

whydoyouneedtoknow
FanficAuthors.net

The Raven and the Writing Desk

Chapter 1

25 October, 1991
Wiltshire, England

Severus Snape walked up a path he had once known very well, fighting to keep himself from staring around like a Muggleborn first year. In truth, he thought, he had the harder job, for the hypothetical Muggleborn had no idea what might be around the next bend, whereas Severus had thought he knew what he was approaching.

It seemed he'd been mistaken.

The manor house glowed in the brilliant light of an autumn afternoon. The ivy which had once darkened its pale stone frontage had been mostly stripped away, leaving only a few artistic tendrils to wander across blocks and carvings. Trees and bushes anchored colorful, exuberant flower beds which drew the eye towards the house, presenting it to visitors in its best light, rather than hunkering sullenly at the heads of unbroken sweeps of grass and attempting to conceal the very fact that a house existed here, as Severus remembered from his last few visits.

"But then, Lucius was alive when last I visited," he murmured, stepping up onto the broad front doorstep. "This, I suppose, would be Narcissa's hand in things."

If, Severus reminded himself, his fears about the woman once again calling herself Narcissa Black were unfounded. If Albus Dumbledore's calm, smug complacency about the strange situation obtaining at the Manor formerly known as Malfoy, as illustrated by the trio of children calling it home who had arrived at Hogwarts seven weeks prior and were rapidly turning the castle upside down, should prove to be the proper outlook after all. If—

Impatiently, he shook off his dithering mood and plied the door knocker (wrought, he noticed with some amusement, in the shape of a serpent, but resting on the head of a lion) three times, then stepped back to wait.

Only a handful of seconds later, the door opened with the smallest of creaks, revealing a woman in plain black house robes streaked with flour, a woman who was certainly not Narcissa. A cascade of bushy brown hair framed an oval face centered on a pair of searching brown eyes—or were they hazel? Surely there were flecks of some other hue visible within their irises—

"May I help you?" the woman inquired in a polite alto, her eyes, whatever color they might be, sweeping Severus once from head to toe, then returning to his face.

Apparently, Severus thought, Narcissa preferred human servants to the house-elf Severus could vaguely remember from Lucius's days as master—or was this woman a servant? She strongly resembled first year Gryffindor witch Jean Gray, from whom Severus had already learned to expect every correct answer in the book. Moreover, the son of this house treated Miss Gray (along

with the third of their little triumvirate, the boy about whom Severus had truly come to ask) quite as an equal. Politeness seemed the order of the day, at least until he had more information.

"I would like to speak with Narcissa. Miss Black. Providing she is available, of course."

"Of course, sir." The woman smiled briefly and moved back, opening the door more widely. "Welcome to Hesperus Manor. I'll see if the lady is receiving this afternoon."

"Thank you." Severus stepped across the threshold and glanced around under cover of making sure his black boots would bring no dirt into the house.

Here, as outdoors, things were utterly changed from the Malfoy Manor he recalled. The portraits of former generations of Malfoys had been removed, to snore or mumble their long-dead thoughts elsewhere. Two suits of armor still stood silent sentinel at the foot of the stairs, but one of them (he had to repress a laugh) had been crowned with a blue and gold fancy dress tiara, and the other's outstretched hand held not a caltrop or a throwing knife but a sleeping model of a bright red Chinese Fireball dragon, its tail draped across a gauntleted forearm. The broad windows above the door, once shrouded in dark green velvet curtains, now stood open to the sunlight, which gleamed softly off the polished wood of wall panels and stair treads, striking fiery glints in burnished bronze newel posts and railings.

For the first time Severus could remember—perhaps for the first time ever—the grand entrance hall of a pureblood home struck him as both truly grand, and truly a home.

"Wait here, please, Professor," said the woman, ushering Severus into a smaller room, decorated in crisp blues and tans. "If you need anything, just ring, and Dobby will be with you in a moment." She nodded towards the thick bell rope hanging in a corner, smiled more fully, and was gone.

Severus began to sit down, then stopped, struck by an interesting omission. The woman had never asked his name, nor had he given it, and he would have wagered a year's supply of his five rarest ingredients that he had never met or seen her before.

"And yet, she knew my title," he murmured. "I suppose she could have guessed it, if she has heard me described or even seen my photograph, but who might have—"

A colorful object on the floor behind one of the wooden rocking chairs caught his eye, and he crossed the room for a closer look, then chuckled under his breath. "Curiouser and curiouser," he said, scooping up the abandoned copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, left open to Alice's first speaking encounter with the Cheshire Cat. "There must be at least one younger child in the household, then. Children of an age to begin their Hogwarts education would scarcely be reading such things any longer."

Which, he had to admit, neatly solved the problem of how the mysterious woman, whoever she was, might know his name and style. Students did tend to write letters home, and his appearance was sufficiently unusual that the woman might well have guessed his identity from a description.

"Although," he added aloud, catching sight of a paragraph in the book, "I certainly have no *very* long claws, nor do I have a great many teeth..."

And then, without meaning to, he was reading, glancing every so often at the illustration on the facing page, watching the Cheshire Cat pop in and out of existence in the trees Alice passed. At last, after her objection to such a practice continuing, it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

"Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," said a clear, feminine voice, "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!"

