry squelched two or three impertinent answers and shook his head.

“Good. I will see you in the fall, then. Practice whatever Lupin teaches you assiduously, as I can promise you that my tutoring will be much more rigorous than his.”

“Grand,” Harry muttered as Snape strode away. “I’m so looking forward to next year.”

But what does he feel when he thinks about the Pack, and about being a Pack-friend?

Could it be... could it possibly be... but why?

Why would he feel guilt?

xXxXx

Danger stood near the barrier between platforms nine and ten, waiting. Hogwarts students had been emerging for several minutes, but none of the ones she was waiting for had yet arrived.

The Den will be so strange with Harry and Sirius both gone...

Meghan appeared first, holding Trevor, with Neville beside her, pushing the trolley on which rested both their trunks. Danger shook his hand and hugged her goddaughter. "I'm sorry, Pearl," she murmured. "But he had to leave already. He left his love, though."

Meghan nodded and rubbed her eyes with the hand not full of toad.

Draco and Ginny were the next pair out, and Ginny met Danger's outstretched hand with a letter. "I don't know what it's about," the red-haired girl said frankly. "Someone gave it to me to give to you."

Danger slit the letter open and began to read the contents.

When she looked up, Hermione, Luna, Fred and George had joined the growing crowd around her. Both girls had slightly bloodshot eyes, and Danger made a mental note to ask why they'd been crying. The twins, on the other hand, looked dumbstruck, Fred cradling a sack in his hands.

"This is very interesting," Danger said calmly. "Thank you for bringing it to my attention, Ginny."

And I'll be bringing it to Albus' the first chance I get...

Two luggage trolleys rattled to a stop near her, one full, one empty. Hermione stepped forward and picked the owl cages off the trunks, and Ron and Draco heaved Harry's trunk onto the empty trolley.

Danger moved around the small section of chaos to Harry's side. He was standing behind the trolley, watching. "How are you?" she asked quietly.

He started a little, then smiled at her wanly. "Not too bad."

"Good to hear." She put an arm around his shoulders, and felt flattered when he leaned into her rather than pushing her away. "Now, remember, don't tell that cousin of yours anything you don't want to see in print." She rattled the letter. "It seems he was partially responsible for that article in the *Prophet*."

Harry sighed. "Great. And I'll be living with him for... how long?"

"We don't know. Probably around a month."

"What?" Harry pulled away to stare at her. "What about my birthday?"

“We’ll have it as soon as you get back. And we’ll send your presents along.” Danger let him see just a little amusement in her face, amusement at his silliness rather than at him. “We won’t forget you just because we don’t see you every day.”

“I know.” Harry kicked at the floor. “But I don’t want to have my birthday there.”

“We’ll try to make sure you don’t,” Danger said. “But I can’t guarantee anything, and I don’t want...”

“To lie to me, I know.” Harry looked up. “Thank you for that,” he said with feeling. “For not ever lying to us.”

“You’re welcome.” Danger hugged her boy again. “Don’t forget to practice those exercises Moony gave you, every night before you go to sleep, and once or twice during the day if you can manage. Be polite, helpful, and unobtrusive. Remember, your relatives are doing a very kind thing by opening their home to you.”

“Gotta be cruel to be kind,” Harry muttered.

Danger chuckled under her breath. “Perhaps. Are you ready to go?”

Harry straightened his back. “I’m ready,” he said. “I said goodbye to everyone else already, on the train. Tell Moony and Letha and Padfoot I said hi.”

“I will.” Danger stroked a piece of Harry’s hair out of his eyes. “Make us proud, Wolf,” she murmured. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” Harry turned away from her and grabbed the handle of his luggage trolley, pulling it back and away from the others, then turning it and starting to push it towards the main area of the station.

He did not look back.

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“So,” said a large, mustached man as Harry pushed his trolley out of the crowd. “There you are.”

“Uncle Vernon,” Harry said politely. “Where’s Aunt Petunia?”

