

## The Spell of Sealing In the Beginning

A man paced around the dilapidated sitting room of the Shrieking Shack. Beside him, on a ramshackle sofa, a black-haired baby boy lay sleeping peacefully.

Across the country, the man knew, people would be celebrating today. He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the Dark Lord who had ravaged the wizarding world for eleven years, was dead, or at least destroyed.

To Remus Lupin, it felt like a singularly empty victory.

"They're all dead," he murmured, trying out the words, seeing if they made any more sense spoken aloud than shrieked inside his mind. "All of them. Every one. Sirius, Peter—what were they *thinking*, playing that stupid game with the Fidelius Charm? All it meant was that they *both* died, Sirius after he'd told them where Peter was, Peter after he'd told them the secret. And then James—at least he got a piece of Voldemort first, I can't imagine what it would have been like to know he died without even having his wand in his hand—and Lily..."

The horror and helplessness crashed over him again, forcing him to bite down on the collar of his robes rather than groan or scream loudly enough to wake little Harry. Lily Evans Potter, bleeding from the spell Voldemort had thrown at her as she fled up the stairs with her son in her arms, had Apparated into Remus's kitchen not eight hours before, gasping out her message almost before she had fully materialized.

"Leave me," she'd spat when Remus tried to pull back her robes, to see how badly she was hurt. "Take Harry. *Take* him, Remus, and take him *away* from here. Take him somewhere safe, somewhere he can grow up free and happy." Painfully, she'd straightened, the wand which had cost James his life to Summon for her gripped between her fingers in perfect dueler's pose. "You're the last of us. The last one I can trust. I don't care how you do it, only *do* it." Her lips had peeled back from her teeth in an expression which set off Remus's every predatory instinct. "*I will handle Voldemort.*"

"And she certainly did." Returning to the present moment, Remus surprised himself with a smile. "Right there in my kitchen, she dueled him to a standstill, and hit him with—good God, I don't know *what* it was, but he started disintegrating on the spot, literally falling to pieces!" His laugh died away into stillness as Harry stirred. "Though he still managed to get off a Killing Curse," he said softly. "And she just stood there and let it come. I suppose she thought that if he saw her die,

he wouldn't make any more effort, wouldn't try to save himself and come after Harry..."

But everything Remus had ever heard or read, along with everything he suspected about "Lord" Voldemort, told him that even apparent death would probably be only a temporary setback for someone so willing to delve into the darker parts of magic. Too, there were the Death Eaters, many of whom might well believe that the best way to resurrect their Master was to kill the child who had escaped his murderous ways. If Remus was going to satisfy Lily's final request, to find a place where Harry could grow up happy and free and safe, he was going to have to get creative.

"She said she didn't care how." Remus turned to regard the sleeping child, who squirmed once and was still again. "I doubt this is what she had in mind. But it will do the trick."

Kneeling down, he pulled open the trapdoor which led to the tunnel onto Hogwarts grounds, propping it up with a handy stick so that it could be knocked out from underneath. "Don't go into the Forest," he sing-songed as he worked, remembering his own Hogwarts days. "There are *werewolves* in there!" Another tiny laugh escaped from him. "Well, not exactly. At least not until I went exploring in there with Wormtail and Padfoot and Prongs. But we did discover who *does* live there..."

In one of the more bizarre facets of lycanthropy, a female werewolf became fertile in her transformed state during the full moons of late winter, around the same time a natural wolf would do so. If a male and a female werewolf met and mated during this time, it was entirely possible for cubs to be conceived.

"And I do mean cubs, even if they'll have basically human intelligence." Remus dusted off his hands and stood up. "The woman's reproductive system locks into its wolf form once she's conceived, and the babies are born during another full moon three months later—and heaven help her trying to explain to anyone who doesn't already know what she is where this sudden litter of 'puppies' has come from!"

At least one such litter of "wise wolves" was known, once they had grown up enough to be independent, to have been released in the Forbidden Forest at Hogwarts. Remus suspected, from his nocturnal visits and his friends' reports on same, that more than one had been so released, or that the offspring of a wise wolf and a common wolf was also likely to turn out wise.

"Or there could be some population growth from other areas." Stone-faced, Remus drew his wand. "Like this one." Taking aim at Harry, he whispered a Sleeping Spell, being sure to envision it at a lower strength than usual. Harry twitched again as it took effect, then relaxed into utter limpness.

"Sorry about this, little one," Remus breathed, kneeling down beside the boy. "At least you know you'll never have to transform..."

Drawing back Harry's sleeve, he closed his teeth carefully around the pale, smooth skin and bore down. An instant later, a burst of copper-iron-salt filled his mouth. Step one was complete.

"And now for my next trick." Remus spat to one side, then conjured a bandage around Harry's arm

and a cup of water for himself. "How to make a werewolf not a werewolf. The only 'cure' that's ever been discovered."

The spell was one all werewolves knew, whispered in a mountain cave in the silence of the dawn after a full moon, scribbled on scraps of grimy paper slipped from one hairy hand to another as their owners passed each other on the street. Somehow the intelligence had never made its way to the Ministry. Remus wasn't terribly surprised. Werewolves had enough trouble keeping hold of their lives as it was.

"It's just the sort of thing they'd love to have, too, isn't it." Restless, he rose to pace back and forth, checking his watch. The lycanthropic infection, like all magical diseases, spread fast. Two minutes should see it well settled into Harry's body. "Not only would it get rid of the danger we pose to human beings, wizards and Muggles alike, but it would get us completely out of sight. No one would have to look at us, think about us, make accommodations for us." He rolled his eyes. "Not that they do now. But this would mean no 'bleeding hearts', as I'm sure the Ministry would call them, could start a campaign to bring them around to that. It would simply stop being necessary to deal with werewolves, ever again..."

Even the maddest lycanthrope could see the sense in this, and thus the Spell of Sealing remained a closely held secret. Remus had brought it up, jokingly, to James and Sirius once or twice, and they had laughed it off, claiming such a thing was a rumor, a potion-dream, relegated to the same drawer in the Ministry files as reports of necromancers and late-life eruptions of magic in Muggles.

"What they'd say if they could see me now..." Remus sighed, his amusement flowing away as he returned to the present. "But even if they can see me, they can't say anything. They won't say anything, ever again. Which means I'm the only one left to make the decisions, for myself and for Harry." He looked back at the child so named, who slept undisturbed despite the few dots of red marking the bandage around his arm. "Not a place I'm exactly comfortable, even if it weren't such a big, irrevocable decision..."

As far as the old werewolf who'd taught it to Remus had known, the Spell of Sealing, once enacted, could never be reversed or altered, any more than death itself.

"And it is a sort of death, if you want to look at it that way." Remus flexed his fingers, looking at them with new appreciation. "It lets us keep our human minds all the time, well and good, no arguments there. But it robs us forever of our human bodies. How can that be worth the trade? Never again walk down the street and shake hands with a friend? Never again say hello or goodbye, never laugh, never cry, never go to school or hold a job or even fall in love..."

*Never be told to get off the street, our kind's not wanted here, his mind supplied. Never have our words or gestures rebuffed because of what we are. Never be forced to keep our feelings private because we know we'll only be mocked, never be told we're not welcome in a school or a workplace. And who says wise wolves can't fall in love? Even common wolves mate for life...*

Remus laughed once, pulling himself out of his thoughts. "It'll be like everything else in this

world," he said, turning back to smile at the little boy so unexpectedly become his own. "Some good and some bad, but unlike anything we ever dreamed. And since none of the Death Eaters would believe this story even if it came with Merlin's personal guarantee, we ought to be safe pretty well forever!"

His heart at peace, Remus knelt down beside Harry, drew his wand for the last time, and held it above both their heads.

*"Lupini conformatio signoque! "*

---

In the dim, chilly light of an early November dawn, a gray-furred wolf walked unhurriedly across the lawns of Hogwarts from the direction of the Whomping Willow, a cub with darker fur dangling limply from his mouth. He paused near the edge of the Forbidden Forest to look behind him one more time, as though saying farewell to the castle with all its hidden secrets and strengths.

Then, with a lupine shrug, he turned back to the way he had chosen, and vanished among the trees of the Forest forever.

## **The Spell of Sealing Perfectly Normal**

Moonfur and Smokepaw, of the fourth den-cave behind the sharp-smelling bush among the home trees of the Stonehouse Pack, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, by the standards of the People sometimes called "wise wolves" by the twolegged ones. They spent their days sleeping in their den-cave, and their nights teaching their cubs how to hunt prey and fight invaders and sing to the moon of their father's name, and their lives ran in an untroubled stream from season to season.

Admittedly, Moonfur's story was an unusual one. Instead of being born among the home trees, or born of the changing ones and released there when he was old enough to fend for himself, he had himself been a changer, who had chosen of his own free will to become one of the People of the Pack. His arrival at the Stonehouse den-caves carrying the boy-cub called Grasseye in his jaws, to humbly beg acceptance into the Pack for both of them, had been the sensation of the late autumn and early winter of that year.

The elders of the Pack consulted, and decided that father and son should be allowed to live among them a season on sufferance. Very few of the changers ever chose Moonfur's path, they explained, and to do so for not only oneself but the cub of another left to one's guardianship (for no one with a nose could fail to catch the differences in their two scents) could mean that he might be pursued. Moonfur acknowledged this truth and accepted their judgment, preparing to wait out his time patiently at the edges of the Pack's territory.

But a she-Person called Smokepaw, so named for the fleetness of foot which allowed her to outrace a centaur in full gallop if she chose, cared little for custom, and sought the strangers almost before Moonfur had chosen a den for himself and his black-furred cub. She would share her hunting grounds with them, she told him, if he would satisfy her curiosity about the world from which he had come. Moonfur agreed gladly, and together they hunted for themselves and for little Grasseye through the cold of the winter, and told tales of the lives they had lived as they curled together around the cub in Moonfur's shallow cave.

The outcome of the bargain surprised no one; on the Night of Balance, when winter turned to spring, the Stonehouse Pack raised their voices not only to sing the names of their newest members but to cry their joy at a new pairing. And on a night of the following year when spring came close to summer, Smokepaw allowed Grasseye to climb onto her back for a better view as Moonfur gently laid a tiny, squirming girl-cub before the full Pack for them to see. Their howl of approval so startled the cub that the fur of her tail made itself into the shape of an ash tree's leaf,

narrow at each end and full in the middle, and thus, amid merriment, was she named Ashtail.

So matters stood, and so, for all that most of the People cared, could they have stood forever. But the elders knew that they were not called the Stonehouse Pack for nothing, and that the incomprehensible doings of the twolegs at the great stone house beyond the home trees, and elsewhere in the land, could easily affect what became of the Pack. And so they took council of Moonfur and Smokepaw, of certain centaurs whom they had reason to trust, and even of those known to the Pack as Redmount and Bees-hum, though the exact identities of these last two were a closely guarded secret.

The first effect of these councils on the life of the small he-Person called Grasseye, who knew vaguely that he had once had another name and shape but did not see why he should care, came in the form of a most unpleasant shock.

---

The young wise wolf stared at his mother, green eyes wide, black fur fluffed, ears and tail lowered. The combination of his posture and the incredulous whimper which burst from him would have translated perfectly to a boy's horrified cry of, {But *Mum!* }

{That will be enough out of you,} said Smokepaw, cuffing her son on the side of the head with one gray paw and bowling him over into the underbrush. {The elders say you will go and learn from the centaurs, therefore, you will go and learn from the centaurs. They know many things we do not.}

{But the centaurs are *boring* .} Grasseye picked himself up and shook, showering fragments of leaf and twig across the clearing outside the Stonehouse den-caves. {They go on and on and *on* about things that are so far away you can barely even *see* them—}

{You see them less well than most, little one.} His mother padded over and delicately nipped a burr out of the fur behind his ear with her teeth. {Perhaps the centaurs can help you with that, so that you can learn to hunt by sight as well as by sound and scent.}

Grasseye growled once for form, but a tentative stirring of interest had begun in the back of his mind. He knew he didn't see as well as any of the Pack's other cubs, like Bramblebud from the next cave over or Gravelbark from two caves the other way. Even some of the elders, whose eyes had been dimmed by time, could see more clearly than he could. His ears and nose were keen enough that he was keeping up with his hunting lessons so far, but it would be nice not to have to rely solely on those senses...

{If not the centaurs, then the twolegs,} Smokepaw added as though it were an airy nothing, wagging amusement at her son when Grasseye spun about to stare in renewed horror. {Yes, you understood me. Either you agree to learn from the centaurs, or we will find a way to communicate to the twolegs that you require teaching.}

{But...} Grasseye sank down to his belly, ears lowered in submission. {Yes, Mum.}

{Good boy.} Smokepaw lay down beside her son, curling herself so that he could lay his head on her paws and look up at her. {Are the sleep-seeings still with you?} she asked, gazing down at him with warm brown eyes. {About the ending of your own time as a twoleg?}

{Yes.} With an impatient growl, Grasseye began to squirm on the dusty ground, trying to scratch an itch on his back. {Why did I ever have to be a twoleg at all?} he asked when he was finished and had rolled onto his belly once more. {They look silly, and they act silly, and I don't *like* them.}

{You are not required to like the twolegs, nor are you required to be one of them any longer.} The angle of Smokepaw's ears altered, changing her tone from loving reproof to something a bit icier. {You *are* required to be a good Person. And that means learning what your parents and the elders of your Pack tell you that you will learn. In your case, whatever the centaurs see fit to teach you, and the other cubs who will go with you. Is that quite understood, little one?}

Grasseye considered arguing the point one more time. His mother's soft growl decided him against it. {Yes, Mum,} he said again, lowering his chin to the dust.

{Very good.} Smokepaw's tail thumped against the ground. {And remember that your father knows many of the arts the centaurs will teach you, and has taught them to me. They are useful, even if you do not immediately see how, and you will not allow your attention to wander away from your lessons like a rabbit in a field.}

{No, Mum.}

{And once the centaurs have taught you how to catch moonbeams, bring me three,} Smokepaw added, dropping her jaw in a grin. {I want to bathe in them and make my fur shine bright like your father's,}

{Yes, M—what?} Grasseye blinked, then whined in protest as his mother rolled over, panting laughter at him. {Mum! That's just silly! Nobody can catch moonbeams!}

{How do you know, little one?} Smokepaw was on her feet in a rush of movement, arching her back and tail, then shaking the dust from her coat in a blur of motion. {The twolegs with their *magic* can do a great many things. Why not that?}

{I...don't know,} Grasseye admitted. {Why not?}

{That, my love, is what you are going to the centaurs to learn.} Smokepaw flicked a last bit of dust off her forepaw. {But you must not go to them hungry or tired. So let us find your father and see if he has had hunt's luck—which I doubt, with your sister to look after, but one never knows—and help him if he has not, and then we shall have a story, so that we sleep deeply and well...}

---

At that very moment, elsewhere in the home trees, the Person now called Moonfur was contemplating with a certain sense of irony the stag he had just brought down. Its leg had been

broken by a fall, destroying its ability to run, and his swift pounce and sharp teeth had likely come as a welcome end to misery.