About to follow Alice into the garden of the March Hare for a mad tea party, Severus paused. The voice had been remarkably distinct for a figment of his imagination.

He looked up.

"Good afternoon, Severus," said Narcissa, smiling at him from the doorway. "Did I answer my cue correctly?"

"You did." Closing the book hastily, Severus set it aside on the most convenient piece of furniture and got to his feet, ordering himself not to gawk. A widow this woman might now be rather than the formerly unapproachable wife of Lucius Malfoy, and even more beautiful than he recalled her, but staring at her with his jaw dangling would be neither polite nor politic. "My apologies for arriving unannounced—"

"Nonsense." Narcissa waved this away with one hand. "If I were unable to see you, I would have asked Danger to tell you so."

"Danger? Ah, your housekeeper?"

Narcissa laughed, a sound both full and strong as compared to the artificial titter Severus had formerly associated with her. "Hardly! But that, I have no doubt, is what you came here to inquire into—yes?" She tipped her head to one side as she found a seat on a cushioned sofa, freeing Severus to sit down himself, a circumstance for which he was decidedly grateful. "What has become of me these last seven years, since Lucius's death, and how Hesperus Manor and our household came to be?"

"That among other things." Severus told his bewilderment sharply that no answers could possibly be obtained if it continued to yammer inside his head. "The children. Your son, and his two companions. Three, if we count the youngest Weasley boy, but he seems a recent addition to the group. They...pique my curiosity, one might say."

"Of course." Narcissa's eyes softened. "My Mal and his cousins would attract your attention, all in their different ways. But the explanation is simple enough—if you would care to hear it from the beginning? Or would you rather ask questions, and have them answered in an order which makes sense to you?"

"Two questions, if you will be so kind, and then the events in order as they happened." Severus gathered his courage and looked directly into Narcissa's face. "Who is Henry Black—and who stands as his father?"

The slightest of smiles twitched at a corner of Narcissa's mouth and was gone. "Ever to the point, Severus," she said, gathering in one hand the skirts of the blue robes which matched her eyes and standing up. "Will you walk with me?"

1 September, 1991

Hogwarts Express

En route from King's Cross Station

Ron Weasley slammed the compartment door shut on his twin brothers' laughter and growled under his breath. "Bloody *gits*," he grumbled, starting down the corridor that ran the length of the carriage. "They *know* I hate spiders. I'll ride on the platform at the back before I'll go in there again..."

Judging by the fullness of the Hogwarts Express as he peered into each compartment he passed, Ron thought that might well be his only option. Moodily, he shoved open the sliding door leading from one carriage to the next and jumped the gap, catching the grab bar in time to save himself from a fall.

"I wonder if it's too late to go get a dishwashing job at the Leaky Cauldron or something," he muttered, shutting the door with a bang and glaring down this new corridor. "'It's your turn to start at Hogwarts, Ronald, and isn't it exciting—you'd be in the same class as Harry Potter, if he hadn't disappeared before he was even two years old!' Who cares about Harry bloody Potter? So he survived a Killing Curse from You-Know-Who and ended the war. Fantastic. He'd probably be as stuck-up as the kids from the perfect pureblood families by now, expecting everybody to bow down to him—"

"Beg your pardon."

"Huh?" said Ron intelligently, startled out of his under-the-breath ramblings. Another boy had poked his head out of a compartment at the far end of the carriage.

"I beg your pardon," repeated the other, stepping into the corridor. He was dark-haired, dark-complexioned, and bespectacled, a bit shorter than Ron, and the gray Hogwarts crest on the robes he was already wearing meant he hadn't yet been Sorted and was therefore also a first year. "Are you looking for a place to sit?"

"I—yes. Please." Ron shook his head, trying to regain his composure. "Everywhere else is full, except back with my brothers, and I've had eleven years' worth of *them*, thank you very much."

"That would be Fred and George, and possibly Percy?" The other boy grinned, a quick bright flash of teeth which lit his green eyes with humor, at Ron's goggle of astonishment. "I'm not reading

your mind, I swear, it's just that red hair and brothers mean you're a Weasley, and—"

"And you're making a hash of this, Henry," said a girl's voice from within the compartment. "Go sit down and let him come in already. It's Ron, isn't it? Ron Weasley?"

"That's me, but how—" Ron began as he followed Henry through the compartment door.

"My fault," said the last occupant of the compartment, another boy, slender and very fair, getting to his feet to offer his hand. "Malcolm Black, Mal to just about everybody. My cousin used to date your brother Charlie, or possibly she's still dating him. I don't know if they're even sure about it themselves."

"Oh, right!" Ron shook the offered hand, recalling to his mind a laughing, heart-shaped face topped by a tangle of bubblegum-pink hair. "Tonks, isn't she, the Auror apprentice? I *think* they're off again just now, but it could change any time."

"Couldn't it always." The girl, her brown curls imperfectly confined by a length of red ribbon, held out her hand in turn. "Jean Gray, pleased to meet you. And *my* cousin, Henry Black, and now you know everybody."