“At the car, with Dudley.” Vernon Dursley looked around, then leaned in towards his nephew. “I don’t care how many freaks are after you,” he growled into Harry’s face. “I don’t care what sorts of nasty things they’ll do if they catch you. If you make trouble, if you talk back to me or to your aunt, if you give anyone – anyone – a reason to think you’re *abnormal*, out of the house you go. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said meekly. *Play omega, Harry, you can do it. You need these people, and it’s only for a month.*

“Good. Come on, then, we haven’t got all day.” Uncle Vernon straightened up and started towards the front of the station.

Harry sighed as he followed.

It’s going to be a long month.

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Dealing with Danger

Chapter 53: Visits and Letters (Year 4)

Chapter 53: Visits and Letters

The car ride from London to Little Whinging was silent. Harry put Hedwig's cage between himself and Dursley and sat against the door, staring out the open window and thinking about the turquoise Ford Anglia headed for Devon.

Hermione and Neville were probably still talking about O.W.L.s, a subject Hermione had opened on the train. Luna would be asleep with her head on Draco's shoulder, ignoring his loud argument with Ron over nothing at all, which would continue until Danger told them to pipe down or she'd pull over and make them. At some point would come shrieks from Ginny and Meghan because Fred and George had tied their braids together, in between counting their newly acquired gold...

At least one good thing came out of this whole mess.

Although the Weasleys still had some of the money they'd received after Wormtail's trial, Mrs. Weasley refused to let the twins have any of it for their "foolish notions" of a joke shop. They'd tried to get some by betting with Ludo Bagman on the Quidditch World Cup, but that had gone sour when he'd paid them in leprechaun gold, which vanished within a few hours of being created by the little creatures. Harry had more than enough money of his own, and he liked the twins' prank ideas when they weren't directed at him. It seemed logical to him that they should have his Triwizard Tournament winnings.

I sure as hell don't want them. I couldn't even touch that sack without thinking about Cedric...

Quickly, Harry summoned his fiery shield and concentrated on it. *Fire. Fire all around me, keeping me safe. Nothing bad can touch me through the fire.*

"Thinking about something else works much better than not thinking about whatever-it-is." Moony's voice echoed through his memories. "Because every time you think, 'Oh, I won't think about that,' you're thinking about it anyway. Find something else to concentrate on, and practice that concentration until you can make your mind come back to that no matter what you were just thinking about."

Unfortunately, Occlumency was working about as well for Harry right now as the Patronus Charm had the first few times he'd tried it.

But that turned out well, didn't it? said a chirpy part of his mind. *I can do a really good Patronus now. I just need to stick with this.*

Harry's hand closed into a fist. *I don't want to stick with it. I don't want to have these memories at all. I want to be a normal human being, dammit! Not some fated hero with a freaking destiny I have to fulfill!*

A tiny glimpse of humor got through his rising anger. *I think I forfeited the 'normal human being' bit the night Danger stole me out of the cupboard. Nobody raised by the Pack is going to be normal.*

But the anger would not be denied. *I don't want to be here. I hate these people already. And they hate me, I can smell it.* He had the window down as far as it would go, and the stink of distrust and dislike was still rank in the car. More of it came from Vernon — *Uncle Vernon*, Harry grudgingly corrected himself — than from *Aunt Petunia*, but both of them were giving it off. And interestingly, it wasn't all connected with Harry.

Uncle Vernon doesn't like Dudley. Or he does, but he doesn't at the same time. And Aunt Petunia is... scared of him? And of me?

Den-night stories came to him, stories about his parents and their families, about his mother's Muggle sister. *"We never met, but Lily often talked about her,"* murmured Letha's voice. *"She thought her sister's aversion to magic was mostly due to fear. Magic is very frightening when you're not ready for it, or used to it. I speak from experience."*

Harry shrugged a little. *Magic's just power, like anything else. You flip a switch, a light goes on. You turn the key, the car starts. You wave the wand and say the right word, the couch goes up in the air.*

His hand clenched shut again. *And I ought to be with people who understand that, not idiots who're bloody scared of it!*

Or maybe I'd still be with scared people if I went home. Maybe that's why they're pawning me off. They're scared of me, or of what I mean. Voldemort wants me, dead or alive. Preferably alive, so that he can make me dead. And he doesn't care who he wades through to get to me.