Still, try as he might, he could never quite forget what this shape had once meant to him.

{Daddy did it, Daddy did it, Daddy did it!} chorused his daughter Ashtail, bounding in gleeful circles around the body of the stag. {Daddy did it and now we have meat, wonderful meat, tasty meat—} She broke off with a squeak as Moonfur deftly tripped her with a paw, then placed it in the center of her chest, holding her still.

{Settle down,} he told her, showing his teeth for a moment to emphasize his meaning. {Your mother and brother will be here soon, and then we will have meat. And when we are finished eating, we will call the rest of our Pack to eat their fill, and we will go back to the den-cave and sleep.}

{Yes, Daddy.} Ashtail lowered her ears obediently, and Moonfur released her. She jumped up and shook herself all over, sniffing at her gray fur and licking it back into place where it was disarrayed, then sat down in front of him, ears upright, tongue lolling. {Will we have a story before we sleep?} she asked. {Please, please, please, a story?}

{What kind of story?} Moonfur asked, keeping an eye on the bushes behind his little girl. He'd caught a whiff of a very particular scent not too long ago, and while giving up kills to the People's traditional enemies rankled, he wasn't capable of fighting even one of the manylegs by himself. If it came down to his child or his meat, he would take Ashtail and run. The trees were full of prey, and someone else had surely had hunt's luck tonight.

{A story about you.} The feature for which Ashtail was named fanned the ground behind her, raising a small whirlwind of dust. {About you and your friends, when you were a twoleg and a changer and lived in the great stone house with all the other twolegs.}

{You do love those stories.} Moonfur let his tongue loll, chuckling at his daughter's fascination with a life she herself would never know at the same time as he took a sample of the scents on the air. The manyleg scent was still there, but it was fading. It didn't seem he'd be required to snatch his cub and run away from danger tonight.

{They're fun.} Ashtail rolled over, snapping and mock-growling at a leaf which had fluttered into her view. {I like to hear the stories and pretend I am a twoleg, and I go to *school*, and I work *magic*.} Some of the concepts of the folk from whom Moonfur had originally sprung could be difficult to convey in the mainly gestural language of the People, but the family had worked out their own understanding of such things. {Will I ever be a twoleg, Daddy?} she asked suddenly, curling her head around to look at him with big, wondering brown eyes. {When I grow up, or if somebody works *magic* on me, could I be one?}

Moonfur stifled his immediate, emphatic negative. He'd made his choice deliberately, leaving behind the twoleg world and everything in it, but forbidding it to his daughter would only lure her to it more strongly in the end. {I don't think so,} he said after a moment of thought. {There isn't



supposed to be any way for that to happen. But maybe your brother can tell you more, once he's learned from the centaurs for a while. That's a kind of *school*, you know. And centaurs have their own *magic*. It's different from the twolegs' kind, but who knows?} He bent his head to lick Ashtail's muzzle. {Maybe that means the answer you want is there.}

{Yay!} Ashtail leaped up to race in dizzy circles. {I could maybe be a twoleg someday! Maybe, maybe, maybe—} She stopped, looking puzzled. {What's 'maybe' mean, Daddy?}

A twig snapped at the edge of the clearing, bringing both People's heads around. {Maybe,} said Smokepaw, stepping out of the brush, {means the answer is hidden from us. It means we have to wait and find out more later.} She nuzzled behind her mate's ear, both greeting and appreciation for the fine kill he had made to feed their Pack. {But there is no maybe about this. Dinnertime, cubs.}

{Dinner!} chorused Grasseye and Ashtail, sitting up to raise their noses to the moon and howl their joy. Moonfur and Smokepaw joined in, adding harmonies that would send their enemies running and bring their friends to feast.

There was meat, and there was Pack, and soon there would be the den-cave and a story.

All the maybes in the world could wait for tomorrow.

---

{Daddy?} said Ashtail drowsily, later, as the family curled together, preparing for sleep. {What happened to your twoleg friends? What happened to the fast-runner who didn't see well, like Grasseye doesn't, and his mate who was so strong to fight against the bad twoleg?}

Grasseye snapped his jaws at his sister. She evaded it easily and continued. {And the laughing one, and the one who was always frightened. What happened to them, Daddy?}

Moonfur sighed a little. {They died,} he said, as he had many times before. {All of them died. I was the only one left.}

{And that's why you took Grasseye and came to the People, and met Mummy.} Ashtail nestled her nose into her mother's fur, and received a loving lick between the ears in return. {I'm glad you did that, Daddy.}

{So am I, little one.} Moonfur rested his head on his paws. {So am I.}

---

Not far away, a man sat atop the tallest tower of the castle and watched the sun rise, alone.

He had been alone for the last four years.

Of the four dear friends he had once known, three were dead: two, a married couple, at the hands of the very person he'd have given his life to protect them from, and the third at his own hand

when he'd realized that one was a traitor. His last true friend, and the child of the couple, were in hiding, and no one would tell him where.

*Happy damn birthday to me.*

## The Spell of Sealing So Close

The morning after his birthday, Sirius Black awakened with a slight hangover, but a dose of the modified Pepper-Up Potion Poppy Pomfrey kept on hand for such things banished it, and he went about his usual morning routine feeling almost cheerful.

*Which is as close as I come to happy, these days.*

Of course, in his darkest times, four years before, he'd doubted he'd ever get back even to the level of "not miserable".

*Given it's my fault Prongs and his Tiger Lily are dead, by association my fault Moony and Harry are missing, and I killed Wormtail myself, the damned little turncoat...about the only thing that could have gone worse with that would be if I hadn't cast first, because then there'd have been no evidence left that I wasn't the traitor, and they'd have tossed me in Azkaban quicker than you could say 'wand'...*

But as he'd managed to get his spell off before his former friend could complete whatever he'd been about to do, there'd been twelve Muggle witnesses eager to swear that the strange little man in the dress had been waving about a funny stick behind his back when the taller man had shot a beam of green light into his chest. After examination of Wormtail's wand had discovered a mostly-completed curse of the blow-up-ALL-the-things variety, and examination of Wormtail himself had turned up a snazzy snake-and-skull tattoo on his left forearm, Sirius had been released from the Auror Office with apologies and thanks.

*Thirty-six hours too late.*

James Potter, as Sirius had already known, had been killed in the entryway of his home, though apparently not before wounding "Lord" Voldemort to some degree. Sirius had simply assumed that the destruction of the cottage's first floor and the lack of a Dark Mark over the place indicated that Voldemort, Lily, and Harry had all gone up together, and decided Wormtail merited a higher priority.

*The more fool, I.*

The explosion, as he'd learned only when he returned to the scene, indicated not a magical battle but the forcible destruction of the cottage's wards from the inside. Whatever had happened

between Lily and Voldemort, it had happened in another location.

*Which, they eventually found out, was the wreckage of Moony's kitchen...*

The remote cottage Remus Lupin called home was in its usual pristine order when the Department of Magical Law Enforcement broke into it, all except for one room. There, amid shattered dishes and splintered furniture, lay the body of Lily Potter, along with a heap of dust which had held onto just enough magical coherence to be identified as the remains of the Darkest wizard in a hundred years. A single Apparition trace, showing enough extra spin in its vector to account for Side-Alonging a child Harry's size, had been traced to Hogsmeade, directly into the Shrieking Shack.

*And there, the trail dead-ends.*

All that the most experienced investigators of MLE had been able to determine (or rather, Sirius thought sourly, all that they were willing to share) was that Remus and Harry hadn't left the Shrieking Shack by any magical means, and as the doors to the outside showed no signs of being forced, they must have left by the tunnel leading to Hogwarts.

*Either that, or they never left at all.* One of the recurring entries in Sirius's nightmares was of Remus transfiguring Harry into a piece of furniture, or even Vanishing him, and then doing the same thing to himself.

*Because as much as I want to say Moony would never do that, I would have said the same thing about Wormtail, right up until I found him gone...*

Those images were not helped in the least by the fact that Remus's wand had been located under a decrepit sofa within the first day of searching, and had been immediately whisked away to the Department of Mysteries for testing.

*Which argues for something weird, something esoteric, that he used on both of them. But why would he leave his wand behind, no matter what he'd done? Unless he'd decided to disguise them as Muggles, and he wanted to make absolutely certain he never slipped...his mum was a Muggle, he'd know how to blend in, but why not keep his wand for emergencies, like Death Eaters knocking on the door? And without magic, what was he going to do about full moons?*

The questions, as ever, were unanswerable, and Sirius abandoned the line of thought with a sigh, as he'd done every time he took it this far for the last three and a half years. Shutting the door of his quarters behind him, he started down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

*If Prongs and Moony could see me now. Assistant Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, of all things...*

But after he'd finally surfaced from the drunken haze in which he'd spent the first six months after the various deaths and disappearances which had shattered his world, Albus Dumbledore had sent him an invitation to tea, gently worded, but nonetheless amounting to an order. Sirius had considered refusing for about fifteen seconds, then shrugged his shoulders and headed out to get

his hair cut and buy a new set of robes. It wasn't as though he had anywhere else to be.

*And I certainly wasn't expecting him to confirm those wild stories we used to spin to each other about the Defense post being cursed!*

Expected or not, that was exactly what Dumbledore had done, and then proceeded to lay out a proposition. If Sirius were willing to accept a lesser title and somewhat smaller pay than that of a full professor, and a workload which would vary depending on the capability of the hapless witch or wizard serving in the jinxed position each year, said jinx could be bypassed, since it was only on the Defense post proper. Thus Sirius would have steady work and a place to live, and the students of Hogwarts would receive a decent education in keeping themselves and their loved ones alive.

*Which I was never going to pass up, not after what I'd just been through, and he knew it, the old manipulator. And then, the very next fall, he goes and hires on—*

The object of his thoughts appeared from the stairway leading to the dungeons just as Sirius reached the top of the marble staircase leading down to the entrance hall. For a moment, they eyed one another.

*I'd never have thought this castle was big enough for me and Snivellus Snape, but I guess miracles really can happen.*

*Even if he does think he could do my job—or rather, my boss's job—better than the person who's got it, and never fails to let me know about it.*

Feeling generous, Sirius took his time strolling down the stairs, to allow Snape time to get into the Great Hall and up to his usual seat at the far end of the teachers' table.

*Why can't Dumbledore give him what he wants? I'd put up with him being nominally in charge of me for a year, just to see what the curse came up with to get rid of him ...*

Pleasant images of Snape nibbled to death by grindylows, discovering one of the legendary Endless Staircases of Hogwarts by falling down it, or turned into a human-sized sea cucumber by his own curse reflected from a student's Shield Spell put a spring in Sirius's step as he entered the Great Hall, and a crop of lime green hair over a laughing face at the Hufflepuff table kept it there.

*'Dromeda's girl, little Dora. Not so little anymore—second year and growing up fast, and top of her class in my subject, as long as she can keep from tripping over her own feet. If she survives Hogwarts with all her limbs intact, she'll be one of the best Aurors the Office has seen in years.*

Thoughts of Andromeda led him inevitably to the sisters who'd bracketed her: Bellatrix, in her cell in Azkaban (*good riddance* was the politest way of phrasing Sirius's thoughts on that topic, though he'd rather his mad cousin's comeuppance hadn't been at Frank and Alice Longbottom's expense), and Narcissa, in her fine lady apartments at Malfoy Manor.

*I never liked Cissy much, but that was more because she was spoiled and silly and selfish than anything else. It's possible she's changed, if only because I doubt Lucius stayed in her bed for longer than it took him to father an heir. What's their son's name again? Draco, that's right. Couple months older than Harry.* Pulling out his chair, he scowled at a harmless plate of sausages. *What is it with my family and the celestial object names? You'd almost think we were centaurs...*

That line of thought mixed itself up with his earlier musings on Remus and Harry, until he had to stifle a snicker in his mug of tea as his mind painted their faces onto centaur bodies. Would Remus's horsehide be a sandy brown like his human hair, he wondered, or a silvery gray like his wolfish pelt? And how long would it have taken Harry to get used to walking with four feet, when he'd only just learned to handle himself with two?

Smiling, he stabbed two of the sausages onto his own plate, and served himself a spoonful of eggs to go along with them. *So now I'm playing Moony transfigured them both into centaurs, which bypassed the werewolf thing because he couldn't be two types of magical creature at once, and they trotted off to the Forest to live happily ever after.*

*I think I'll stick with that going forward.*

*It's certainly a lot nicer than some of the other alternatives I've come up with.*

---

Grasseye sniffed tentatively at the bulb-shaped vegetable roasting over a small fire fueled with tree bark, wrinkling his nose at the pungent aroma of burning resin. {What is this called?} he asked his teacher, who had folded her legs underneath her and was working with two pieces of stone, one carved to fit neatly inside the other. {On the fire, not in it.}

"Fennel." Alcyone did not look up from her work as she spoke. "And here, in my mortar, these are bilberries." She lowered the stone bowl to let Grasseye see the dark substance within it. "Or rather, they were bilberries, before I crushed them with the pestle. Now they are bilberry paste."

{I can't say all that,} Grasseye protested with a little whine. {Those are mouth-noises. They don't mean anything.}

"Which is why I will be teaching you how to read and write, and some of your fellow cubs with you." Alcyone set her mortar aside to fix Grasseye with a stern look uncomfortably akin to those his mother could deal out. "The world is much, much wider than your home trees, little cub, and you may think you have no interest in it, but what if it takes an interest in *you*?"

{Why should it?} Grasseye slapped his tail against the ground once. {Just because I used to be a twoleg—}

"Human," Alcyone interrupted firmly. "You were a human."

{It means the same.} Grasseye sat up, balancing on his hind legs, and pulled the knocked-silly face he used to send Ashtail into fits of helpless, tail-wagging, back-rolling laughter. {Walking

around like they're going to fall over, wearing false fur because they're too stupid to grow a decent coat of their own, making mouth-noises at each other all day long. It's a good thing they're plant-eaters—they wouldn't last three days if they had to hunt for their food...}

"Can you fly, little cub?" Alcyone asked idly, retrieving the stick on which the fennel was roasting and setting it down on a wooden cutting board. "Fly through the air, like the birds?"

{I'm a Person, not a bird. So no, I can't fly.} Grasseye dropped back to all four paws, scuffling them into the comforting ground beneath him. {I can run fast, though. Very fast.}

"Could you make this stone lift itself into the air?" Alcyone patted a rock beside her with her hand. "Or this knife." She held up the blade with which she was coarsely chopping the fennel. "Could you make it sing and dance?"

{No, but who would want to?} Grasseye lay down in place. {Unless maybe you needed a safe place to climb up to, when the manylegs are coming. Or a noise to distract them, send them in another direction.}

"If some terrible catastrophe struck, and the prey in the home trees here began to die, would you know where to look for new hunting grounds?" Alcyone scraped the bilberry paste from her mortar and began to mix it together with the pieces of fennel. "Could you send a fast message, asking other People where there was still enough prey for your Pack to eat?"