"They're cousins of mine, too, or at the very least connections," Mal explained as Henry finished shaking Ron's hand and took a seat next to Mal, leaving Ron to sit down beside Jean. "My mum or Jeanie's could probably trace it for you, I know *I* can't—"

"*Don't* call me Jeanie."

"Fine, fine, whatever." Mal rolled his eyes. "My mum or *Jean's* could trace it for you, if they were here, *and* if anybody cared, but we don't and they aren't, so they can't and they won't."

Henry sighed. "They do this a lot, you'll get used to it," he said to Ron. "In any case, we've all grown up together since we were about four, after Mal's father got killed in an accident."

"Tripped on a folded-over rug and bashed his brains out on the corner of the drawing room mantelpiece." Mal shrugged his shoulders. "I don't exactly miss him, he was a world-class prat by all accounts. Mum seems to have thought so too, judging by how fast she took her old name back, and changed mine to match. In any case, she didn't want to live in that big house all alone, and she thought I ought to have some company too, if she could manage it."

"So she went looking for any relations who had kids close to Mal's age, and turned up my family and Henry's." Jean smiled across at her cousin. "She invited us all to move into the Manor, and we said yes."

"And so..." Henry spread his hands. "Here we are today."

"Here we are," Ron repeated, feeling a little bubble of warmth start to spread through his chest. He had a strong suspicion that the grin currently occupying his face looked rather idiotic, but he couldn't bring himself to care. "What House d'you want to be in, then?"

"Not Slytherin," said Mal promptly. "And probably not Ravenclaw, though Jeanie—*Jean*," he corrected himself at a baleful glare from that young lady, "might fit in there, with all the reading she does. Memorized our textbooks yet? You've been through them often enough..."

"Better than not even cracking them open, like you've done!" Jean fired back. "All you care about is practicing your flying and scheming to get onto the Quidditch team, when you *know* you won't even be allowed a broomstick of your own at school for another year—"

"Tonks has told us loads about Hufflepuff," Henry broke in, sliding his voice deftly around Jean's. "How they take care of each other and such." He rested his fingers against his forehead, massaging idly under his fringe. "But my parents were Gryffindors, and I think my dad, especially, is hoping I end up one too. What about you, Ron?"

"Weasleys are always Gryffindors. Even Percy." Ron scowled at the thought of his perfect prefect brother. "If anybody ought to've been a Slytherin—but you'd know all about that, Tonks doesn't care for him one bit."

"No, she doesn't." Mal grinned suddenly. "Did she really tell him, if he was that hard up for pocket money—"

"He ought to pull the wand out of his arse and go sell it at Ollivanders?" Ron finished, enjoying Henry's snicker and Jean's shocked squeak. "At the top of her lungs, no less. Never saw Ginny blush that hard in my life."

"That's your sister, right? Younger sister?" Henry pulled a photograph from his pocket. "I've got one of those. Meghan, but we usually call her Pearl. She was eight in June."

"She's kind of cute," said Ron, watching the little girl in the picture spin on one foot, pausing every so often to throw a gap-toothed grin towards the photographer. Her skin was the same light brown as Henry's, but her eyes were a shimmering, silvery gray instead of her brother's green, and she wore her hair in tight braids, while his lay every which way on his head. "Does she like dancing?"

"Only as much as she likes breathing. Or throwing tantrums." Henry leaned back in his seat with a blissful sigh. "Three whole months we *don't* have to deal with the brat. Or with Dobby, or with *any* of our parents. It's almost too good to be true."

Jean sniffed. "I give it two weeks until he's homesick," she informed Mal and Ron. "Possibly less."

1 September
Hesperus Manor

Far away from the train carrying his children off to their first year of school, the dark-haired man who seldom thought of himself by any other name than Ryan Black these days sat in front of a battered typewriter in a room filled with sunlight, a clean white sheet of paper caught between the

rollers, awaiting his first word, his first sentence.

It had been so waiting for over an hour.

"They'll be fine," he muttered to himself, in the tones of a man desperately trying to convince an anxious corner of his own mind that what he said was true. "We've trained them well, we've taught them as much as we can, and the spells on Henry are rock-solid, they won't budge for anything less than the exact counterspell, which no one knows except the five of us..."

From outside the window, a woman's laughing voice rose up in song.

"The time has come, the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things,
"Of shoes and ships and sealing wax,
"Of cabbages and kings..."

A little girl's piping tones joined in the next lines, making Ryan smile to himself.

"And why the sea is boiling hot,
"And whether pigs have wings!"

"That's at least two decent things I've done in my life, even if everything else eventually comes back to bite me on the arse," he said aloud, pounding out the sentence on the keyboard before him as he spoke. "Bringing up the kids, especially my Pearl, and helping Cousin Cissy figure out she was more than just her husband's wife or her son's mother. Though John and the ladies had something to do with all of that as well, and the kids themselves have chipped in more than a little."

His smile widened into a grin as he imagined, as he had so many times, Lucius Malfoy's reaction should the Death Eater somehow have the chance to see what had become of his former home. Where rigidly regimented formal gardens had once been laid out in perfect lines and rows, white peacocks stalking back and forth with their rusty-gate cries, a miniature wilderness now held sway, tiny pocket plantings of herbs and vegetables interspersed with streamside trails and benches, berry brambles trained up obliging trees and wild birds of every imaginable color flitting hither and yon.