Harry's breath was starting to come raggedly in and out. *Dumbledore told me I shouldn't be afraid to love, that love's what makes me different from Voldemort. But how can I love people I never see? And how can I be sure they love me, if they're kicking me out of the Den like this?*

In his mind, he knew these feelings and thoughts were nonsense. The Pack's love was the one constant in his life. Wherever he'd gone, whatever he'd done, the Pack had always been behind him, around him, with him, their love tangible and known.

But his heart refused to hear the rationale his mind set out. *Maybe they've always been there, but now they're not. Now I'm alone. A Pack of one.*

That sounds really stupid, but it's safest this way. Safest for everyone.

He recognized dimly that he'd heard this argument somewhere before, coming from someone else, and it hadn't made sense even then, but the memory wouldn't jell for him, and he didn't care. He was too busy keeping the burning in his chest from turning into audible growls.

I was stupid to say I'd do this. I was stupid. I was so bloody stupid.

And now I have to live with it.

Maybe they'll figure out while I'm gone that life's easier without me around. Maybe they'll decide they don't need the aggravation, and just tell me to stay where I am. They'll put a good face on it — "You'll be safer there, and we don't want you to get hurt" — when what they really mean is, "We'll be safer without you, and we don't want us to get hurt."

He held himself back from transforming with an effort. *No magic. I can't do any magic while I'm here, not even Animagus.* That had been made thoroughly clear to him. The Ministry was keeping tabs on him, and would know in an instant if anyone did magic at Privet Drive.

And they're just looking for excuses to say I'm out of control and dangerous. I don't even want to think about what they'd say if they found out I was an Animagus, and half my friends too.

Of course, now that he was thinking about why he *couldn't* change into Wolf, either to howl out his anger and frustration or to get rid of it by hanging his head out the window and playing 'name-that-smell,' he wanted to even more. It was like an itch in that place in the middle of his back that he could never reach on his own.

Harry closed his hands tight around his knees. *Thank God for the seatbelt. I can't transform when I'm sitting like this.*

We never wear seatbelts in the Weasleys' car. We never need to. It's got so many Safety Charms on it I don't think we'd get hurt if it ran straight into a brick wall...

That sounds like something Fred and George would do. Or more likely, they'd get somebody to do it for them. Somebody stupid. The Pride are all too smart to try it, but they'd find someone...

And he was right back where he didn't want to be, thinking about the people he wanted more than anything, the people who, it seemed, no longer wanted him.

Well, fine. They don't want me, I don't want them.

But even as Harry summoned his anger again to push the memories away, a small, childish part of him, deep down inside, was still sniffing and wondering why Danger or Letha didn't come to kiss him better.

xXxXx

Uncle Vernon pulled the car into a driveway and parked. Harry was out the door almost before the engine stopped running, breathing deeply and gratefully of the fresh air.

I think I would have thrown up if I'd had to smell him another minute. Or look at that smirk on Dursley's face — Dudley, I suppose I'd better call him now. What does he think is so bloody funny? Famous Harry Potter, back where he started?

Then he took a better look at the house. "I thought you lived at Number Four," he said before he thought.

Uncle Vernon glowered at him. "We used to," he said darkly. "Before your kind came into our lives. But we found this place when we got back on our feet, no thanks to you. And I won't have you ruining it for us again, understand me?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, most of his mind worrying at the problem of the number beside the door.

Number Seventeen, Privet Drive. Why does that sound familiar?

Then movement near the corner of the house caught his eye, and the half-emerged memory in his mind fled back into hiding.

What is he doing here?