Grasseye squinted until Alcyone's pale, oval face came into better focus. {Are there other People? Like us, I mean?}

"I don't know." Her two plants mingled to her satisfaction, Alcyone scooped them into a shallow bowl and picked up a handful of greenery with white flowers at the end of each leafy stem, spreading them out on her cutting board to pick through them. "But the humans would know, or could find out. They could do all the things I have mentioned, little cub..."

{I don't care if the twolegs can do things. And stop calling me 'little cub'.} Grasseye growled, sitting up. {I have a name. A proper name.}

"So do the humans." Alcyone's hands worked quickly, discarding some stems, breaking others in half and dropping them into her mortar. "It is always most polite to call people what they call themselves."

{Fine.} Grasseye turned his head away to groom down a bit of fur near his tail, and rolled his eyes while Alcyone couldn't see him. {The *humans*, then. I still don't care if they can do those things.}

"Not even when those things are useful?" Alcyone picked up her pestle again. "If the 'manylegs', as you call them, threatened your den-caves, would it not be helpful to have allies who could fly through the air and strike your enemies with heavy stones from far away? Or if your family was hungry, would you not want to know where you could find prey for them to eat?"

{Well.} Grasseye scuffed a paw underfoot. {Maybe,} he admitted grudgingly. {But only if we had to.}

"That will do for now." Alcyone used her pestle to transfer the ground greenery to the bowl where the other two plants waited. "Come and watch, Grasseye. This is the final step in making the magic which will help your eyes."

{It is?} Eagerly, Grasseye bounded over, being sure to give the fire a wide berth. He liked its warmth, but knew from his father's strict warnings just how quickly a spark could leap from its proper fuel to the fur of an over-interested cub, and how much the resulting burns would hurt. {What's that green stuff?}

"It is called eyebright." Alcyone laughed at Grasseye's pricked-up ears. "Yes, even the humans know what it is for. Now, watch carefully."

Using two sticks, she picked up a piece of burning bark from the fire and dropped it into the bowl. The three substances within, though damp, caught quickly, sending up a thick pall of smoke that made Grasseye back away a few steps, coughing. {Is that part of the magic?} he asked, burying his nose under one paw.

"Not in this case. Though it might be, if we were hoping to see the future, instead of helping *you* see." Alcyone watched as the fire began to burn lower. "No, in this case, it is the ashes we want."

When the fire in the bowl had gone out, Alcyone beckoned Grasseye to sit in front of her. "Sit very still," she warned him, dipping a finger into the damp ash. "I do not want to harm you by mistake. Now, then..."

Grasseye tried to pretend he was a rock and couldn't feel the tickly brush of finger on fur, or smell the sharp, green-and-black scent of burned plant, but it was hard, so hard, especially when that finger was moving around first one of his eyes, then the other, which meant the smell was right beside his nose, and now it was going over the *top* of his nose, he couldn't help it, he was going to —

"There," Alcyone said with satisfaction, taking her hand away. "Done."

The sneezing fit flooded Grasseye's nose and made his eyes well up uncomfortably. Whining, he shook his head back and forth, trying to get the goo to go *away*, he didn't *like* it, he wanted to be able to *see* —

And as he blinked away the last of the tears and lifted up his head, he could.

{I—I can—wow!} Astonished, he spun in circles, staring around him. {The rocks have little sparkles in them! And the trees have so many leaves! And you—} He skidded to a halt and looked his teacher up and down, seeing clearly for the first time how perfectly her long pale-blond hair matched the fur of her hooved legs, how she wore her quiver of arrows slung over one shoulder, how her eyes, a paler green than his own, shone with pleasure at this accomplishment. {You're



*pretty .}*

"Thank you." The she-centaur smiled, holding out her hand to let Grasseye rub his jaw and side against it, marking her with his scent. "I think we will get along very well together."

## The Spell of Sealing The Fire-Bird

An interview with Albus Dumbledore in the *Daily Prophet* had once quoted the Headmaster of Hogwarts as saying that when he was troubled by a dilemma which seemed insoluble, or when the various burdens of his life became too heavy to bear any longer, he simply went for a walk in the woods. His problems, he said, lifted away from him when he was the only human being in sight, and the meditative calm of the forest helped him to think more clearly, and sometimes to see a way through his trials which had not been obvious elsewhere.

While Dumbledore's statements were, in the strictest sense of the word, the truth, his walks had far more to them than most of his audience would ever suspect.

---

{The fire-bird, the fire-bird!} Ashtail burst into the den-cave, bouncing with excitement, making Grasseye look up, startled, from the piles of plants Alcyone had given him to learn by sight, scent, and name. {The fire-bird, he's back, he's back!}

{Sit,} Grasseye ordered, and Ashtail did so, but her whole back half continued to wiggle with happiness. {Do Mum and Dad know? Or the elders?}

{Mum was with me when we saw him, and Bramblebud went to tell the elders. I don't know where Dad is.} Ashtail's squirming stilled momentarily. {He goes away a lot since you started learning from the centaurs.}

{Oh, sure, make everything my fault.} Grasseye growled at his sister, but relented when she cowered and whined. {I'm sorry, Ash, I didn't mean it like that. Will you show me where the fire-bird's perching?} He grinned, his lower jaw dropping to show off his fine white teeth. {Now that I can finally see him properly?}

{Yes!} Ashtail leapt into the air, her own grin appearing to match her brother's. {Yes, I will!}

Side by side, the cubs raced out of their den-cave and into the home trees beyond the clearing's edge.

---

"The world sees only what it wishes to see, in many cases," said Headmaster Albus Dumbledore thoughtfully, leaning back in the chair of sun-warmed stone he had formed over many visits to

this small, hidden glen through the years he had devoted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. "In my case, depending on who precisely is doing the seeing, a foolish old man well past his prime, or a champion of wisdom and goodness despite his age. Neither perception is entirely false, but certainly they cannot be called the truth either!"

A snort came from the underbrush nearby, sounding very like a suppressed laugh.

"And what of you, my friends?" Dumbledore closed his eyes, letting his mind open and relax, aided by a certain potion of which he had sipped a careful measure before leaving the castle. It could be dangerous, used too often or in too large of quantities, but at the proper dose, it aided a type of perception of which few wizards and witches were even aware. "What would the world see if they looked at you?"

"Danger," said a man's mid-range tenor without hesitation. It was calm, a trifle hoarse, and clearly understandable, despite the fact that Dumbledore knew he heard it with his inner ears, rather than his outer ones. "Sharp teeth and claws, some of the aspects of monsters—not all of them, which I have to assume is due to a certain amount of cross-breeding, but enough. They would fear us, run from us, snatch their children away."

"And why is that?" Dumbledore kept his eyes closed, his voice mild, his breathing calm and unhurried. He knew he could not fool his conversation partner—no matter how controlled he might be, his scent would give him away—but the effort was likely to be appreciated.

"Because they do not know us." A woman's voice, a warm and full alto, took over the conversation, speaking a bit more hesitantly than the man had, as though this mode of communication were not as familiar to her. "They would try to place us into the categories of things they already know, never realizing that we are different from all those things. That they must broaden their minds, connect ideas they had never connected before, if they are to understand us."

"How should that be done?" Dumbledore felt pieces begin to fall into place within his own mind, for surely this had a bearing on the problem he had come into the Forest to contemplate—*the troubles that our Muggleborn students face, entering a world so different from anything they have ever seen or known, and many of them bearing the stigma of difference already from the eruptions of their magic through childhood...*

"In a perfect world?" The man chuckled. "Not that there's any such thing, but if I had my way, we'd catch them early. Train them up young. Children will accept anything that looks like fun, especially if it also makes sense in their own logic."

"And as they grow, they will not think to question," the woman seconded. "Until they find others who think differently, and are surprised, and begin to question all that they have learned from their families." She laughed. "But that is simply part of growing up, be you who you may."

Dumbledore exhaled in satisfaction as the last piece snapped home. "So it is, madam," he said, sitting up and opening his eyes. "So it is indeed."

He received no answer, nor was there anyone to be seen within the clearing, but then, such was always the case when he took part in these little colloquies. Sometimes, as today, he provided his own means of hearing the other participants, while on other occasions they and others of their kind had met him more formally, with a centaur to act as interpreter.

*And neither of us will ever say, but both of us know, that there once was a time when I met this man face to face, and spoke to him directly, in human words...*

Getting to his feet, he stretched his stiff muscles, then began to walk in the direction from which he could faintly hear Fawkes singing. If he moved quietly, there was a possibility he might get a glimpse of something he had never yet been allowed to see.

---

Grasseye sat at the foot of the tree in which the fire-bird was perched, content, for once, to do nothing but watch and listen. He had heard stories from his parents and sister of the fire-bird's glories for as long as he could remember, but to see such a thing up close for himself was utterly delightful. The bird's eyes were closed, his red-and-gold head tipped back, as he poured his song out onto the air, a song that made Grasseye want to jump and dance like his own silly sister, want to race off and defeat one of the manylegs in a great battle, want to do all sorts of things he couldn't quite understand—

The song slowed, then stopped, and Grasseye sighed, shaking his head to bring himself back to the reality of the home trees on a sunny afternoon. {Thank you,} he told the fire-bird, lowering his front half to the ground in a polite bow. {That was very beautiful.}

The bird bowed in response and whistled a few sweet notes, then took wing, soaring across the clearing to—

Grasseye froze in shock as he followed the bird's flight with his eyes. While he had been listening to the song, a twoleg, a *human*, had stolen up almost close enough to touch him!

*But he's not threatening me.* The old two—*human*—was simply standing there, the fire-bird perched on his wrist, until he held out his arm to a small tree beside him, allowing the bird to sidle off onto a branch. *He's not doing anything except looking.*

Beside him, Ashtail whined a little, and Grasseye licked her muzzle once. {It's okay, Ash,} he told her, putting his paw protectively across her, so that she was peering out between his front legs. {He won't hurt us. Use your nose, silly—he isn't angry, or afraid, or blood-hungry like the manylegs, or anything except...} He wrinkled up his own nose in perplexity as the overtones of the emotions the human *was* feeling came clear to him. {Happy and sad, all at once. And a lot of both of them.}

{Happy *and* sad?} Ashtail shook her head until her ears flapped. {That's strange.}

{That's humans.} Grasseye wagged his tail a little in pride at his proper use of the term. {Remember Dad's stories. They're *never* sure what they feel, even themselves. And they can't tell

what other people are feeling either. It causes all kinds of problems.}

{But can't they smell it?} Ashtail nuzzled Grasseye's fur. {Feelings all smell different. Everybody knows *that* .}

{Yes, but look how small his nose is.} Grasseye nodded towards the human, who was still watching both of them closely. {I don't think he can smell much of anything.}

{Oh.} Ashtail lowered her ears. {That's so sad.}

Dropping to her belly, she began to wiggle across the clearing towards the human, glancing back at Grasseye every so often to be sure he was still there. Grasseye sat down, watching closely, ready to defend his sister if there should be need—

*But the fire-bird is good.* One of Alcyone's lessons to the cubs of the Stonehouse Pack through the long, chill nights of winter had been about the magical animals who shared their home trees, and which of them inclined towards good or evil or sat in between, which ones followed laws and which ones were a law unto themselves. *He makes his own rules, but he's good. He wouldn't be friendly to a human who would hurt someone else without a reason.*

And this human, crouching down now to let Ashtail sniff his fingers and learn his scent, gave Grasseye the impression of constant thought, as if his mind were as busy, and buzzy, as a beehive. The fire-bird, perched in the tree beside the two, was scratching his head with one clawed foot, eyes half-shut in concentration.

Slowly, as though it made no difference to him whether he stayed put or moved, Grasseye got to his feet and meandered across the clearing, watching Ashtail wriggle in delight as the human stroked her belly fur. Stopping just out of arm's reach, he sat down again and regarded the human more closely.

*At least this one has some fur of his own, even if it is awfully overgrown.* He had to stifle a laugh when Ashtail yipped comically at the tickling touch of the human's long white face-fur on the bottom of her chin. *And he has things on his face to look through, like the patterns Alcyone drew on my face with the plant-stuff.* Remembering that smelly spell, he wrinkled up his nose. *Maybe, if I were still a human, would I be wearing those things too, instead of having a spell on me? Is that how humans fix it when they can't see very well?*

The human was looking at him now, calmly, even smiling a little (Grasseye's recognition of human facial movements and their matching emotions had grown by leaps and bounds since he'd started learning from Alcyone, given that she was human from about the waist up), the expression creasing the corners of his pale blue eyes. After stroking Ashtail once more, he held out his hand to Grasseye, fingers curled under.

As was only polite, Grasseye sniffed, and blinked at the complex rush of scents into his nose. The sweet, smooth smell of beehives was there, but coupled with it were sharper aromas: one smelled like a tree which grew near the edge of the People's territory, which had tasty berries but mildly

poisonous wood; another was mouth-puckeringly tart and unfamiliar to him, though he thought he might have caught just a snatch of it in one of Alcyone's herbal mixes, when she had added a few pinches of something bright yellow and finely ground.

{He's *nice* ,} Ashtail announced, squirming around so that Grasseye could see her face. {I like him.}

{I like him too.} Grasseye bowed a little to the human, and scooted closer to allow a proper ear scratch to be administered. {But then a fire-bird wouldn't be friends with just anybody. They're as strong with good magic as unicorns, and they're smarter.}

{But unicorns are pretty,} Ashtail protested, then sighed as the fire-bird looked down at her with an inquisitive chirp. {You're pretty too,} she told him, panting her appreciation up at him, a comical sight given that she was still lying on her back. {But—unicorns...}

{Cubs!} Their father's sharp bark from within the thicket nearby made Ashtail yelp in shock and brought Grasseye to his feet. The human rose, looking (and smelling) mildly distressed.

"I hope they will not be in trouble for greeting me," he said, his eyes resting on the section of bushes from which Grasseye could now catch the scents of both father and mother. "It was very pleasant to see both of them, and I would enjoy the chance to do so again, from time to time. If it were possible, of course."

Ashtail rubbed her face once against the bottom of the human's false-fur, then bolted into the underbrush, where a muffled yip told Grasseye one parent or the other had taken her immediately into custody. He kept his own paws planted defiantly.

*They said they didn't want me thinking humans were all bad...*

After a few moments, the bushes rustled, and Smokepaw stepped out, Ashtail dangling from her mouth. She set the cub down, licked her fur straight, and fixed her gaze on Grasseye. {We will be having a little talk about obedience when we get back to the den-cave,} she told him, but her slowly wagging tail hinted that she wasn't entirely displeased.

{Yes, Mum.} Head down, Grasseye padded over to his mother's side and sat. Smokepaw gave his fur a few perfunctory licks as well, then nipped the tip of his ear sharply enough to make him yelp in his turn. The human's scent took on a touch of amusement.