"And that's only the outside." Grinning still more widely as his fingers began to fly, crafting the tale of a dismayed ghost who'd been wandering for seven years only to discover the home he'd been seeking was changed out of all recognition, Ryan gave himself over to the joy of the story. "Once he got in, he might well think he took a wrong turn at Godric's Hollow, because the rooms are still shaped the same but that's the *only* thing we've left alone..."

On the wall, three framed photographs smiled down at him. Narcissa and Mal, fair and laughing, held pride of place in the center, with sandy-haired John Gray and his brunette wife and daughter talking together earnestly on one side of the mother and son. On the other, Ryan's own photographic image, pale as milk in a shot taken near his February birthday, held hands with that

of his wife Carrie, whose skin tone owed more to her ancestors' sun than to her own, holding much the same warm tint of brown as strong coffee. The boy and girl standing between them blended the two shades to *café au lait* perfection.

Photographs featuring these nine people, updated periodically to account for the growth of the children, had watched Ryan at his writing in this room since he had claimed it for his own, those same seven years ago.

25 October
Hesperus Manor

"In many ways, my life, the life I have now, began the night my husband died." Narcissa opened a side door and waved Severus through it, into one of the gardens he had noticed as he was approaching the house. "Does that surprise you?"

Severus considered his options for answering and went with truthful, yet guarded. "Not terribly so."

"Which is to say, you never cared much for Lucius, neither his outlook on life in general nor his attitude towards me in particular." Narcissa shut the door behind herself and raised an eyebrow at him over her shoulder. "I always had eyes, Severus, yes, and ears, too, even when I seldom used my voice. For the rest..." She sighed, the sound trailing into a chuckle at the end. "Your choice of reading material may be more apt than you yet understand. Thinking over this story from one end to the other sometimes leaves me feeling as though I have fallen down the rabbit hole myself, and I *lived* a great deal of it. But you had questions. About my son's companion Henry, and about my cousin Ryan, his father."

"Ryan." Severus frowned over the name, finding it half-familiar though not instantly able to identify the reason. "Ryan Black..."

It came to him in a flash. Minerva McGonagall had been reading a book, a novel, in the staffroom the week before, and he had happened to glance at the spine when she set it down to find her handkerchief. "The author Ryan Black? *Cry of the Plover*?"

"The same." Narcissa set out across the leaf-scattered lawn, moving obliquely towards a small grove of trees on its other side. Severus kept pace with her, though not without some effort. "An unexpected talent in him, to be sure, and one to which he came later than some, but a true passion to him now." Again she turned just enough to meet his eyes with her own, her feet never slowing or faltering for a second. "The only one stronger is protecting his children. *His* children, Severus, whoever or wherever they began."

"Does he kill for them, then?" Severus increased the length of his strides and moved in a few swift steps around Narcissa to block her path, bringing both of them to a halt almost in the shade of the trees. "Anyone he thinks might be a threat, or stand in the way of their ascent to power?"

"He does not." The denial held a hint of ice within its depths. "He never did. And as for power... into what House, pray tell, have our children been Sorted? Do they fall into your purview as Head of Slytherin, or is another responsible for them?"

"They are not Slytherins," Severus admitted. "But that hardly means they are blameless, as you know very well—"

"Better than you can dream." The ice in Narcissa's voice rose up to chill the blue of her eyes as well. "Did you come here hoping to protect a certain child, Severus, or were you seeking something else? Something more personal, perhaps? More satisfying?"

"Could you blame me for pursuing both goals," Severus parried, "when they dovetail so well?"

"When you work from mistaken information, and your own determination to see only the worst in those who once wronged you? I can and I do." Narcissa stormed past him, pausing at the edge of the grove to look back.

"Follow me," she said in tones of warning, "only if you are truly willing to listen."

whydoyouneedtoknow
FanficAuthors.net

The Raven and the Writing Desk

Chapter 2

1 September
Hogwarts Express

The lunch trolley arrived at the compartment door about one o'clock, causing a brief, intense round of wand-quill-parchment among the Manor three. Ron thought with a wince of the dried-out corned beef sandwiches in his pocket and watched with some envy as Mal, the winner (or loser) of the game, regarded the contents of the trolley.

"Why don't we just say four of everything, and we can all swap to our heart's content later," the blond boy said finally, and the plump witch in charge of the trolley beamed and started handing over Cauldron Cakes and Chocolate Frogs.

It took Ron a moment to realize the significance of the number, and by then the trolley was gone and Henry was helping to sort out the pile of sweets heaped on the empty seat between him and Mal. "You didn't have to—" he began.

"He wanted to, and you'll never win that argument, so don't even start." Henry tossed a box of Bertie Bott's across the compartment. Automatically Ron snagged it out of the air. "Hey, look at that! Keeper's hands, you've got. Ever think about going out for your House team, once we have Houses?"

"Sometimes. Fred and George play Beater for Gryffindor already." Ron ripped the side of the box open, since it was there, and shook out the usual colorful confusion into his palm. "Either of you play?"