Albus Dumbledore had just come around the corner of the house, his wand pointing back at the walls. His lips moved, though Harry could hear nothing. None of the Dursleys seemed able to see him, not even Dudley, who was dragging his trunk up the front walk.

"Hurry up, boy," Uncle Vernon barked from the boot. "What're you staring at?"

"Nothing, sir." Harry sidled around the back of the car to get his own trunk out, glancing back at Dumbledore from the corner of his eye. The Headmaster was still deeply engaged in whatever he was doing. But as Harry returned to the backseat to retrieve Hedwig, Dumbledore looked up and met Harry's eyes.

Harry sucked in a breath as a picture appeared in his mind. He and Dumbledore sat together on a small bench in a grassy yard. "Here?" he mouthed as the picture disappeared. "Now?"

Dumbledore inclined his head in a grave nod.

But... I thought...

Never mind.

Harry nodded back, and hurried to his trunk with Hedwig's cage in one hand.

"You'll be in the bedroom at the top of the stairs," Aunt Petunia said as Harry pulled his trunk through the front door. "The bathroom is across the hall."

"Thank you," said Harry automatically, his mind preoccupied with what Dumbledore could be doing there. *Isn't it dangerous for him to be around me? Couldn't Voldemort decide to attack one of us if he figures out he can get into my head?*

Trunk at the bottom of the bed, Hedwig on the desk, cage door open and window up, Harry was out the door again, not forgetting to close it. Padfoot had sent him a trunk alarm as a going-away

present, so he'd know if Dudley or anyone else tried to get into his things, and Hedwig was capable of defending herself.

There wasn't any bench in the front, so it must be out back...

He slipped out the back door and sure enough, there sat Dumbledore, looking at something in the air at about the level of the first-floor windows and nodding in satisfaction. "The wards are taking well, Harry," he said. "Will you sit with me?"

Harry made it most of the way across the lawn before his curiosity got the better of him. "What are you doing here, Professor?" he asked, getting the title in at the last second so as not to sound too rude. "I thought..."

"That we could not be near one another, and under normal circumstances, we cannot," Dumbledore finished. "However, these are not normal circumstances for two reasons. First, here and now, with the blood magic wards once again present, Voldemort cannot invade your mind purposefully. Second, I arranged for him to be otherwise engaged for some two hours this afternoon, to give you time to arrive here from King's Cross, and myself time to recreate the wards. It would be wasteful for me not to use that time to speak with you, since this may be our last opportunity to do so for some time."

"My last opportunity to speak with anyone," Harry muttered before he could help himself.

"I beg your pardon?" Dumbledore looked surprised.

"I can't very well go visiting, if the point of my being here is to keep me safe," Harry said bitterly, the anger of the car ride resurfacing. "Why not leave me here all the time? That'd be even safer. Why don't you just tell them to lock me up and feed me through a hole? Voldemort couldn't ever get at me then."

"I will not insult you by telling you I understand your feelings," Dumbledore said quietly. "I doubt anyone who has not been through what you have would truly understand. But I do sympathize, and I have come here to tell you one of the reasons I wished you to return to your relatives for a time."

"One of the reasons? The only one you can let Voldemort know about?"

"No, one of the reasons because the others I believe you already know."

Harry tucked his arms across his chest and let himself slide down on the bench. "Yeah, I'm dangerous," he said, staring across the yard. "I'm an effing time bomb. You have to keep me from exploding until you can throw me at Voldemort, right?"

"You could see it that way, if you chose. But what I have come here to tell you does not involve you, except peripherally, as it involves all of us. There is a spy in the Order of the Phoenix."

"Snape." Then the words twisted themselves into a new meaning, and Harry sat up to stare at

Dumbledore. “Wait. You don’t mean...”

“I do.” Dumbledore was not smiling, and his eyes were completely sober. “One of the current members of the Order reports to Lord Voldemort.”

For a long moment, Harry couldn’t find any words. “Why do you let him stay, then?” he blurted finally. “Why haven’t you turned him in as a Death Eater?”