{My love,} Smokepaw called after a few moments had passed with no further movement from any party. {I believe he waits for you.}

Moonfur's response was only partly understandable to Grasseye, involving references and actions with which he was unfamiliar, but it made Smokepaw bare her teeth and growl. {I will remind you that there are *cubs* present,} she snapped. {*Our* cubs. And your being profane will change nothing.}

{Do you really want to lose me so badly?} Moonfur shot back. {This is the life I left behind, Smokepaw. The life I wanted to forget. If it's followed me even here—}

{He knows already who you are, and who you were,} Smokepaw cut off her mate mercilessly. {Showing or hiding yourself changes nothing. And skulking in the bushes like a cub who believes that if he cannot be seen, neither can he be heard or smelled, is unbecoming to your years.}

A grumbling sigh greeted this. Then the branches parted, and Moonfur emerged. Grasseye looked at the ground, prepared for his father's cuff or admonishing growl, but instead felt the momentary weight of an adult's head resting atop his own in protection and approval.

"'Safe, free, and happy', wasn't it?" the human remarked. "All in all, I would say you have succeeded very well, so far. And no one will learn of your whereabouts from me." He paused. "Though there might be one who would deserve to know, if any would."

The next four words made little sense to Grasseye, put together, though individually he understood them all. Alcyone had shown him and the other cubs some of the brightest stars in the night sky and named them, explaining what they and the planets signified when they took on their different combinations, and he'd known his colors since he was littler than Ashtail (though he knew many creatures who shared his general body conformation couldn't see all of the ones he could). But how could a star and a color be alive? And why was this nonsensical news so shocking to his father?

He set it aside as something to ask about later, when things weren't quite so crazy.

## The Spell of Sealing On the Tour

The young wizard was as bored as he could ever remember being in his not quite six years of life. If this was Hogwarts, he rather thought he wanted to get behind his father's on-and-off campaign to wear his mother down on the subject of Durmstrang.

*I could learn the Dark Arts properly, there, and I'd be away from both of them for most of the year. That would have to be worth however cold it gets there, and having to learn other languages to talk to most of my schoolmates!*

To be fair, though, he'd only seen one room at Hogwarts so far, and it was hardly awe-inspiring. The chill and damp made him suspect it was in the dungeons (they'd Flooed directly here so he couldn't be certain), while the walls lined with jars of strange substances and pickled creatures (or parts of creatures) gave him the creeps. As for the room's inhabitant, a dark-haired, sour-faced wizard with whom his father had been having a low-voiced argument for several minutes now...

*I've seen him before. He's come to the Manor a few times, usually something about potions or ingredients. And he always looks at me funny, like he doesn't like me.* Safely out of the line of sight of both wizards, the boy stuck out his tongue. *Well, I don't like you either. So there.*

"...told you, I have nothing definite," the wizard was saying now, his deep voice exasperated. "Only a disgustingly smug look on the Headmaster's face whenever the subject comes up. Clearly he knows *something*, but I have no way of learning what."

"Then *find* a way," the boy's father insisted, leaning forward across the other wizard's desk. "You live here, for Merlin's sake! I never thought stupidity was one of your vices, but possibly I was wrong—"

"If you wish to consider disinclination to uproot three years' worth of groundwork as *stupidity*, I can only conclude—"

Stifling a groan, the boy unlatched the door and slipped out into the corridor. He got quite enough of listening to people fighting with his father at home.

*Since Mother thinks he ought to be doing one set of things, and some of his friends think he ought to be doing something else, and some of his other friends think he ought to be doing what they want instead.* Shaking his head at the state of a world which placed adults in charge of everything,



he meandered up the corridor, absently following his nose towards a faint smell of something savory.

*I wish the Dark Lord hadn't ever fallen. Then there wouldn't be so much fighting, and the Muggles and Muggleborns would know their places, and the world would be a lot more fun to live in!*

---

The young witch was as fascinated as she could ever remember being in her six and a half years of life. She had always known something about her was different, but never in her wildest dreams had she thought it might be *magic* .

*Though it does explain why Mummy never catches me reading in bed anymore. If the batteries in my torch really did run out a couple months ago like I thought they had, and I'm making the light by magic now, maybe it's a light she can't even see.*

Which, the girl concluded regretfully, wasn't fair to her mother, and she was going to have to stop.

*I wouldn't want to get a name for using my magic wrong before I've even got here, after all!*

Tucking her arms around herself, she gazed upwards at the vaulted stone ceilings, the floating branches of candles, the whispering paintings, and felt a thrill down her spine as she had every time she let the thought sweep through her.

*Only five more years until I'll be a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...*

"...is how Hogwarts came to be founded," said the Hogwarts professor who was leading their small tour, a short, plump witch with flyaway gray hair who had told them to call her Professor Sprout. "There was far less secrecy around magic in those days, but over the years, it's become wiser for wizards and witches to keep themselves hidden from Muggles—which does *not* mean you won't see your families any longer, once you've begun your education," she added briskly at one small, pigtailed girl's gasp of horror. "There have always been *some* Muggles who knew about the wizarding world, and the parents and siblings of Muggleborns are a long-standing part of that tradition. Now, we'll have a look at one of the House dormitories..."

*Muggle* . The girl tried out the word as the tour moved off down one of the corridors from the entrance hall. It felt a bit odd on her tongue, but so did most new words until one got used to saying them. *Muggle*. *A person who doesn't have magic. And Muggleborn—a wizard or a witch whose parents are both Muggles, whose magic just blossomed out of nowhere.*

*Someone like me.*

She spun once in place for the sheer joy of it all, then hurried after the tour. It wouldn't do to get left behind, after all.

---

The boy wasn't sure whether to be more astonished or disappointed. There were *Mudbloods* at

Hogwarts, Mudbloods his own age, the pinnacle of everything his parents had always taught him to hate and fear—

And except for their clothing and the way they stared at everything, they looked and acted just like him.

*They don't smell bad. They're not fighting every other minute.* He nipped quickly behind a pillar as a girl at the back of the group looked around sharply, her bushy brown curls swinging with the movement. *And that's the third time that one almost spotted me. If all I had to go on were the stories, and I saw her next to Crabbe or Goyle, I'd have to think he was the Mudblood instead...*

The thoughts were immensely disquieting. Shutting his eyes, he tried to shake them off. Whatever might be true of the boys he'd known most of his life (and detested nearly as long), it wasn't true of him, he assured himself fervently. He was stronger, smarter, cleverer, than any Mudblood could ever be, and he'd prove it, just as soon as he got a chance—

"I beg your pardon."

A most undignified yelp escaped the boy as his eyes flew open. The girl who'd come so close to seeing him three times before was standing directly in front of him now, hands on her trouser-clad hips. "Is there a reason you've been following us?" she demanded. "Who *are* you?"

"My name's Malfoy." He took what refuge he could in this indisputable fact. "Draco Malfoy. My father's one of the school governors. Who are *you* ?"

"Hermione Granger." The girl held out a hand, at which Draco looked disdainfully.

"I don't touch your kind," he informed her. "You're dirty."

An instant of shock across Hermione's face was replaced by naked fury. "Take that back," she spat. "Take it back *now* ."

"Why? It's true." On firmer ground now, Draco grinned. "Besides, you're not just dirty, you're stupid. You don't know *anything* . Not why the school Houses are called what they are or which one's the best, not how to play Quidditch or fly on a broomstick, not even why the Forbidden Forest is forbidden—"

"Oh, and you do?" Hermione challenged. "Tell me, then, Mr. Know-It-All!"

"Because there are *werewolves* in there." Draco breathed the word in the same thrilling tone his father used when he was explaining to his son some of the dangers of the wizarding world, which a pureblood wizard was inherently intelligent and brave enough to overcome. "And werewolves like to *eat* people. Rip them apart and drink their blood and crunch their bones—"

"Ew!" Hermione clapped her hands over her ears. "You're disgusting! Besides, werewolves aren't real."

Draco snorted. "That's what *you* think. Stupid Mudblood."

A moment later, he was blinking hazily at the floor, wondering why he'd fallen down, and what was making his ears ring like that.

"Don't," said Hermione's voice very precisely from above him, "call me names."

*She—she hit me!* Blinking his eyes back into focus, Draco scrambled to his feet, staring at this impossible, intolerable girl. *And now she's ordering me around, like she thinks she's as good as I am—like she thinks she's better—*

"I'll call you whatever I want to," he snapped back. "Especially if it's true."

"It is *not* true!" Hermione stamped her foot. "Just because I don't know things yet doesn't make me stupid! What do *you* know about cars and televisions and football, if you're so smart?"

"I don't have to know about that stuff, because I don't want to live in the Muggle world!" Draco shuddered at the very thought. "But you want to come and live in *my* world, when you don't know anything about it at all—"

"Which is why I came here for the tour, so I could *start* learning." Hermione glared down her nose at him. "And I'll be back again this summer, and for a day or two every holiday after that, and read the books they're sending with me in between times—"

"Oh, right. Books." Draco scoffed. "Like a book is going to teach you how to fight a werewolf."

"And you know so much about how that's done—"

"More than you!"

"So why don't you prove it?" Hermione smirked, as if certain she'd found an argument he couldn't answer. "Let's go out to the Forest this very minute and you can show me how!"

For half an instant, Draco wavered, but he'd lost too much face in this encounter already. If he didn't find *some* way to shut this girl up, he was never going to hear the end of it.

*And besides, if I fly my course just right, I might be able to leave her behind to get eaten by something, and that's one less Mudblood in the world.*

"Let's," he said shortly. "Unless you're scared."

Hermione sniffed. "Of something *you* can do? I don't think so."

Leaving a careful foot of space between them, they set off down the corridor, headed for the nearest door to the outside.

---

Looking for something, anything, to distract him from his massive stack of essays for marking (*and to think I used to gripe about having to write the things!*), Sirius shoved his chair back from his desk and got to his feet, glancing out the window as a matter of course.

His second glance was much less casual.

*Too big for house-elves. Too small for students. What in Merlin's name—*

Then he remembered.

*The Muggleborn tour! That was today—and if a couple of those kids decided to peel off and go exploring on their own—*

With an under-the-breath growl, he yanked open his office door and bolted for the stairs, hoping to head off the pair of small, scurrying figures he'd seen crossing the lawns before they could reach the trees.

*Seeing as the idea behind the tour was to give them a good first impression of the magical world.*

*Getting munched on by something large and carnivorous definitely does not count!*

---

"So?" said Hermione after she and Draco Malfoy (*I wonder if all magical people have strange names?*) had walked a short distance into the shade of the Forbidden Forest. "Where's the werewolves?"

"They'll come." Draco sounded confident, but Hermione had seen him glancing over his shoulder twice now. "As soon as they smell us, they'll come. We should keep an eye out for trees or rocks, anything we can climb that they can't."

"You can climb in those?" Hermione eyed the long, heavy robes Draco was wearing with disfavor. "Wouldn't they get in the way?"

Draco frowned down at his robes, then shook off whatever he was thinking to glare at Hermione again. "At least I'm not half-naked. Unlike *some* people."

"Yes, well, at least I'm not *rude*," Hermione shot back. "Unlike *some* people."

Whatever answer Draco would have made to this was overridden by a loud rustle from the bushes nearby. Both of them whirled to face it, backing away a step or two (or three, in Draco's case).

After several seconds in which the only thing Hermione heard was the thundering of her own heart, Draco relaxed. "It wasn't anything," he said, turning to face Hermione again. "And if you think *that* was rude—"

Movement past him caught Hermione's eye. It was hairy and tall, too tall to be a wolf, even a werewolf—and it had legs, too many legs, more than *anything* should have, including the ones

reaching for Draco right this very second—

"Look out!" she screamed, and groped behind her for something to throw.

---

Grasseye burst into a full-out run as the human shrieking gained a second voice, rising in panic. The stench of the manyleg he had been tracking from a safe distance was stronger than ever, and he was grimly certain that he was about to encounter it from a very unsafe distance indeed.

*Right in front of it. And probably right inside it, afterwards. But I have my teeth to fight with, and a human my age won't have their wand yet, so they don't have even that much...*

A rock went shooting past him as he pounded out of the bushes.

*Well, maybe they have more than I thought.*

Now it was the manyleg's turn to shriek, dropping the robed human boy it had been trying to lift up as it clawed at one of its multiple eyes, which had been punctured by the sharp-edged rock. Grasseye bounded across the clearing and planted himself in front of the dazed-looking boy, snarling his fury.

*You can't have him! Or her, either,* he added mentally as he spotted the human girl hefting another missile at the other end of the clearing. *Though I think she can take care of herself better.*

Since the manyleg was still distracted by trying to get the stone out of its eye, Grasseye risked a quick glance and sniff-over of the moaning human he'd chosen to guard. The boy's hair was an even paler shade of blond than Alcyone's, and something hanging against his chest inside his false fur, his *robes*, had a smell not unlike that of the centaurs' work with their herbs, or the haze left in the air after the Stonehouse Pack sang one of their songs which was not simply a joyous uplifting of voices together but which was meant to accomplish something. It was a smell, Grasseye realized with a jolt, of *magic*.

{What is this?} he demanded of the boy, tapping his paw lightly against the thing, which was hard like stone or metal under his pads. {What does it do?}

"It's a shield." The words were mumbled, but clear. "Meant to protect me. Keep me safe."

{Just you, or other people?} Grasseye shoved his nose against the boy's neck when there was no immediate response to this, stifling the inevitable yelp with a paw. {Answer me,} he demanded, locking his green eyes onto the other boy's shocked gray ones. {Is it just for you, or can it grow?}

The boy pushed Grasseye's paw off his mouth. "I don't *know*," he breathed, getting his elbows under him and staring up at the manyleg. "What *is* that thing?"

Before Grasseye could answer, a torrent of shrill barks buffeted his ears. Ashtail tore out of the bushes, her fur fluffed out as far as it could go, her tiny teeth bared and ready. {Go away!} she

howled at the manyleg, which immediately focused its remaining eyes on her. {Go away! Leave them alone!}

Grasseye grumbled low in his throat and braced himself to attack.

## The Spell of Sealing Chance and Change

Sirius dodged between trees, his blood pounding in his ears, as a burst of high-pitched barking joined the human shouts and the purposeful snarling from up ahead. Either the two kids he'd seen were being attacked by some of the four-legged inhabitants of the Forest, or—

He shoved through the last set of bushes and growled a curse under his breath as he took in the scene in one appalled look.

*Or the four-foots are siding with them, against the ones with eight bloody legs.*

The acromantula, its obscenely jointed legs as tall as Sirius himself at their highest point, seemed momentarily baffled by the yapping, fluff-furred wolf cub facing it down. To one side, a larger cub was crouching in preparation for an attack on one of the enormous spider's legs, while a pale-blond human boy in robes was just sitting up, rubbing the side of his head as though dazed. To the other, a girl in Muggle clothing with a mass of bushy brown hair had a hefty rock clutched in one hand. Sirius could hear her breath coming in short and terrified spurts, but the stone-punctured eye on the acromantula testified that her fear hadn't affected her aim.