"Chaser by preference, Seeker at need," Mal answered. "Not half bad either way, if I do say so myself. Nothing to his Seeking, though. Or his flying." He nodded towards Henry, his hands being occupied with the opening and restraining of his Chocolate Frog. "He gets on a broom and you'd swear it was part of him, not a separate thing at all."

"I like to fly." Henry tore open a Cauldron Cake and broke it in half. "It feels...right. Like it's what I was meant to do, or one of the things anyway." He grinned, elbowing Jean in the side. "Like this one likes to read."

Jean closed her book with a finger to mark her place, swatted her cousin on the back of the head with her free hand, and appropriated the half-Cake he'd placed back into its wrapper. "'This one' has a name," she informed him. "And ears."

"And a temper." Mal bit a leg off his Frog and flipped over his card. "Oh, would you look at that. It's The Boy Who Lived."

Henry groaned. "Don't they ever get tired of talking about him?" he asked, catching his own Frog

mid-jump with fingers only a shade or two lighter than what they held. "He was a *baby*, for Merlin's sake. He didn't have anything to do with whatever happened that night. I tell you who they ought to put on the Chocolate Frog cards, they ought to put his mum on there. Lily Potter. She was the one who did whatever was done, she's the reason he even became The Boy Who Lived in the first place—" He stopped, visibly restraining himself. "Sorry," he half-mumbled, and bit off his Frog's head. "It's just—it doesn't make any *sense*," he said thickly around his mouthful of chocolate. "And besides, he's probably dead now anyway, so who cares?"

"Do they have anything new on this card, Mal?" asked Jean, opening a bottle of spiced pumpkin juice to go with her Cauldron Cake. "Or just the same old everything?"

"New picture. What he'd look like today, or so they think." Mal held the card up to display its front side, where a sketch of a pale-skinned boy about their own age slicked back his sleek dark hair to reveal the lightning-bolt scar down the center of his forehead. His green eyes were bold, challenging, confident, reminding Ron unpleasantly of his thoughts as he'd walked down the corridor earlier. He would never have dared to make friends with Harry Potter as he had with Henry, or with Mal and Jean, he thought.

"Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived, is widely credited with ending the war against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the age of fifteen months," Mal read from the backside of the card. "Sadly, before his second birthday, young Harry went missing from the home of his only living relations, his mother's Muggle sister and her husband. As noted criminal Sirius Black, one of the aforementioned Dark wizard's most fanatic supporters, had broken free from prison a short time before, Harry's fate was likely a grim one. No trace of the boy hero has ever been found."

"And to match that..." Henry held up a card of his own, on which the photographic image of a dark-bearded man threw back his head and laughed, madness shining in his silver-gray eyes. "Sirius Black, one of the last scions of a noted wizarding House, murdered thirteen people with a single curse shortly after the end of the war against his master, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Six months afterwards, Black escaped from Azkaban prison by means unknown, a feat never duplicated before or since, and is widely assumed to have kidnapped Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived. As of this printing, some nine years later, Black remains at large."

"Relation of yours?" Ron asked Henry, half-joking. To his surprise, his friend flinched and looked away. "Wait, I didn't mean it like that—everyone magical's related to everyone else one way or another, I was just looking at the surnames—"

"We know," said Jean, setting aside her pumpkin juice. "Though Mal's the closest of any of us. His mum, our Aunt Cissy, she's very close to the direct line. Sirius Black's first cousin."

"Which is how the Aurors know he's not dead yet." Mal scowled down at the remains of his Frog. "If he'd died, the Blacks' house-elf would have known it, and come to her for new orders, since she's the closest member of the family still alive and not convicted of any crimes or formally disinherited, like they did to Aunt Andy—that's Andromeda, Tonks's mum," he added in a quick aside. "But we haven't had any unexpected bat-eared little visitors, so Sirius Black's still alive out there somewhere."

"I hope he's hidden well, wherever he is." Henry was gazing out the window, his voice quiet but intense. "Dug in so deep they'll never find him. Whatever he'd done, whatever he was, it doesn't begin to justify what they want to do to him."

Considering the stories he'd heard of Azkaban, Ron had to admit Henry had a point. "But why do they think he's connected with Harry Potter?" he asked, shaking his box of Bertie Bott's in Jean's direction, then pouring some into the hand she held out towards him. "I've never been able to work that out. Even if Sirius Black did work for You-Know-Who, why does everyone think he has to have been the one who took Potter?"

"Because there was history between them." Jean sorted through her palmful of beans and selected one red and one pale gold, popping both into her mouth. "Oh good, tomato and spaghetti." She sucked the beans thoughtfully for a moment. "And I don't mean between them, exactly, but between Sirius Black and James Potter, Harry's father."

"Our parents were at Hogwarts around the same time they were," said Henry, still looking out the window. "All except Jean's mum. She learned magic at home."

"But that's not important now." Jean waved a hand, dismissing such nonsense. "What's important is that James Potter and Sirius Black were friends. *Best* friends. They went everywhere together, Black was Potter's best man when he got married, Potter probably would have returned the favor if Black had ever stopped fighting with his girlfriend for longer than it took them to play Beater together for Gryffindor..."