“I doubt the Ministry would believe me, at the moment,” Dumbledore said mildly. “As well, I am not certain that I have determined who the spy is. However, that there is a spy I am sure. We must therefore proceed with caution.”

“Proceed with caution?” Harry shook his head in disbelief. “How do you do that, when somebody’s telling Voldemort everything you do?”

“Take your case as an example, Harry. There are, at this moment, two places where you could spend the summer. The spy knows, and will be reporting to Voldemort, where you go. However, one of those places has wards on it that cannot be breached by anyone intending you harm. The other, well-warded as it may otherwise be, does not.”

“But you can’t do anything about that.” Harry slumped again. “So I’m stuck here, aren’t I?”

“Not necessarily. We have begun proceedings to create a headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix. The Fidelius Charm will be placed over the chosen house. No one who is not told of its location by the Secret-Keeper will be able to find it. Meaning that the spy, try though he may, cannot tell Lord Voldemort where it is.”

Harry snorted. “Unless the spy *is* the Secret-Keeper.”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled for a second. “I hope you are not accusing me of being the spy.”

“What? No, of course not... you’re going to be the Secret-Keeper?”

“I would have done it for your parents, had I been allowed.” A flash of pain and sorrow showed in the blue eyes. “But things past are past, and we must live in the present and look to the future. You will remain here only as long as it takes for the Order to set the wards and charms on our new headquarters, Harry. After that, I doubt you will ever need to set foot in this house again.”

Harry knew his relief showed on his face, and he didn’t care. “How long will it take, sir?”

“Approximately a month. I would like to ask you to obey a few rules while you are here. The wards extend only to the limits of your aunt and uncle’s property, but in daylight I believe you may wander the neighborhood to some degree. After nightfall, though, please stay within the house and yard. I believe you were instructed as to the degree of contact expected.”

“I’m to write as often as I can, every other day at least,” Harry recited. “And someone will come by every three or four days to check on me.”

“Indeed. Those who know you personally will, of course, announce their presence, to you if not to your relatives.”

You had to go off like that, yelling about never seeing anyone again, when you knew all along there'd be people coming and going, part of Harry's mind nagged.

You didn't know they'd be talking to you, another part answered. *What if they'd just come and watched you, made sure you weren't bruised or bloody, then left? They could have been Disillusioned or under Invisibility Cloaks, and you'd never have known they were there.*

Oh, come on. People wouldn't do that.

Harry suddenly realized he was missing what Dumbledore was saying and tuned back in. *I think it was something about passengers. What's he doing? It looks like he's petting an invisible cat...*

“You will take precautions, I am sure.” Dumbledore rested his hands in his lap. “Now, may I ask if you have received any instruction on how to behave while you are here?”

Harry took a moment to translate “play omega” into more usual terms. “Do what I'm told, and don't put up a fuss,” he said. “Let them order me around. Act like I don't have a mind of my own, or like I'm afraid of them.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Likely a difficult task for you, as it goes against your true nature. Have you perhaps wondered why?”

“It's so I don't get in trouble with them. Isn't it?”

“Yes, but another reason also exists. You are aware that your cousin has had troubling encounters with Dark wizards in the past.”

“Well, he was part of that thing with Malfoy and Wormtail last year. But they just used him, he didn't have anything to do with it...” Harry trailed off. “Did he?”

“I do not know with any certainty,” Dumbledore said. “He may be as innocent as he seemed, or he may be interested in the darker side of magic. If he is, and if Voldemort comes to hear of your summer with your relatives, he will receive an account of you that is exactly what we want him to think. Dudley will tell him of a shy, quiet boy who obeys orders without question, and Voldemort will believe you a child he can cow. What he will find facing him is a young man with the heart of a lion, who obeys his chosen authorities but does so with his eyes open.”

“Sounds great,” said Harry. “Where're you going to find him?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “I should depart,” he said, standing up. “Before I go, may I see the chain on which you wear your pendants? I have something I wish you to carry with you at all times, and that seems the most likely place for it.”