*Too bad the damn thing has seven other eyes it can use. And shakes off most curses like Stunners or Impediments—but wait, eyes—*

"*Conjunctivitis Occuli* ," he hissed under his breath, snapping his wand towards the thing, just as it shook off its shock and snapped its mandibles towards the tiny wolf cub below it, who dodged back with a yip. The larger cub snarled and lunged for the nearest chitin-covered joint, the girl shrieked and hurled her rock, and the boy shoved himself off the ground and stumbled forward, bent almost double—

The acromantula screamed, a thin and piercing sound, as Sirius's spell, the girl's stone, and the wolf cub's teeth all struck simultaneously. Its flick of the injured leg sent the larger cub flying, but he twisted in midair with an agility Sirius could only envy and landed on his feet. The poison-tipped mandibles clashed together in empty air above the heads of the smaller cub and the human boy, who had scooped her into his arms and, wisely in Sirius's view, was continuing to move in the same direction, towards the spider's rear—

*Except that's one place the damn thing can still see!*

A leg lashed out before Sirius could turn this thought into a spell, aiming for the back of the boy's head, but glanced off a barely-visible protective shield which sparked momentarily into life around him, sending him tumbling forward into the bushes. The boy yelped, and the little cub he'd been carrying squalled, but both sounds indicated surprise to Sirius's ear rather than hurt.

*All right, there's two of them out of harm's way.* Sirius took the opportunity to beckon the Muggleborn girl towards him, and after a trembling second she obeyed at a run, as did the wolf cub from another edge of the clearing. Shooing both of them behind him, he aimed and fired off the Conjunctivitis Curse once more, and nodded in satisfaction as the massive spider began to pivot back and forth, clawing at its now-useless eyes. *Make that all of them, and one blind monster. Now all I need is a vulnerable spot—*

A strange hiss-thock sounded from somewhere nearby, and the acromantula squealed again. An arrow, neatly fletched in white, was buried almost to the feathers on the interior of one of its enormous legs, which was starting to teeter. A moment later, a second arrow joined its mate, and the acromantula's leg collapsed, making it stagger sideways.

*Of course, that's where! You just can't usually get at that spot, because they move so damn fast and they can see you from any direction—but this one's blind and crippled, so here goes nothing—*

Sirius barely had time to abort his spell as twin streaks of gray fur shot out of the underbrush, snarling in harmony. The darker of the two bolted under the spider, turned on a Knut, and leapt straight up into the air, fastening her teeth onto another vulnerable tendon, opposite the one which sported arrows, and using her body weight to tear it loose. The brighter, whose coat shimmered in the afternoon sunlight like silver, pounced on the juncture between abdomen and thorax, ripping at it with teeth and claws.

On the clearing's other side, the bushes parted to reveal a palomino centaur woman with her bow in her hands (Sirius wasn't sure whether to be grateful or sorry for the support-halter she wore across her chest, crafted from the same material as her quiver strap), the robed boy and the smaller cub beside her, both staring avidly at the battle between wolves and spider.

The tendon the female wolf had been attacking snapped under her weight. She bounded aside, escaping the spider's collapsing bulk with a speed Sirius might not have believed if he hadn't spent so much time watching what Remus could do on full moon nights, and the male wolf growled in approval and tore loose another portion of acromantula armor, exposing the spider's soft innards—but one of its undamaged legs was rising, getting ready to strike—

*"Get clear!"* Sirius bellowed, and the bright-furred wolf dived off the spider's back an instant ahead of the heavy, blunt claw coming down.

Sirius's Blasting Curse and the centaur's gleaming arrow struck the weak spot in perfect unison.

With one final, horrible howl, the acromantula tumbled onto its side, its legs twitching randomly as various parts of its body fought vainly against the fact that it was dead.



The girl beside Sirius seemed to be having a hard time breathing. He wasn't sure if he should attribute that to her crying, or to her needing to be sick. A downward glance told him it was some of both.

"Here," he said, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket. "Need this?"

"Yes." The girl's hand was freezing cold when it touched Sirius's, and shaking so hard she had trouble accepting the small square of cloth. Sirius went to one knee and took her hands in his, rubbing them to warm them. "What was that thing?"

"It's called an acromantula. You'll learn about them sometime your, oh, third or fourth year. Assuming you're here for the Muggleborn tour?"

The girl nodded, pulling one hand free to blot at her tear-stained cheeks with Sirius's handkerchief. "I'm Hermione," she said shakily. "Hermione Granger." She glanced over at the boy, who had sat down on the ground, his skin even paler than usual. The smaller wolf cub was standing on her hind legs, enthusiastically licking his face. "He said his name was—"

"I know who he is," Sirius interrupted, recognizing a familiar and much-loathed set of features in this new, smaller version. "Assuming his looks don't lie. Surname of Malfoy, perchance?"

Hermione nodded, twisting the handkerchief between her hands. "I thought he was just trying to scare me," she said, looking past Sirius to the still-shuddering corpse of the acromantula. "About the Forest being forbidden. He said there were things in here, things like werewolves and monsters, and I didn't believe him, but—"

A sniffing sob cut her off, and Sirius took one instant to lay a virulent (if silent) curse on Lucius Malfoy and his progeny before going to work to repair the damage done. "Well, now you know he was right about that part," he said, rotating his legs so that he was sitting more comfortably, glancing as he did so at the third party to this conversation, the young wolf on his other side. His earlier impression of masculinity was borne out by the cub's scent, and his certainty that this was no ordinary wolf was bolstered by the vibrant curiosity in the green eyes with the spectacle-markings around them, like those of Professor McGonagall in her Animagus form.

*Or like Prongs's...*

Cutting off this train of thought before it could become a runaway, Sirius got back to the task at hand. "But that doesn't mean he was right about the other things he was saying. Assuming he said other things?"

Hermione nodded again, staring up at Sirius with a strange blend of defiance and misery in her eyes. "I'm *not* dirty or stupid," she said, anger and pleading mingling in her tone as in her expression. "He panicked and didn't do *anything* to save himself—I tried to warn *him*, and then I threw the rocks—"

"Which was good thinking, though I wish you'd stayed with your tour guide to begin with." Sirius

crossed his fingers behind his back that he'd successfully walked the line of sympathy and adult firmness, and chalked up another mark for the cub belonging to the pack of wise wolves which inhabited the Forest when the youngster snickered into the inside of his paw.

Idly, Sirius pressed his fingers and thumb together, then moved them in a horizontal line, one of the hand signals the Marauders had worked out among themselves, this one meaning 'Oh, shut up.' *He won't understand it, not organically, but he might get it from context, or even from my scent...*

The young wolf lowered his head to his paws, looking abashed.

*Attaboy.* Sirius offered his fingers for sniffing, and rubbed gently along the underside of the cub's jaw when this important rite was complete. "And you're definitely not dirty or stupid," he said to Hermione, holding out his other hand to her, both for comfort and to check on how well she was recovering from her shock. "No more stupid than anyone who comes visiting the *Forbidden Forest* , at any rate."

Hermione gave a weak little giggle into the handkerchief. "I should have known better, shouldn't I?" she said, looking around her wistfully. "But he was being so *rude* , and acting like he knew *everything* , and I just couldn't take it any longer."

A wicked urge came to Sirius. "So why don't we see how much he really knows?" he suggested mildly.

"What do you mean?" Hermione looked perplexed, and the young wolf pricked up his ears.

Sirius explained.

By the end of his third sentence, the wolf's jaw had dropped in a grin, and Hermione was giggling in good earnest.

---

Alcyone unstrung her bow and leaned it against a nearby tree, then removed her quiver and set it down as well, scuffing the rune of polite request in the dirt beside them with a hoof. The forest-elves, by the bargain which held all intelligent and honorable life forms in the Forest accountable to one another, would return her weapons safely to her sleeping-place in the camp, and bring them to her again when she might call out for them, as she had done only a few moments before.

*But just now, my only 'weapons' must be voice and face, and careful knowledge.*

She knelt, then settled onto all fours, tapping the cub Ashtail on the top of the head. "Are you hurt, little one?" she asked.

{No.} Ashtail sniffed herself all over, turning in three rapid circles to do so. {That was *scary* . Is the manyleg dead?}

"Yes, it is dead." Alcyone glanced over the people, human and otherwise, remaining in the

clearing, and frowned over the dark-haired adult wizard whose spell had aided her in killing the acromantula. The centaurs might choose to remain deep in the Forest, but they were not ignorant of the everyday matters of human society, and she knew this man's face.

It surprised her not at all that Moonfur had vanished the instant he was sure the acromantula was dead. For that matter, she was quite sure that he would greatly have preferred his elder cub to be lying anywhere but at Sirius Black's side, ears on the prick and tail slowly thumping the ground.

*But we cannot always have what we prefer, and he could not hope to remain hidden forever.*

*Still, that is not my concern.* She looked down at the human boy beside her, who sat with his face in his hands, his shoulders heaving suspiciously. *This, though, just may be.*

"Go to your mother, little one," she said to Ashtail, nodding towards Smokepaw, who was pacing a slow circle around the corpse of the acromantula, part of the wolves' ritual for declaring the death of one of their most hated enemies. "I have work to do here."

The most central tenet of centaur philosophy held that the person who was first to discover a problem was, by definition, the person who knew most about it, and therefore the person best suited to fix it. In the course of her scrying over the last few months, Alcyone had discerned a great trouble looming over both her own people and the humans, one which would cause terrible and avoidable suffering.

One of the brightest nodes of that trouble had persistently shown itself to her as, she had thought, a young centaur colt, his coloring as fair as her own.

*And I, foolishly, assumed that this meant he was my own, and that therefore the trouble I must avert was still many years in the future, as I have no mate and no plans to take one. Whereas now I realize that I have seen only the child's face and shoulders, his hands and arms, or occasionally a moment of his moving swiftly through the woods. Never his full body, and never his rearing or galloping or any other motion that only we may make. He is not a centaur after all, but a young wizard.*

*But still, in some senses of the words, he may yet be 'my own'.*

Gently, she reached out to touch the boy on the shoulder.

## The Spell of Sealing The Cusp Point

Smokepaw turned her back on the corpse of the manyleg and scraped dirt towards it with both back feet. {Now you,} she told Ashtail, and panted approval as her daughter's small paws thrust soil in the direction of their deceased enemy. {Good. That signifies that this thing is too foul and filthy even for us to eat.}

{But I thought the manylegs could talk, like the centaurs can, and the twolegs—I mean, the *humans* ,} Ashtail corrected herself with a wag of pride, cocking her head in the direction of the man and girl who were quietly conversing across the clearing with Grasseye lying beside them to listen. {If they talk and they live in the home trees, we couldn't eat them anyway, could we? By the Great Agreement?}

{No, we could not.} Smokepaw licked the top of her daughter's head lovingly. {Clever girl, to remember your lessons. But the manylegs are not part of the Great Agreement, because they have no honor. They believe that a promise holds only the one single person who makes it, not an entire people along with it, so that even if the leader of their tribe promised that his people would uphold the Great Agreement henceforth, the other manylegs would see no reason they should not break that promise.} She growled softly. {My parents and grandparents learned that lesson in blood, before you or I were ever born. The People do not forget.}

{I won't forget either, Mummy.} Ashtail bared her teeth in the direction of the manyleg's body, then glanced back at the two humans. {But what about them? They don't live in the home trees, and I know we shouldn't eat them...}

{They do not taste good, in any case.} Smokepaw snorted a laugh at Ashtail's wide-eyed astonishment. {Silly cublet! Use your nose! Do they smell like the deer and rabbits we chase, who eat only the plants of the ground, or do they smell like us and the bone-horses?}

{Ooohhhh.} Ashtail wagged furiously in understanding, stirring up a cloud of dust. {But...} She looked over at the third human present, who was speaking to Alcyone with some heat. {Does that mean we can be friends with them?} she asked finally, lowering her head as though already expecting a rebuke from her mother. {Or should we stay away?}

{That is a very good question.} Smokepaw ignored the half-stifled curse she could hear emerging from the undergrowth nearby. If her mate wanted a certain outcome from this chance encounter, he would have to come out here and cause it to happen himself. {Why don't we listen, you and I,

and find out what would be best.}

Side by side, mother and daughter padded towards the human boy and his companion.

---

Draco wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting on the ground, fighting his hardest against crying. Pureblood wizards never cried. But he'd been so scared, and hurt, and confused (werewolves were supposed to attack people, not defend them, and they certainly weren't supposed to *talk*), and then the huge spider had tried to bite the little werewolf cub and that wasn't right, she was just a baby, and he'd been running to try to get her out of the way before he quite knew what he was doing—

A hand touched his shoulder, gently, but startling him enough that he flinched away from it. "Are you hurt?" a woman's voice asked, full of concern. "I thought your shield had protected you."

"N-no." Draco clamped his lips shut over his treacherous stutter and scrubbed at his eyes with his sleeve, forcing himself to calm down, to not show weakness, to be as brave and strong as he knew he was expected to be. "I'm fine," he said when he thought he could, trying to ignore the fact that the hand remained in its place against his robes. "It didn't hurt me."

Belatedly, the voice matched itself with a face and a body in his mind, and he jerked his head around.

From the waist up, the person kneeling beside him could have been his mother (if his mother would ever have consented to wear so very little clothing, which Draco strongly doubted). From the waist down, she was nothing of the sort.

"You're—but you're a—"

"Centaur?" the other finished, with a grave nod. "I am, and my name is Alcyone. What is yours, young wizard?"

"Draco." He was staring, he knew he was staring, but he couldn't seem to stop. "I didn't know centaurs talked."

Alcyone raised an eyebrow, for all the world like his mother when she was not inclined to tolerate foolishness gladly (which was most of the time). His mother, of course, did not have a long tail, exactly the same shade as the hair on her head, which twitched restlessly in time with the raising of the brow. "Didn't you," was all she said, but Draco heard a world of meaning in the two words.

He scowled. "I'm not *stupid*," he said, pulling his shoulder out from under the hand still resting on it. "I just haven't studied centaurs yet. I'm still on things like gnomes and jarveys, I won't get to part-humans until next autumn—"

"Part-humans," Alcyone repeated, smiling slightly. "Is that what you have been taught to call us. How would you like it, I wonder, if I called you a 'part-centaur'?"

"Don't do that." Draco bristled. "We *have* a name for ourselves."

"As do we." Alcyone's smile broadened, for some unfathomable reason. "And as I told another young student of mine recently, it is always politest to call a people what they call themselves, unless it would cause undue confusion and there is another name available which gives no offense. Such as..." She motioned to the two figures now sitting beside them. "The wise wolves."

An instant of shock—how could something that big move so *quietly*—froze Draco in place, and in that instant, the smaller wolf pounced.

{You're all right, you're all right, you're all right!} she cheered, her front paws planted on Draco's shoulders, her tail slapping against his knees and her tongue busily washing his face, dodging his ineffectively shielding hands. {Your false-fur smells funny, but *you're* nice. Let's be friends. My name's Ashtail, what's yours?}

The larger wolf coughed once, a sound Draco knew well from his own mother. {No one can say anything,} she stated in a tone of infinite patience, {when he is being loved very nearly to death. Sit down and give him a chance to answer you.}

{Yes, Mum.} The smaller wolf, Ashtail, licked Draco's cheek once more, then leaped neatly back and settled into a sit, looking intently at him.