"And it wasn't just them, either," Mal put in. "There were two other boys who stuck to them like Spellotape. Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew. Pettigrew's dead now—he was one of the people Black knocked off with that curse, the rest were Muggles—but no one knows what happened to Lupin. He hasn't been seen since pretty close to the time Black and Harry Potter disappeared."

"Weird." Ron shook his head. "Do they think Black killed him? Maybe so there wouldn't be anybody around who knew him too well, who could tell the Aurors where to look for him?"

"Maybe." Henry turned away from the window at last and snagged a Peppermint Toad from the rapidly diminishing pile of sweets. "Or maybe he took off on his own. Trying to find his former friend, bring him to justice, and save his real friends' little boy—not that there'd be much left to save at this point. Harry Potter's probably even worse than most of the pureblood-purity sorts by now. Cross between a stuck-up little ponce and a stone killer, trained to worship Voldemort—"

Ron flinched back. "You—you said—"

"I said a name," said Henry levelly. "Probably not his real name, either, I can't see anybody's mum deciding to slap that on her darling baby, no matter how round the twist she may have been. I won't say I wouldn't be afraid of *him*, if he were still up and about and killing people—I rather like being alive—but being afraid of his *name* is stupid at best and actively counterproductive at worst."

"You sound just like Uncle John when you do that," Mal remarked approvingly. "That's Jean's dad, John Gray," he added towards Ron. "He's a great sport, taught us all a few basic spells as soon as we got our wands over the summer. Anyone taught you any yet?"

"George said he had, but I bet he was lying." Ron seized on the new topic with gratitude. "Spells aren't meant to rhyme, are they? I know Muggles sometimes think they do, but that's just silly..."

1 September
Hesperus Manor

John Gray, who like his closest friend had spent the past seven years training himself to respond to that name and that name only, slipped soundlessly into the spacious kitchen, trading smiles along the way with the clothed house-elf directing the dishes in the sink to do themselves. A glance at the door through which John had come gave Dobby the hint, and he took his leave, bobbing a bow to John before he vanished.

"Looking for me?" asked the other occupant of the kitchen, a woman who was just setting down a baking sheet filled with golden brown scones, and who turned to face John with a warm smile and an outstretched hand.

"Always." John caught the hand in his and drew its owner to his side for a kiss, weaving the fingers of his other hand into a wild cascade of brunette curls. "Who *isn't* looking for a lady of talent and beauty, not to mention wit and charm?"

"Flatterer." His wife sighed once, leaning her head against his shoulder. "Have we done the right thing, my love?" she asked quietly. "Sending our little ones off to school with so many secrets still to keep, and staying here, almost in public, where our enemies can see us at any time they choose?"

"If I knew that, I'd be a better Seer than you are, instead of a freelancer for Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures." John twined his arm around his lady's waist. "No dreams recently, I take it?"

"None at all. Unless..." Slender lips thinned further in concentration. "Hmm. Come to think, I may have had one the other night. But it was a quiet one, subtle. That's not usually how they come to me."

"No, usually they cause you to blurt out bizarre statements to strangers in parks. Though if that phase truly is over with, I'd be just as happy." John looked down with a quizzical arch of eyebrow, enjoying the flecks of his own eyes' blue speckled throughout his lady's brown, knowing she saw the same in reverse when she looked at him. "Unless there's someone else you married last night and you're keeping him hidden from me?"

"And just how would I be able to do that?" His lady laughed, flicking his nose lightly. "Even assuming I'd do that sort of thing, which I wouldn't, you'd smell out and run off any such usurper

long before he could threaten your rights to your mate."

"So I would." Bending slightly, John slid his free hand under a slim pair of knees and lifted, his wife's arm coming easily around his shoulders to balance herself as he cradled her against him. "And so would you, should I ever seem to be sniffing about some other lady."

"As if you would." She lifted herself in his hold and nipped once at the lobe of his ear. "I know your kind. You mate for life."

"Only if we're lucky enough to find the right one." John looked down at his armful, turning his head first this way, then that. "You know, I do believe you're it. How lucky for me."

"How lucky for *me*, you mean—" The lady's words broke off in a laughing shriek as John turned briskly in place and the kitchen winked out of existence around them, to be replaced by the bedroom they'd taken as their own some seven years prior.

"We really need to talk about your dream, Danger of my life," he murmured, laying her on the broad, soft bed with its embroidered crimson duvet. "But..." With a grin, he climbed up beside her. "Later will do."

"Mmmm," his wife agreed, before they no longer had any need for words.

25 October
Hesperus Manor

Severus stood in the warmth of the autumn sunlight and considered his options. He could still turn around and walk away, if he so chose. Or he could move forward, claim without words his willingness to listen, and hear Narcissa's reasoning for harboring her murderous cousin, the child he had stolen, and a crew of flunkies and fools gathered up along the way. Such a tale ought to be fascinating as a work of fiction, if nothing else.

"And what else should it be, given the man who stands at its center, and the new path he has chosen to pursue in his life?" Severus surprised himself with a genuine laugh. "Besides, I have enough wondering 'what if' in my life already. Forward it shall be."