Harry pulled the necklace over his head and handed it to Dumbledore. “Do you want it open,

Professor?”

“If you would be so kind.”

Harry willed the chain open at the top, and Dumbledore separated the two ends and slid something onto one of them. “You may close it again,” he said, handing the chain back to Harry.

A small golden phoenix hung beside Harry’s last pendant, a loop of the flame surrounding it curling around the chain to hold it on. “Nice carving,” Harry said, fingering it. “What’s it for?”

“Dire emergencies,” said Dumbledore. Harry looked up, surprised, at the worried note in the Headmaster’s voice. “The wards on this house should be impregnable, Harry, and I hope to have an adult member of the Order nearby at all times, but unexpected circumstances have a way of arising. Should the protections fail, or should you be caught outside them with no help within call, press the carving to yourself and speak the phrase ‘Denward bound.’ You will be taken to a safe place.”

“A passworded Portkey?” Harry slipped the pendant chain back over his neck. “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Most wizards cannot, and I would prefer to have my ability remain unknown. As well, Portkeys are strictly monitored by the Department of Magical Transportation, and to create an unauthorized one incurs, at the least, a heavy fine.” Dumbledore looked Harry in the eye. “Do not use the Portkey unless you are in true peril of your life,” he said firmly. “You are of an age, and an understanding, that I trust you with it. Do not make my trust misplaced.”

Don’t use it to run off because you don’t like the Dursleys, Harry translated mentally. “Yes, sir.”

“If all goes well, it will be unneeded,” Dumbledore said. “But I would rather be in trouble myself for creating an unauthorized Portkey than give the Ministry a chance to make trouble for you by forcing you to do underage magic. I do believe you capable of defending yourself, Harry — you have shown that capability many times — but Cornelius Fudge thinks that you and I are a threat to him, and his years in the Ministry have taught him that threats must be eliminated. And there are those on his staff whom I trust far less than he. I do not want you saved from one sort of trouble only to fall into another.”

Like this isn’t trouble right here. My relatives hate me, Professor, and maybe they can’t shove me in a cupboard anymore, but they’re not going to make it easy for me. But Harry only nodded. “I understand, sir.”

“Excellent, and now I really must leave you. My best wishes for your month. And if you should happen to need more information, I suggest you ask the monster underneath your bed.” Dumbledore turned in place and was gone.

“I’m a little old for that,” Harry said to the empty air.

All the same, when he walked into the bedroom again, he regarded the bed with trepidation. Dumbledore didn't lie, and he might say silly things sometimes, but there was usually meaning behind them. Was there really a monster under the bed? Maybe a snake, that Harry could talk to and get advice from...

He opened his trunk, disconnecting the alarm as he did so, and took out his Firebolt, which lay corner to corner across the top. Holding it just above the tail, he sat down beside the bed and jabbed the broomstick under it.

Something grabbed it.

Harry pulled.

The thing pulled back.

Harry ducked a bit lower, enough to see that the form under the bed was human. "Give it back," he said, pulling harder.

"No."

Harry let go of the broom in surprise and fell over backwards.

The bed bucked. "Ow!" it complained. "That was my head!"

Harry sat up, rubbing his shoulder. "At least it wasn't anything important," he said, his usual smartmouth tendencies rekindled by the familiar voice. "Weren't you going on some secret mission?"

"Maybe."

A sudden suspicion surged into Harry's mind. "You're supposed to watch me, aren't you?" he challenged. "That's your secret mission. To keep an eye on little Harry, because he can't survive a month alone with the big bad relatives."

"Er, no, actually. I just thought I'd stop off here on my way out. I can go if you don't want me."

Harry's anger, its fuel removed with Padfoot's answer, burnt itself out as quickly as it had started, and he sagged in place. "No, don't go," he said. "I mean, if you can stop a little while."