"You do talk." Draco wiped his face with his sleeve, trying to regain his balance and get back some semblance of the world he'd known half an hour ago. "I mean, you don't talk out loud, not with words, but I know what you're saying, and that doesn't make *sense* —"

{If I may?} the larger wolf asked Alcyone, who nodded. {Your magic is still somewhat unformed, Draco,} she said to him, her meaning conveyed by the angle of her pointed ears, the direct look in her brown eyes, the slow swish of her long and furry tail. {You have not yet been paired with a *wand*, as is the human custom. Sometimes, under great stress and great need, *wandless* magic takes unusual shapes. In your case, that of understanding the speech of my People as clearly as you do your own. And my name, if you are wondering, is Smokepaw.} She bent her head in what was clearly a bow.

"So..." Draco thought this over. "I was scared and I needed to understand you...so I did?"

{Very good.} Smokepaw let her tongue loll out in approval. {Though it was not me you understood first, but my son, Grasseye, Ashtail's elder brother. He is very nearly your age, as far as I can tell.} She nodded to the third wolf, who was lying beside the vaguely-familiar looking adult wizard across the clearing, both of them listening to the Muggleborn girl, Hermione. {Perhaps you will become friends.}

"Friends?" For a moment, Draco considered the thought, let it grow inside his mind, let it shimmer in all its glory—to have a friend, a real friend, someone to talk and laugh and play with, even if he did have four legs and fur, and someone else to look up to him, as Ashtail was looking up with shining eyes right now—

"I can't," he said regretfully, dismissing the idea with a pang. "I have to go home soon, and Father wouldn't understand. He doesn't allow animals in the house, and *he* wouldn't be able to hear you. So I can't."

{I see.} Smokepaw glanced once at Alcyone, who rose to her feet and moved delicately away. {Let us talk of other things, then. Tell us about your home, Draco. I have visited the Stonehouse for which our Pack is named, and my mate, Moonfur, has told me more about what it is like, but Ashtail has never been inside a human dwelling.}

"The Stonehouse? Oh, you mean Hogwarts, the castle." Draco nodded, understanding. "My house is big, but it's not *that* big. We call it Malfoy Manor, after my family, and I have a set of rooms all to myself..."

---

Movement from across the clearing caught Sirius's eye in the middle of Hermione's eager explanation of Muggle dentistry, as practiced by her parents (the young wolf looked as though he couldn't decide whether to be fascinated or appalled). The she-centaur was coming towards their little group, her eyes of pale green focused quite firmly on him.

"Hang on a tick," he said when Hermione paused for breath. "I do want to hear this, but in just a second." He leaned a little closer. "You don't want to offend centaurs," he murmured, "and ignoring them is pretty high on the offensive list."

Hermione's eyes went wide, and she nodded hard.

"Thanks." Sirius got to his feet. "Ma'am," he said with his best pureblood bow as the centaur approached to conversational distance. "Sirius Black, assistant professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Alcyone is my name." The centaur inclined her head. "Yours I knew, but your introduction is welcome. Tell me, am I right in believing you have some relation to the child named Draco?"

"Little Malfoy? We're related, all right. Let me think." Sirius rubbed his fingers together, noting that Hermione and the young wolf were both eavesdropping shamelessly on the conversation above them. "His mum's my first cousin, so that puts us at once removed, doesn't it?"

"It does. And makes you the person to whom I believe this information should come first." Alcyone administered a stern look to the young wolf, who lowered his ears and scooted away. Hermione looked momentarily confused but followed suit with a little yelp when an urgent set of teeth closed around her sleeve and tugged.

"The kids shouldn't hear it?" Sirius turned his shoulder to accommodate Alcyone's obvious precautions to this end. "Can't be good, then."

"It is not." Alcyone scuffed a hoof against the forest floor. "Draco has great potential, but if he remains where he is, I fear it will be wasted. The thought of friends was a welcome one to him, but

almost an alien concept. He seems far more wary of his father than I believe is normal in a human child of his age. And then there is what it means that he is here in the Forest at all."

"Which is, Lucius was so caught up in whatever he was doing at the castle that he never bothered to look around and see Draco wandering off." Sirius sighed between his teeth. "Typical. And you're probably right about him being wasted where he is—he's going to learn the straight-up pureblood purity line, and that's a *hard* mindset to break away from. Trust me, I know."

"You would." Alcyone smiled at Sirius's raised eyebrow. "I told you that I knew your name," she said. "Shall I add that I have heard a great deal of your history, including your nearness to several famous figures on the better side of the human war?"

"Not like I did them any good by it." Sirius scowled, but then shook off his mood. "And not like it matters right now, either. What're you proposing?"

"Very little in a magical world happens by chance." Alcyone's sweeping gesture took in both sets of children, Hermione and the young wolf playing mirror-me on one side of the clearing, Draco scratching the ears of his lapful of fur while chattering nonstop to a larger wolf on the other. "This moment, this meeting, may well be a cusp point for the future. Will you help me seize it, and shape it as we would all like it better?"

"You mean the kids." Sirius nodded. "I was already thinking about something of the sort. Seeing if Draco and Hermione would agree to be pen pals, owl back and forth, learn about each other's worlds. Maybe even meet every so often, though we'd have to find some way to hide it from Lucius. He'd burst a blood vessel." A snicker broke through his words. "Maybe that means we *should* tell him, then. Not until we're well on the way, of course. See what he does when he finally realizes just how far we've corrupted his only son."

Alcyone's face remained straight, but her tail swished in what Sirius suspected was restrained laughter. "It is a good thought," she agreed, "but it does not address the immediate problem with Draco. If his father is so neglectful, and his mother too, since she allows it..."

"As much as I hate to say it, give Lucius his due." Sirius grimaced, fighting the urge to spit against the foul taste the words generated on his tongue. "Whatever he's here for, it's got to be something pretty damn urgent to pull his attention away from his kid. Normally he's overprotective to a fault. Malfoys don't tend towards the prolific."

"We can find that out." Alcyone dusted her hands idly against her furred sides. "But the fact remains that if we had not been present, both children would likely now be dead. That cannot occur again."

"True. And the Muggleborn tours are easy—just a simple Tracking Spell over the kids should stop any of them wandering off without the tour guide realizing it. But that's not why Draco's here, and we can't exactly..." Sirius trailed off uneasily as Alcyone regarded him with cool eyes.

"I know that you cannot take him from the custody of his lawful parents," the she-centaur said



with calm assurance. "It is against your human law. But I am not a human, and you stand within my world now. If I choose to keep this child here with me, to take him deep into the Forest where no human ever goes, to raise him and train him as once my people trained the greatest heroes of old, do you have either the power or the desire to stop me?"

## The Spell of Sealing Completion

A silver dog bounded through the wall of Albus Dumbledore's office and play-bowed to him where he sat at his desk. *"Tell Pomona don't panic, "* it said in Sirius Black's voice. *"I've got her wanderer. Will return her shortly. "*

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at the portrait of Phineas Nigellus as the Patronus-messenger dissipated. "Has Pomona misplaced one of the young witches she was taking on the tour, by chance?" he asked.

"If she has, she hasn't spotted it yet. Not that the Muggleborns are making that any easier on her." Phineas snorted. "Bringing them to Hogwarts that young will be trouble, Dumbledore, mark my words..."

"Someone else has just noticed the same thing," Dilys Derwent cut in, scowling at Phineas. "Lucius Malfoy is turning the ground floor upside down as we speak."

"Intriguing." Dumbledore got to his feet. "Perhaps I should go and assist him. It would never do for a child of one of the school governors to be lost at Hogwarts. Lucius's son is rather younger than our usual run of students, after all, and despite his upbringing, we cannot expect him to be knowledgeable about every possibility which can befall the unwary in this castle or on these grounds."

After straightening his hair and beard in the mirror hanging on the wall near the door, the Headmaster stepped out onto the revolving staircase, waving his wand idly behind him as he sank out of sight.

On his desk, a small, rustic-looking scroll spun three times and vanished.

---

Sirius was sitting at his desk, writing his first letter to Hermione, when his office door slammed open so hard it crashed into the wall beside it. He took a second to make sure his expression was suitably composed, then looked up.

"Afternoon, Narcissa," he said to his cousin, drawing his wand and closing the door behind her. Judging from her disheveled appearance and the fury burning in her eyes, this would not be a conversation he wanted broadcast through the corridors of Hogwarts. "What can I—"

"Where," Narcissa snarled over his words, "is my son?"

"Sorry, no idea." Sirius pushed his chair back and stood up, watching Narcissa warily. He hadn't expected she'd tumble to his involvement so soon, or be quite so fiery about it, and wondered uneasily if he'd underestimated her maternal feelings.

"Do not *lie* to me." Narcissa drew her own wand, planting her feet in a dueler's stance. "*You* restored the Muggleborn girl to her tour guide—"

"She was wandering around the castle, looking lost. I gave her a couple of sweets, showed her a trick or two, and handed her back to Pomona to finish out the tour. End of story." Sirius shrugged. "What makes you think that's got something to do with Draco? If he's anything like we used to be as kids, he'd have run screaming from a Muggleborn, not teamed up with her."

Narcissa glared at him, to which Sirius returned his blandest and most innocent look, the one he'd perfected through seven years of Professor McGonagall's searching gazes. *Come on, Cissy, crack*, he willed her, crossing the fingers of his wandless hand behind his back. *Give me something, anything, human for once. Just the least bit of normal emotion, that's all I need...*

The shift in his cousin's scent forced Sirius to hide a triumphant grin, and allowed him to reach for the box of tissues on his desk an instant before her first tearful inhalation. *Got her.*

"I—I was so sure," Narcissa said shakily, accepting the box Sirius levitated towards her, and the chair he trundled out from the corner of the room. "So sure you would know something, a place where traces of what has been lost at Hogwarts can be found, or some artifact that would allow us to search the whole castle and the grounds, all at once."

"Why are you asking, Cissy?" Sirius leaned against the corner of his desk, eyes, ears, nose all trained on the slender form before him. "Honestly, I never thought you cared that much about the kid."

Blotting her eyes, Narcissa managed a faint smile. "He is primarily his father's son to raise, as a daughter would be mine," she said. "So say all the years of custom in which we were brought up. But my heart..." She twisted the tissue between her hands. "My heart says otherwise. So I slip around our customs, as much as I dare. Draco likely does not think well of me, since I take up time he might be spending on his own entertainments, but I cannot help it." She exhaled a breathy, tear-filled laugh. "I love him, Sirius. As little as I would dare to admit it to any of my relatives but you, I love him. And if I must play the dutiful wife and the society lady much longer without knowledge of what has happened to him, I fear I may lose my mind."

"Well, we can't have that." Sirius slid off the desk and conjured himself a chair beside his cousin's. "Listen, Cissy—no, don't talk," he corrected at her widened eyes, her sharp inhalation. "Just listen. You were right the first time, I do know something, but what I can tell you is limited. Magically limited. So hear me out, don't interrupt, and we'll work this through together. All right?"

Her knuckles white around her handful of tissue, Narcissa nodded sharply.

"First things first. Draco's alive, and he's safe. And the only reason I can tell you that is because you just proved you care about him as more than a status chip on your personal gameboard. So well done there. I—" Sirius stopped, stifled a sigh, and reached around to draw his silently sobbing cousin into an awkward embrace. "Hey, now," he said, patting her back. "It's not that bad."

"It could have been." Narcissa turned her head on his shoulder to make her words audible. "If you had any idea how many times I almost convinced myself not to come here today, how certain I was that you would simply laugh at me and send me away again, or share the story of my foolish Mugglish weakness with everyone I have ever known..."

"I don't play like that." Sirius kept his impatience muzzled by reminding it that most of the people in Narcissa's world would have done precisely this, with the added fillip that some of them would have tried to ensure Lucius never heard the story until it was so well entrenched that even his money and influence could not stop it from spreading. "But here's the next thing, Cissy. The people who've got Draco right now? They saved his life, and they wouldn't have had to if Lucius had been keeping an eye on him. And the way they're thinking, if his father cares that little about him, and his mother knows that but lets him go out with his father anyway—"

Narcissa stiffened, and Sirius knew his message had been received. "They want what's best for Draco, Cissy," he said carefully. "And right now, as far as they're concerned, that's keeping him. But I got them to agree, if you'd come here and talk to me, if you showed some signs of actually caring about him as a kid, as your son, instead of just as Lucius's heir and the proof you've done your duty, then they'd be willing to talk to you about it. About him."

"And if I had not?" Narcissa sat up, anger and hope warring in her eyes. "If I had never come, or if you had adjudged me insufficiently caring? How long would you have left me without news of my child?"

"Are you going to hex me for—ow," Sirius finished as a small fist drilled into his shoulder. "I'll take that as a yes, then, shall I."

"Just tell me." Narcissa exhaled a long breath, shaking her hair back into place on the end of it. "Since I have, happily, avoided the fate of being thought a completely unfit mother."

Sirius shrugged. "If they didn't think it was safe to let him go home, they were going to work on convincing you and Lucius he never would," he said carefully, watching Narcissa's face for signs of comprehension. "Bloodstained robes to start with. Grading up from there as needed."

"And you..." Narcissa breathed the words. "You would have agreed to this? To separate a child from his natural guardians with falsehoods, to force them to mourn for one who is not dead, to leave them forever ignorant of his true fate?"

"What do you want me to say?" Sirius demanded, his patience wearing thin. "I've been in that same damn situation for going on four years now, so don't even tell me I don't understand! At least you would have had an answer, even if it was a lie! I've got *nothing*, Narcissa. Nothing except an abandoned wand and a whole lot of questions that are probably never getting answered."

"But..." Narcissa blotted at her eyes again. "I don't understand. I was sure you knew something about him."

"Who? Draco? I just told you, I do—"

"No, not Draco." Narcissa waved this away impatiently. "If you tell me he is safe, I believe you. I am speaking now of Harry Potter. Lucius has been certain for a year that the answer to his whereabouts is here, at Hogwarts. It was about that he came to consult Severus Snape."

"And took his eyes off Draco long enough for...well. Yeah." Sirius shook his head, bewildered. "Lucius thinks Harry is *here*?"

"Or that some clue about him is. I know very little, only what I have overheard." Narcissa smiled faintly. "I will do my best to learn more. If you will use your vaunted powers of persuasion to argue that my son should be returned to me."

"Deal," said Sirius promptly. "As long as you're planning on paying better attention to him from now on."

Narcissa grimaced. "I doubt he will welcome it, but yes."

"Now, with that I might be able to help you." Sirius grinned, on firmer ground here. "Let me know when you have a free evening or two, and we'll begin your education on What Little Boys Like To Do..."

---

Moonfur lay atop one of the Stonehouse Pack's thinking rocks, watching as far below, his cubs romped with a laughing human boy.