Another laugh, or more accurately three of them, stopped him before he had moved more than a yard in the direction of his choice.

From the grove of trees into which Narcissa had disappeared came three other witches, two of about Narcissa's age or Severus's own, the other a child too young for Hogwarts, perhaps seven or eight. One of the adult witches was the slender brunette who had opened the door when Severus had arrived—Danger, he recalled after a moment, Narcissa had called her Danger. The other, dark-skinned, broad-shouldered, and beautiful, woke a faint chord of memory at the back of his mind, as did the little girl trotting beside her, by her face and her dancing movements Henry Black's sister, as the woman was his mother.

"Or so-called mother, at any rate," Severus muttered under his breath, before putting on a neutral expression to greet the three. He might not have struck a bell, but it seemed he was nevertheless bound to bide the danger.

"Professor," said the woman of that name, stopping at a conversational distance and nodding to him. "Will you forgive me if we don't stand on ceremony? The children have written so much about you, I feel like we know you already."

"Please." Severus inclined his head in return. "You must be Jean Gray's mother."

"I am, and my name is Gertrude, but everyone calls me Danger." She shook her head ruefully, but her eyes were dancing. "One foolish moment in my childhood, and a lifetime to remember it by. And this is Henry's mother, Carrie Black, and her daughter Meghan."

"Mrs. Black." Severus bowed slightly, and Carrie returned the favor as Meghan curtsied gracefully. "Your son is...quite remarkable."

"We've always found him so," responded Carrie, her voice clear and pure, as silver as her daughter's watchful eyes.

Severus managed at the last second to stifle a gasp as the indefinable threads of memory wove themselves into a cable. A dark woman who had once had some claim to the ignoble and most youthful scion of the House of Black, if only by dint of fighting with him more frequently and more bitterly than any other witch in the school would have dared—the first female Beater Hogwarts had seen in ten years, also possessed of a marvelous singing voice and the hands of a Healer—one of the few students, along with Lily Evans herself, who had ever been able to challenge Severus in the practical areas of the discipline of Potions—

"I once knew a witch named Aletha Freeman," he said as casually as he could manage. "Henry reminds me of her on occasion." He glanced down at the child Meghan, whose eyes—*Sirius Black's eyes*, he realized at last, with an upwelling of revulsion—had widened in shock and distress. "As does your daughter, Mrs. Black. Rather more strongly than her brother."

"Our little Pearl does take after me," Carrie acknowledged, laying a hand of comfort and caution on her daughter's shoulder. "Henry resembles his father. But you knew that."

"I did." Severus battled to remain calm, to keep his voice level, to stop himself from Apparating off these grounds now, this very instant, for surely, surely he had learned enough to bring the Ministry here in droves—

But if he were to do so, with equal surety Hesperus Manor would be deserted before he could ever return, and the three children of theirs currently entrusted to Hogwarts would vanish as well, before they could be freed from whatever spells or subtle brainwashing had warped them into believing these adults devoted to their welfare. Indeed, he might already have tipped his hand too far, telling Sirius Black's on-again-off-again girlfriend that he recognized her within the shell of devoted wife and mother she had built about herself. If he were to win this battle, he would have

to fight with more subtlety.

All this while, little Meghan's silver eyes had been fixed upon Severus. Now she spoke up, those eyes narrowing in childish petulance. "I don't like you," she announced, and crossed her arms over her chest with a distinct hint of pout in her expression.

"Meghan," reproved Danger, giving the girl a stern look. "We are not rude to guests."

"But I *don't* like him." Meghan's pout intensified. "He's thinking bad things about us. About all of us, but my Dadfoot especially."

Severus thought he ought to have received a medal for not reacting outwardly to this casual child's nickname, which sealed his personal certainty as to whom he would find somewhere within this manor house or its grounds, actual father to this girl and acting as such to a boy—a *boy on whom he should never have dared to lay his filthy, bloody hands...*

"Meghan Lily Black." Carrie's voice was cool and firm, and her daughter wilted at the sound of it. "You cannot see inside Professor Snape's mind, so you cannot know what he is thinking. You will apologize for your rudeness."

"But—"

"Now ." The single word left no room around it for the possibility of being disobeyed.

Grudgingly, Meghan looked back at Severus. "I'm sorry I was rude, Professor," she said in the sing-song of a dutiful child, then glanced up at her mother once more. "Please may I be excused to go inside?" she asked in a rush.

"Yes. Go." Carrie kissed her fingertips and blew the kiss after her daughter's running form, smiling at Danger's indulgent chuckle. "It is possible," she said thoughtfully, "that having a mother, a godmother, and an honorary aunt all petting that child at once has spoiled her just the tiniest bit."

"And her father and godfather have nothing to do with it?" Danger tossed back lightly. "She's every bit the gem we call her, but she'll need to learn a few more manners—fit into her setting better, as it were—before we can send her off to school without the distinct possibility that she'll bite someone who insults the wrong person in front of her, or simply irritates her beyond what she thinks she can bear..."

The women's voices blurred in Severus's ears, as three words repeated themselves inside his mind.

Meghan Lily Black.

Without consent from his mind, his feet began to move, carrying him forward into the grove of trees.