"I can." Padfoot crawled out from under the bed, his Muggle shirt and jeans slightly dusty. "I don't have to be where I'm going until late tonight."

"Where are you going?"

Padfoot shook his head, dusting himself off. "Sorry, Greeneyes. There's a reason it's called a *secret* mission."

“But it can’t hurt to tell me,” Harry wheedled, getting up to sit on the bed. “I won’t see anyone long enough to tell.”

“Not falling for it, Harry. You can still write letters — I know, I know, you wouldn’t put anything like that in a letter. But this one needs to stay secret...” Padfoot stopped and frowned. “On the other hand, I don’t see why it has to stay secret,” he said, sitting beside Harry. “Voldemort’s likely to know about it before anyone, considering who he deals with. All right, if you want to know, I’ll tell you.”

“I want to know.”

Padfoot plastered a big fake grin across his face. “I get to go home. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Home?” Harry asked in confusion. “The Den?”

Padfoot dropped the smile. “I wish. No, home as in where I came from. I’m Albus’ ambassador to the purebloods. I get to make the social round, go to the parties, shake the hands, kiss the babies — not that there are many of those these days.”

“Is that why Letha’s not going with you?”

“That, and Albus wants her at Hogwarts rebuilding the wards. Apparently I’m not special enough.” Padfoot huffed. “I’m special. I’m very special.”

Harry suggested, with a word or two his godfather had taught him, just how special Padfoot was. “How long will you be gone?” he asked.

“About as long as you will. Maybe a bit longer, depending on when they finish with Headquarters. My last party ends August 5.”

“Yeah, Dumbledore said it would take about a month to get Headquarters set up.” Harry found himself thinking of the place with a capital letter already. “Where are they putting it?”

“Can’t tell you that either. This time for real.” Padfoot tapped Harry’s temple. “If you know before the Fidelius goes up, then that’s bad news for everybody.”

“Yeah.” Harry’s mood, which had been slowly climbing out of a pit, lost its grip and tumbled back in. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“Hey.” Padfoot slipped off the bed and went to one knee in front of Harry. “Hey. Look at me.”

Harry turned his head away.

“Fine, don’t look at me. I always knew I was ugly.” Padfoot sniffled. “Nobody loves me, everybody hates me...”

“If you finish that sentence, I’ll push you out the window,” Harry said without turning.

“True, that’s not the most natural food for either of my forms. Luna might go for that, or Draco, but not me. Wonder if there’ve ever been any fish Animagi?”

“How would they practice?” Harry wondered, interested in spite of himself. “Would they have to have a bucket there to breathe when they did their head transfiguration?”

“Probably. And then they’d just have to be near water when they tried the first transformation.”

“And hope they didn’t run out of air before they finished the incantation. It took me a while to get through it, the first time.”

Padfoot grinned, sitting down cross-legged on the floor. “Sounds like a song. All those ‘-ation’ words.”

“You have to be near water when you try your transformation,” Harry chanted, “and don’t run out of air before you finish your incantation...”

“Hey, that’s good!”

Harry bowed. “But the transfiguration part should go first, and we need one more word to go with it.”

“Let’s see. ‘-ation’ words.” Padfoot rocked back and forth, thinking. “Cogitation,” he said finally. “‘If you want to be a fish, you’ll need some cogitation; bring a bucket when you do your head transfiguration.’ Then yours go after that.”

“Now we need a tune.” Harry hummed a snatch of song. “How about that one?”

Padfoot blanched slightly. “Do me one favor,” he said. “If Letha ever hears about this, claim I suggested the melody.”

Harry snickered. “I didn’t learn it from you.”

“That’s what frightens me. All right, let’s put it together.”

They were on their third rendition of the ‘Silly Fish Song’ when heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs. Padfoot dived for Harry’s open trunk, yanked out the Invisibility Cloak, and threw it over himself just as a fist pounded on the door. “Open up in there!” Uncle Vernon’s voice bellowed.