*I never thought any of this would happen.* Moodily, he thwacked his tail against the surface of the rock, making the children pause and look up before returning to their game. *The human world wasn't supposed to care what had become of me, or even of Harry, once it was established that Voldemort was gone. We should have been a nine days' wonder, superseded by the next oddity down the pike, relegated to footnotes in dusty old history books and "Whatever Happened To..." newspaper retrospectives by now.*

Of course, he'd never expected to discover that Sirius Black had survived the whirlwind day of destruction which had led him to his irreversible decision.

*Though if I'd known then what I know now, I might still have made the same choice...*

A small grunt behind him, and a waft of a most familiar scent, warned him that Smokepaw had climbed up to this perch to join him. He flicked his ears once in acknowledgment of her presence, then went back to watching Lucius Malfoy's son being playfully mauled by a pair of wolf cubs.

*Which I doubt I could have anticipated, no matter what I'd known back then!*

{Love,} said Smokepaw, sitting down beside him. {What troubles you?}

{Nothing.} Moonfur snorted in bitter amusement. {Everything.}

{Far more the second than the first, I think.} Smokepaw swept her tail once back and forth in appreciation of the small joke, but her look was direct and her shoulders set at their no-nonsense angle. {You are unsettled and unsure about what you should do next, now that you know one of your friends is both alive and involved with the children ours wish to befriend. Yes?}

Moonfur glared at her. {Where are these mindreading classes held, the ones women always manage to attend and men never do?} he asked, sitting up to be more on a level with her. {And how do they manage to get the point across to *every* woman, no matter what she looks like?}

{I believe it is partly instinct, partly learning.} Smokepaw chuckled, her tongue hanging momentarily loose from one side of her mouth. {But by that, I take that I am right. You are feeling such things.}

{I...am. Yes.} Moonfur sighed, conceding defeat. {How am I supposed to face him, Smokepaw?} he asked, gazing out over the home trees, in the direction of the castle he'd once called home, the friend he'd unknowingly wounded. {How am I supposed to tell him what I did, and why?}

{If he was any true friend to you, he will be so glad to know that you and our son are safe and alive that he will care little in what form you come to him.} Smokepaw brushed her pads idly against the surface of the rock. {And if I remember your stories correctly, he has a form at his command which is very like ours, so that he will be able to be a part of both worlds. Something which you, my love, seem to forget you must do.} A soft growl underlay her last sentence.

{What do you mean?} Moonfur turned to face her, startled. {I left that world behind when I came here. When I came to you. This is my home now.}

{It is, but that does not wipe out the years you spent living as a human, or the ties you had to others then. Especially not when one of those others has finally come back within your purview.} Smokepaw lowered her ears, adding extra emphasis to her tone. {I am glad to have you here, and as you are, and as my mate and the father of my cubs. None of that has changed. But if you try to make believe that your first life, in the human world, never happened, your second life here with us will be forever incomplete. It is time to find completion, beloved. For all our sakes, but especially for the children. Besides.} Her eyes danced momentarily. {I have always wished I could have met your wicked friend Mr. Padfoot. Our senses of humor seem very much alike.}

Moonfur sighed and lay down once more. {I'm doomed,} he told the rock. {Absolutely doomed.}

---

When Sirius got back from his last class of the day, he found a scroll waiting on his desk, made from a thick and crackly substance he thought might be tree bark. Inside were two sentences, inscribed in an unrecognizably neat handwriting.

*Meet me at the statue of the Fates, tomorrow night after sunset. Come furry, and come alone.*

There was no signature.

## The Spell of Sealing Casting Blame

Under the light of a waning gibbous moon, Padfoot the dog trotted out of a small secret passage in Hogwarts's outer walls and headed for the statue of the Three Fates, each holding the symbol of her power over human lives.

*I can't get too excited, he reminded himself. This isn't necessarily what I want it to be.*

But the fact remained that only four people in the world had ever known Sirius Black had a fur-bearing form, and of those four, two were dead. Albus Dumbledore knew the truth as well now, but Dumbledore had no need to send Sirius cryptic notes asking for midnight meetings.

*Though he might if he thought it was funny. He's got a weird sense of humor from time to time. Still, I don't think this is him.*

Reaching the statue, he paced once around it, sniffing. If this were a real rendezvous, and not a prank or a joke, he was the first one to arrive for it.

*May as well get comfortable.*

He lay down, cushioning his head on his paws, and looked up at the night sky, remembering wistfully the nights he'd spent romping these same grounds in this same shape, Prongs galloping beside him, Wormtail scurrying to keep up, and Moony out in front, running off some of the boundless energy full moons brought him.

*Though I think they stole it from the rest of his month to dump it all into that one night. Padfoot bared his teeth at the annoyance that spiked in his memory. We joked about it, called it his furry little problem, said he was dating Phoebe and Diana and Artemis, but it wasn't easy for him, not even with us there to help. He always looked tired, and older than he should be. And of course he never could hold down a job, not when he'd have to be absent three or four days a month at the best of times, and he hated accepting charity...*

He frowned, dog-style, wrinkling up his nose and forehead. *How has he been able to take care of Harry all this time, then? Babies cost, and little boys cost more. And Harry was an active kid, he never stopped moving except when he was asleep, and even then he was a squirmer. How could Moony have kept up with him?*



{Are you asking?}

Padfoot was on his feet before he recalled moving, his hackles up, his teeth not quite bared at the stranger, the strange *wolf*, who had managed to get to within ten feet of him, practically *beside* him. {Who the hell are—} he began heatedly, then stopped in confusion as tone, body language, scent, all finally registered with him.

{"Speak of the devil, and lo, he appears."} The wolf's silvery tail described metronomic arcs in the air, ticking off his amusement. {It's nice to see you again, Padfoot. For more than a few passing seconds while battling an overgrown arachnid, that is.}

{But—} Padfoot sat down hard, and looked up at the sky to reassure himself that he hadn't somehow lost track of most of a month. {This is impossible. Full moon was last week. How are you still—} He stopped as another incongruity made itself known. {And you're *talking!* You never used to be able to talk, not like this—the change took your mind away, we had to herd you around like an actual wolf with a grudge against humans—}

{It's all part and parcel of that same story.} Moony sat down as well, tilting his head in a familiar gesture to look levelly at Padfoot. {Are you going to listen, or just splutter all night long?}

{Oh, you haven't *heard* spluttering.} Padfoot shook his head hard, making his ears flap back and forth. {Damn you, Moony, you went and disappeared on me for four bloody years, *with* my godson, I think I'm due a few seconds of shock—and where is Harry, for that matter?} He looked around, scanning the scenery behind Moony's back for the shape of a little boy not quite six years old, a boy with his father's face and his mother's eyes. {Is he all right?}

{He's alive and well, yes.} Had he been human, Moony's words would have been clipped and curt, a tone expressed in his wolf form by the sharp angle of his ears and shoulders. {And as for disappearing on you, Padfoot, I thought you were dead until a few months ago. Lily assumed, when she brought Harry to me, that Voldemort breaking the Fidelius could only mean that both you and Wormtail had been found out and killed. And of course James was already dead at that point as well, and Lily died that same night. Leaving me the last man standing. The one who had to make the decision for both of us.}

{Decision? What decision?} Padfoot dug his paws into the ground, trying to fight the feeling that it was being dug out from underneath him, the world shifting its boundaries. {Moony, what the hell did you do?}

{You're looking at it.} Moony raised one paw and brushed at his head, his chest, his hindquarters. {This is who I am now, Padfoot. Who we both are. The change is irreversible.}

"Are you *insane?*" Until the words emerged in a shout, Sirius didn't realize he'd reverted to human. "What the hell could possibly make you think—what *right* did you have—"

{What right do *you* have to second-guess me?} Moony's ears flattened, and he growled low in his throat. {You weren't there, Padfoot. As far as I knew, you'd never be there again.}

"You could have waited a couple days, at least!" Sirius curled his hands into fists, as the preferable option to drawing his wand. "Found out what was going on, asked somebody what happened to me—"

{With the Death Eaters going off like a load of jostled fireworks? When I had no idea who might be safe to approach and who might not, or even who was still alive?} Moony snorted, a sound of contempt Sirius had seldom heard from him. {Never mind. I don't know why I bothered to tell you all of this. Except that it's unnecessarily cruel to leave you in the dark forever. So, now you know. We call him Grasseye, if you were wondering.}

"Merlin's bootlace." Sirius had to fight for breath as this second revelation punched into him. "That wolf cub, in the Forest—not the little tiny cub, that was a girl, but the older one, the one who was playing with Hermione—I *thought* those eyes looked familiar!" He stopped, hearing again the precise phrasing of his friend's communication. "Wait. We?"

{Apparently I make a more attractive wolf than I ever did a human.} Moony's eyes softened momentarily, as he glanced back towards the Forest. {Her name is Smokepaw. She's more than I deserve. And that 'little tiny cub' you noticed is our daughter Ashtail.} His teeth flashed in a wolf's grin. {Surprised, Padfoot?}

"Maybe a little." Sirius pressed his fingertips against his forehead, trying to take it all in. *Moony's alive, he's all right—hell with all right, he's married with a kid of his own, he's damn well fantastic! And Harry's alive and all right, he's even got a family again, father and mother, a baby sister to pick on—it ought to be the greatest news I've heard in years, and in a lot of ways it is, but there's just one itty-bitty little problem—*

"So where do I come in?" he asked when he thought he could say it without whining. "I'm still Harry's godfather. I ought to have some right to him."

{Oh, well.} Moony scuffed a bit of dirt idly underpaw. {If we're going to talk about *rights* .} Despite his speech being silent, his tone nonetheless managed to be as withering as Sirius remembered it from a certain episode in their sixth year involving Severus Snape and the Whomping Willow. {Who might have had the *right* to know what you and Prongs and Wormtail cooked up among the three of you with regards to that Fidelius Charm?}

"What the hell?" Sirius stared at the silver-furred wolf. "That has nothing to do with this!"

{That has *everything* to do with this!} Moony snarled aloud, so fiercely that Sirius flinched. {You didn't trust me then. Why should I trust you now?}

"Because—" Sirius floundered in a morass of half-developed thoughts. "Because I'm your *friend* , dammit!"

{You *were* my friend. And I was yours. But then you decided I might be too risky to tell the truth.} Moony flicked the dirt off his paw, the gesture as contemptuous as his earlier snort. {You decided there was a greater chance I was the spy than Wormtail. You had a fifty-fifty chance,

Padfoot. One in two. And you blew it.}

"Merlin's balls, you think I don't know that?" Sirius shouted back, losing his temper at last. "You think I don't live with that every day, dream about it every night? You think I haven't beat myself up for that decision a million times, begged the universe to make it not have happened, wished I could trade the entire rest of my life for just those two damn minutes to live over and do it differently? But it doesn't work like that, Moony. All the wishing in the world won't change the past." He blew out a breath, tiredly, and leaned back against one of the Fates. "Prongs and Lily are dead. I killed Wormtail myself. And you did—whatever the hell you did. I'm not asking you to tell me the details."

Moony's tail swished left, right, left, then curled with precision around his front paws as he sat down. {What are you asking for?} he said quietly.

"Forgiveness, to start with." Sirius shut his eyes. "For the dumbest thing I've ever done. Not to mention the one that managed to hurt everyone I cared about but let me off free as a bird." A shaky laugh forced its way out of him. "How stupid is it that I almost would've liked it better if I hadn't got to Wormtail in time? If he'd blown the hell out of that street and got me blamed for it, and probably stuffed in Azkaban without so much as a trial? At least then I'd feel like I was doing a little of the suffering, instead of getting it spread around to everybody *except* me, when it's my fault to begin with..."

A cold nose against the side of his neck made him yelp and jerk away.

Moony thumped his tail against the side of the statue, wolf-grinning once more. {That's for all the times you did that to me,} he said, then sobered. {We're neither of us being fair, are we, Sirius? To ourselves, or to each other. We made the decisions we thought were best, at the time, with what we knew, and now here we stand casting blame and deciding who 'ought to' suffer.}

"Trouble being, 'ought to' has damn-all to do with 'is'." Sirius ran his hands through his hair, sighing. "Moony, I'm sorry. I should've told you what we were doing with the Fidelius. Hell, I should've asked *you* to be Secret Keeper instead! But I didn't, and we both get to deal with the fallout of that for the rest of our lives."

{And if you're not going to classify that as suffering, what is it, exactly?} Moony snorted, this time with a great deal more humor. {A walk in the park?}

"Maybe one designed by Snivellus." Sirius cast an unfriendly glance back towards the castle. "He's here, did you know? Dumbledore hired him on as Potions professor after Slughorn left. And he keeps applying for Defense every year, and he keeps getting turned down in favor of the most god-awful parade of losers—which is where I come in, as *assistant* Defense professor..."

{Oh, is that what you're still doing here?} Moony smirked, a peculiar expression to see on a wolf's face but nonetheless the only word which could be applied. {I thought McGonagall finally figured out how much of your N.E.W.T.s you copied from James and me, and hauled you back here to retake your seventh year classes until you could pass them by yourself.}

"Hey!"

Moony ducked Sirius's swat easily, panting laughter. {My turn,} he said, sitting down, the amusement dying out of his eyes. {Sirius, I'm sorry. I should have checked on what Lily told me before making any irrevocable decisions. But I was alone and frightened, far more for Harry than for myself, and I did what I thought was best for us both.}

"And you baffled the hell out of everyone in the process, which can't be too bad a thing, given the cult that's grown up around the both of you." Sirius looked his friend over, head to tail. "Has Dumbledore told you about any of it? The Boy Who Disappeared, that's what they've decided on calling Harry. There isn't really one solid name for you, but the Mysterious Friend is the best one I've heard."

{Now with extra mystery.} Moony snickered. {And as petty as it may be, a bit of revenge on Lucius Malfoy for all those cracks he used to make about shabbily-dressed Gryffindors. I'm just as glad he's the age he is and not a year younger—if we'd had another year at Hogwarts together, I can't help but think he might have figured me out. Whereas now...}

"You've got a hold of the one thing in the world he might actually like more than himself." Sirius grinned. "How is he? Little devil?"

{Surprisingly good-natured, as it happens.} Moony tilted his head and scratched one ear with a hind foot. {He can understand us, the way you can, so he knows we're not animals, but we're *shaped* like animals, so he doesn't feel he has to be on his pureblood best manners. It's probably the only time in his life he's been able to behave like a normal child, and to him, it's one big adventure. Especially with Alcyone including him in the cubs' magic lessons. I doubt he'll want to leave.}

"Yeah, well." Sirius shrugged. "I sort of promised Narcissa I'd ask about that. She's going a bit mad over it. Been imagining all kinds of horrors. Like what would've happened if any of us hadn't turned up in time to fight that damn acromantula. Hell, if Hermione hadn't been there with those rocks she was throwing!"

{That's the little Muggleborn girl?} Moony's eyes half-lidded as he thought back. {I liked the look of her. And Grasseye hasn't stopped talking about her, about how much she knew about the magical world even though she'd only just learned about it.} Opening his eyes fully, he caught the tail end of Sirius's skeptical look. {What?}

"Do you have to do that?" Sirius shifted in place. "He has a name. So do you, for that matter."