Harry got his earnest and scared face on and opened the door. “Yes, sir?” he quavered, moving slightly to one side to direct a kick at the patch of air which was having a hard time suppressing sniggers.

“What is all that noise coming from in here?” Uncle Vernon was peering around Harry and the door, inspecting the corners. “It sounded like two people singing at once.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I’ll be quieter.”

“You’d better be.”

Harry shut the door and leaned against it. “Oops,” he said.

“Me too,” said Padfoot quietly, emerging from under the Cloak. “I forgot we weren’t in Den.”

“So did I.” Harry looked around the room. “I don’t know why, but I like this room,” he said. “Better than the rest of the house, I mean. I haven’t been here very long, but this already feels a little bit like home.”

“Don’t get too attached to it,” Padfoot advised, standing up. “You’re not staying. I’d better go, Harry, before I get you into more trouble. Someone will be along within the next couple of days, and you’re probably going to wear out all your owls writing back and forth.”

“Probably.” Harry hugged his godfather tight. “Don’t let the purebloods bite.”

“Fine, and don’t you let the Muggles get to you. Oh, and be careful if you put anything under that bed. There’s a floorboard loose under it.” Padfoot pressed his ear to the door. “Nothing,” he said. “Go scout the terrain for me? I just have to get out of the house without anyone seeing me, then I’ll walk around the corner and Apparate from there.”

Harry slipped out the door and checked to see that a path to the front door was clear, then waved Padfoot onward. The older wizard came down the stairs with the quiet grace of his dog namesake and dodged out the front door adeptly while ruffling Harry’s hair on the way past. One hand waggled its fingers, and he was on the sidewalk, looking like just another passerby.

Harry watched his godfather out of sight, then turned and went back upstairs. Depending on how loose the floorboard was, it might be a good place to hide things.

The floorboard was very loose. And Harry wasn’t the first to have the idea.

Within the dust under the board reposed a folded piece of paper.

In the light from the window, it became a letter, addressed in a familiar girlish half-scrrawl to “Whoever Finds This.”

Whose handwriting is that?

Harry sniffed at the letter, then sneezed. Any scent on it had long since been overridden by the dust. Maybe Wolf could have taken a scent from it, but he couldn’t be Wolf for four long weeks.

And there’s a much easier way to find out...

He scooted back until he was leaning against the bed, tore the letter open, and began to read.

4 November, 1975

To whoever finds this letter,

Greetings from the past! Did you know you were in my bedroom? Well, it's probably your bedroom now, but it's my bedroom in my now, when I'm writing this. I won't tell you my name, because you'll think it's silly, but I'll tell you about me. I'm a girl, I'm almost fifteen years old, and I live here with my mum and my dad. I don't have any brothers or sisters, but I'd like one. A sister, I think. I don't like boys much.

The letter went on, giving little details about the writer's life, her hopes and dreams, what she liked and didn't like. Harry ran a finger along the faded lines of ink, imagining he could feel the writer's presence in them.

I wish I could have known her. I think I'd have liked her.

Finally, he neared the end.

Well, this letter's getting very long, so I think I'd better end it here. I'll hide it in my bedroom, under the floorboard — of course, you knew that, because that's where you found it. Maybe you can hide a letter here too, and see if someone finds it years and years from now. Maybe, if you could find out where I am and what I'm doing in your now, you could tell me you've found my letter. I'd like that. Though I suppose you have to know my name for that. Oh well. Here goes.

Harry read the signature, then let his head sag back against the mattress.

I am such an idiot.

xXxXx

30 June, 1995

Dear everyone,

I made it and I'm all right. It hasn't been bad so far, but I've only been here about fifteen minutes. The house is very clean, so it doesn't look like I'll have much to do beyond day-to-day things. Yes, I know, those are what take up most of the time. That and cooking. I'm already thinking about dinner.

There isn't much else to tell, so I'll send this right away and write more tomorrow. But I do have to ask one thing...

Danger, does Moony know that you don't like boys much?

Love from

Harry