Moony sighed. {Sirius, I want this to work,} he said patiently. {But if you're going to harp on the things that don't really matter, it won't. He's been Grasseye a great deal longer than he ever was Harry Potter, and it's the name that's most appropriate for the person he has to be in his everyday life. When in Rome...}

"I know, I know." Sirius sighed in his turn. "Light a Roman candle."

{I'm not sure that's quite how the saying goes, but all right.} Moony brushed this mode of discussion away with one front paw. {Have you stayed in touch with her? With Hermione?}

"Yes, and that's another reason I'm so damn glad to see you. You were always better on theory than I was, and she's got *loads* of questions about how magic works, where it comes from, what it can and can't do..." Sirius shook his head, baffled. "Girl's not even seven, and already asking about things we never so much as thought about until we were third and fourth years!"

{And you said Narcissa is worried about her son, and wants him back?} Moony seemed to be doodling on the stone plinth of the statue with a claw. {What is she willing to do towards that end?}

"Honestly? Just about anything, provided she can swing it without tipping Lucius off to what she's doing." Sirius narrowed his eyes. "Mr. Padfoot would like to know what Mr. Moony has in mind."

The wolf finished his drawing and regarded it calmly. {Mr. Moony wonders why Mr. Padfoot thinks he has anything in mind.}

"Mr. Padfoot requests that Mr. Moony stop thinking four years apart has completely dulled his brain."

{Mr. Moony would like to express his astonishment that Mr. Padfoot has one of those articles on hand.} Chuckling, Moony dodged a thump between the ears with Sirius's fist. {All right, all right! Let me get my Fwoopers in a row, and then you can start throwing spells.}

"Fair enough. But one question first." Sirius waited until Moony looked up, blue eyes meeting gray. "When do I get to see him again? And meet your wife and kid, for that matter? They're your and...and *Grasseye's* family, they ought to be mine too."

Moony's tail raised a small cloud of dust behind him. {Now that sounds like the Padfoot I used to know,} he said, getting to his feet. {Plans can wait. Let's go now.}

A moment later, two canine figures were loping through the night towards the Forest.

## The Spell of Sealing Without Really Trying

Hermione could hardly wait for her parents to fall asleep. The yearly camping trip to the Forest of Dean, always an eagerly awaited event in the Granger household, took on even greater significance this year. One of her letters from Sirius had promised that not only he but everyone would come to see her there, and possibly meet her mum and dad.

*That's if they want to meet magical people. But I think they will. I'm magical, after all, so they're going to have to meet some witches and wizards along the way!*

She had been uncertain about sneaking out of the tent while her parents were sleeping to make the initial contact, but a little thought had set her fears aside. If Alycone the she-centaur, or the wise wolf family, had wanted to hurt her or kidnap her, they could have done it a lot more easily back in the Forbidden Forest. Sirius could still do it any time he wanted to, with that popping-out-of-the-air thing she'd seen some wizards doing in the village called Hogsmeade (you couldn't do that at Hogwarts, she'd been told, and was very glad to know there wouldn't be boys appearing in her dormitory without warning).

*It doesn't mean I should be stupid, but it does mean they probably don't want anything wrong. They just want to try out the way they'll be traveling here, at a time when they won't startle my parents with what they look like and who they are.*

Finally, when her father's occasional snore and her mother's even breathing assured her they were deep in their dreams, Hermione slid out of her sleeping bag, scooped up her shoes, and slipped out of the tent.

*A white oak tree.* Pulling on her shoes and tying them didn't require her eyes, so she was free to look around the small clearing where the Grangers had pitched their tent, looking at each tree's leaves carefully in the bright, clear moonlight. *Sirius said they would be coming around a white oak tree. Oak leaves are longer than they are wide, with mirrored lobes along each side, and white oak leaves have tips that are round, round like snowballs, white on the ground...*

---

"...while red oak leaves have tips like flames, as sharp and pointed as their names," Draco recited, and felt the by-now familiar thrill shoot through him as Alcyone nodded in satisfaction.

{They smell different, too,} added Grasseye, sitting down to scratch an ear with a hind leg. {But

you probably can't tell that, with that bitty little useless thing you've got on your face.}

"Better than a great honking muzzle like you have," retorted Draco, and shoved his friend's shoulder. Taken by surprise, Grasseye yipped like a much younger cub as he went down, and Draco laughed aloud, until a he-wolf missile hit him in the legs, sending him over backwards himself.

{Play-fight!} yelped Ashtail joyously, and leapt into the middle of the ruckus, licking faces with indiscriminate abandon.

Draco found an instant, in between fending off teeth and tweaking tails, to remember with wonder how different his life had been only two months before. Some of his training, to his surprise, had helped him learn about life in the Forest—the Stonehouse Pack had their own ideas about manners, propriety, and precedence, as complex as anything the son of a pureblood line had to learn by heart—but the days so monotonously similar that they might have been duplicated by a Cloning Charm, the lonely and fear-filled nights when he curled up under his covers and cried silently into his pillow, were gone as though they had never existed.

*Maybe they never did. Maybe I just had a bad dream of them, and this is waking up...*

The thought entertained him, and he missed a lunge by Grasseye and yelped in his turn as the side of his neck was ferociously washed.

"That will do," said Alcyone's voice from behind him, and her hand came down to close around his arm and pull him effortlessly free, as Moonfur and Smokepaw waded into the fracas from the other side, each catching a cub by the scruff of the neck in strong, white teeth and hoisting them clear. "Face me and hold still, Draco. You do not want to appear slovenly in front of your friend."

"Yes, ma'am." Draco obediently turned towards his teacher and allowed her to brush the dirt and leaves out of his hair and off his robes (which were a trifle the worse for wear, mostly with teethmarks, but had held up surprisingly well, given the amount of abuse they'd endured). "You said you would tell us what a white oak tree had to do with how we were going to get there when it was time," he said when she was finished, looking up at her with interest, Grasseye and Ashtail coming to sit one on either side of him. "And it's almost time now."

Alycone laughed. "Troublesome one," she said fondly, ruffling Draco's hair. "Very well." Folding her knees, she lowered her body to the ground. "Mount, and we will be on our way."

Draco placed his two hands on Alcyone's back and hoisted himself up, swinging his leg across with as much assurance as he'd ever used on his broomstick at home (Grasseye had been fascinated to discover that humans really *could* fly, and the boys had spent several hours discussing possible modifications which would allow a Person to guide a broomstick). Once he was seated, he adjusted his weight so that he was comfortable, neither grinding his seat bones into Alcyone's spine nor pinching anything else against her side.

*Because once I'm comfortable, she will be too. And that rule works for more than riding...*

Beside him, Ashtail bounced in place with excitement. {May I ride too?} she asked, stilling for a few moments to get her words across, then beginning to squirm again almost before they were completed. {Please, please, *please* may I?}

"May she?" Draco addressed the question to the three adults. "I can hold her, she won't fall..."

{As long as you're careful,} Moonfur said after a few moments of conversation too quick to follow between him and Smokepaw. {And if Alcyone agrees. It's her back, after all.}

"It is, and it will hardly be broken by such a small additional burden." Alcyone twisted lithely and scooped Ashtail off the ground, depositing her in Draco's arms. "Up you go, little one."

{Yay!} Ashtail wiggled once with glee, and licked Draco's cheek, but then stilled, wide-eyed, as Alcyone got gracefully to her feet. {Wow,} said the little she-wolf in awed tones, staring down over the protective curve of Draco's arm. {We're high up off the ground now.}

"Yes, but don't worry." Draco gripped Alcyone's barrel with his knees, feeling the way her muscles stretched and bunched as she walked a few steps forward, cuddling Ashtail close to him to keep their weights centered so they wouldn't slip. "I've got you."

*But for how much longer?*

The thought prickled at the back of his mind, and as he had several times before, he shooed it away. It didn't matter now. It wasn't important. He had his friends, and his teacher, and they would take care of everything. All that he had to worry about was what a white oak tree had to do with traveling.

{Here it is,} called Grasseye, voicing his words in a soft howl, his parents joining him a few paces ahead of Alcyone with her double burden. {The biggest white oak in this part of the home trees.}

"Well done, and so we begin." Alcyone turned her head to look solemnly at Draco. "Close your eyes, my young wizard," she said, her tone warm and loving but with an undertone of warning that she would brook no nonsense here. "This manner of travel is unpleasantly disorienting, otherwise. When you are older, if you are still able to partake of forest ways, you may see what it entails, but until then you must keep your eyes closed."

"What do you mean, if?" Draco draped a fold of his robes over Ashtail's face. Next to Alcyone's hooves, Grasseye had the features after which he'd been named shut tight, Smokepaw guiding him forward around the tree with gentle nudges of her nose. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Close your eyes and listen to my voice, and I will explain." Alcyone drew two fingers downwards through the air, and Draco obediently shut his eyes, focusing his attention on listening, and on keeping his balance as Alcyone began to move once more, clopping slowly forward and to the left, as though she too were walking around the tree. "It is a question of how magic is used, Draco, and how it is not. At the moment, as we have told you before, your magic is somewhat formless, because you have never learned how to use it, or how *not* to use it. Once you reach an age to attend



Hogwarts, and are paired with a wand for the occasion—"

"I don't want to go to Hogwarts," Draco interrupted. "I want to stay in the Forest with you. It's nice here. Nobody shouts, or scolds, or makes me do chores, or—anything," he ended rather lamely, recalling just in time that centaur though Alcyone might be, she was still a grown-up, and grown-ups did not take kindly to children tattling about other grown-ups.

"We will discuss that more later tonight." Alcyone was still walking, though by Draco's estimation she must have gone around the tree at least twice by now. "But for the moment—yes, we are here. You may open your eyes, Draco."

Draco did as he was told, not without a mental huff. *That was it? What was the big deal? All we did was walk a couple times around—*

Then he stared.

The white oak tree beside which Alcyone was standing was not the same one she'd started beside, nor was the forest around him the same. The trees here were smaller, but spaced more closely together, and the litter underfoot had a different shape and smell. Ashtail, in his arms, was also gazing around wide-eyed, and Grasseye was sniffing at things in bafflement. {How did we—} the young he-wolf began, turning to his parents.

{We walked widdershins around the tree,} said Moonfur, patting his silvery paw against it to demonstrate. {Now, traditionally, widdershins is the direction of dark magic, of wrongdoing. But we don't want anything wrong—we only want to be somewhere we aren't right now.}

{So the tree, in its annoyance with our tiny little 'wrongness', sends us to the nearest cousin tree it has to the place where we wish to be,} Smokepaw finished, rubbing her gray-furred length against the rough bark of the oak. {In this case, the forest where your friend Hermione is camping with her parents.}

"Is *that* how you do it," said a voice from behind Draco, nearly scaring him off Alcyone's back. Sirius Black stepped out from behind another tree, nodding to everyone and bending down to scratch behind Grasseye's ears as the boy-cub bounded over with a little yip of happiness. "I'd always wondered how the centaurs and such could get around the Forest so fast. Didn't seem to make sense that they were just running, but they couldn't Apparate at Hogwarts, or without wands." He frowned. "Though come to think, house-elves do both of those every day...but that's neither here nor there. How're you doing, Draco?"

"Very well, thank you." Draco nodded at Sirius's inquiring hands, and got one of his own hands under Ashtail to support her as the older wizard plucked them both neatly off Alcyone's back and set them on the ground. "Is Hermione really here?"

"She is, and her family's campsite is that way." Sirius pointed with a thumb. "Ladies, care to join me?"

{I think we shall, yes.} Smokepaw laid her head against Draco's shoulder for a moment, then stepped back to let him set a happily squirming Ashtail on the ground. Mother and daughter loped away in the direction Sirius had indicated, with Sirius himself following behind at a half-run, but neither Moonfur nor Grasseye made a move to follow, and Draco felt a little clutch in his stomach as both wise wolves turned their eyes towards him.

"Have I done something wrong?" he asked, looking from the People to Alcyone, who shook her head slightly, her face unreadable. *She doesn't think so, but maybe this is something they don't agree about, maybe I've been bad and I won't be allowed to stay...*

{No, you haven't.} Moonfur shook his head. {No more than is usual for you, which is about equivalent to what I expect out of this one.} He swatted Grasseye lightly between the ears with a paw, eliciting a small yelp and growl. {But we have a proposition for you, Draco. A suggestion, something we want you to listen to, and then think carefully about...}

---

"You want me to—to pretend to be from a magical family?" Hermione stared at Sirius. "Why?"

"Not all the time, and not for a couple years at least." Sirius accepted a stick from the littlest wise wolf, Ashtail, and dug its tip into the ground. "As for why, well, you remember the sorts of things Draco was saying to you the day you two first met? He didn't just make that up out of his own head, Hermione. He was taught that way. He's learned better since, as you'll see in just a few minutes here, but plenty of the families that have been magical for a long time still think like that. And a while back, before you were born, there was a war going on over exactly that..."

Smokepaw, the mother wolf, barked softly, ending the sound with a grumbling growl, and Sirius glanced her way. "Sorry," he said, and turned back to Hermione. "What I mean to say is, that was the *excuse* for the war. It was really happening because there are some nasty people in this world, and they'll take any excuse they can find to be cruel. And one of them managed to get a whole load of what're called purebloods on his side with that excuse, until a very brave witch—who just happened to be a Muggleborn like you—stopped him."

"Lily Potter." Hermione smirked at the shocked look on Sirius's face. "I read about her in one of the books I bought from that catalog they sent us home with, after the tour." She grinned in remembrance. "My mother was so startled by the delivery owl that she nearly threw the teapot at it!"

Both wise wolves snickered audibly, Ashtail rolling over on her back to waggle her paws in the air. Hermione, greatly daring, leaned over to stroke the she-cub's soft fur, as she would with a puppy. Ashtail closed her eyes in bliss at the contact, and Hermione scratched a bit harder, giggling as one of Ashtail's back legs started to kick.

"Well, if you've read up on it any, you know it got pretty bad." Sirius's eyes were dark as Hermione glanced up at him, and she shivered a little. "I'd be willing to do a whole lot to make sure that doesn't happen again. And there's a possibility it might. But if you trust me—and if your parents do, I'll be bringing this up with them before we start anything, of course—I think, and

Alcyone thinks, and our furry friends here think, that we have a shot at stopping any kind of Second War before it ever gets started."

Despite herself, Hermione felt her eyes widen. "But how—I'm just—"

"Don't ask me for details." Sirius shook his head. "It gets really complicated, with prophecies and foreseeings and all that sort of thing, and I'm not sure I understand it yet myself. But you don't have to do a single thing you wouldn't ordinarily, not yet, except for keeping in touch with Draco, and getting to know this one and her crazy big brother." He stroked the line of Ashtail's jaw gently. "Though that's going to be tricky, when you can't understand what they're saying...but we may be able to figure something out for that. It'll be letters to begin with anyway, for all of you, and that they have worked out how to do. So what do you say?" He looked directly at Hermione. "Willing to give it a go?"