Narcissa sat on a cunningly carved bench by the side of a shallow pond, tossing bits of bread to

lazily swimming fish with scales of brilliant orange, her pale-gold hair dappled with light and shadow cast by the intersecting branches above her. "Not quite what you were expecting, are we, my friend?" she asked, rising and brushing off her hands as Severus approached.

"How could he—" Severus choked on the words. "How *dare* he—"

"Because he never did what he has been accused of doing." Narcissa's words fell calm and certain into the silence between them. "Because he grieves for Lily Evans almost as deeply as I know you do, and for some of the same reasons. But he chooses to honor her life and death, and that of her husband, by continuing the work for which they died. Come, Severus." She patted the back of the bench beside her. "Come and sit by me. I can explain everything." One pale eyebrow rose into a perfect arch. "Or will you run back to your dungeon instead, and hide there like a coward? Or flap off to the Ministry and croak your lies to them like a carrion crow?"

Stung, Severus crossed the small clearing in three strides to stand beside Narcissa. "Tell your tale," he said shortly, seating himself the instant after she did. "I am listening."

1 September
Hogwarts Express

"Do you have any pets, Ron?" Jean asked as the train chugged steadily through a forest with mountains visible in the distance, the sky a blue so dark it was nearly purple. "We all have Hedwig to share—" She nodded upwards at the snowy owl drowsing in her cage. "—and my mum said if I got good marks this year, maybe next year I could have a cat."

"Just Scabbers." Ron reached into the interior pocket where the named creature was drowsing. "He's Percy's old rat and he's utterly useless, never wakes up unless he's eating—ow!" Shocked, he pulled his hand out and stared at his fingertip, where a bright bead of blood was welling up. "He bit me!"

"Guess he doesn't want to come out, then," said Mal as Jean pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and appropriated Ron's hand. "I can't really blame him. Owls are predators, after all."

"What's he look like?" Henry's voice was quiet, but intense, bringing Ron's eyes to him. "Your rat. Is he big, small, black, white?"

"He's gray, just gray all over, and not really big or small as rats go, I don't think." Ron cupped his free hand, indicating the size he meant. "Naked tail, twitchy nose, a little bit beat up...he's not that interesting, really."

"Beat up how?" Jean asked, giving the handkerchief a bit too vigorous a tug, making Ron hiss in pain. "Sorry. But does it show most on his ears, his tail, his paws..."

"Paws, I think." Ron tried to call up the image of his sulking pet. "Yeah, definitely paws. He's missing a toe on one of the front ones."

"And he was Percy's before he was yours?" Mal hadn't moved from his lounge across what was supposedly two seats, but his words sounded as brittle as the bit of Peppermint Toad he was sucking. "How long had Percy had him?"

"Longer than I can remember, I think he was about four or five when he found a rat in the garden and convinced Mum to let him keep it—why do you all care so much, anyway?" Ron demanded, baffled by this sudden spate of interest in his pet. "He's just a rat, there's nothing special about him."

Henry seemed to be about to fire back angrily, but changed his mind before the words could emerge. "You know what?" he said instead, shaking his head. "You're right. Stupid of us, to be worried about a rat. We were just curious." His grin made a return appearance. "And I promise we won't let Hedwig eat him."

"Thanks." Ron didn't miss the glances exchanged among the Manor three, but pushed out of his mind what they might mean. He had friends, real friends, for the first time in his life, and if they seemed a little weird on certain topics, well, everyone was entitled to a few quirks. He doubted Henry would ever lie awake in his Hogwarts bed listening for the moaning of the ghoul in the attic above him, or that Jean or Mal were practiced in the art of distracting their mothers from the hovering turquoise Ford Anglia above the roof of the back shed.

These stories, among others, occupied the rest of the train ride, to the point where the announcement of arrival in ten minutes came as a genuine surprise to everyone. Henry accompanied Ron back up the train to get his robes from his trunk, catching the twins' compartment at a fortunate moment, as everyone seemed to have felt the need to visit the lavatory simultaneously. Ron wondered why as he fastened the front of his robes with shaking fingers, one of which was still quite sore, though it had stopped bleeding. Surely his brothers had nothing to worry about—*they* didn't have to wrestle a troll, or make a song up on the spot, or whatever else was really involved in Sorting...

"Deep breaths," Henry said quietly as they returned to their own compartment. "You don't want to pass out before we even get there."

"I might." Ron managed a small smile. "That way I'd go straight up to the hospital wing, and I could get Sorted later on, all by myself, without everyone staring."

"It happens in front of everyone, then?" Henry shook his head before Ron could answer. "Never mind, of course it does, what am I thinking of? Opening Feast. My dad told me it always happens at the Opening Feast."

"Do me a favor?" Ron swallowed hard. "Don't talk about food."

They finished their walk in silence. Mal had his own robes on by now and was sweeping the rubbish from their extended lunch into a bag, while Jean was combing knots out of her hair with her fingers. She greeted them with a tense nod, her face set and lined.

"You've got this, Jeanie," said Henry, and Ron braced himself for the inevitable correction, but instead his friend only nodded once more and returned to the attention she was giving her brown curls. Ron wondered why she was bothering, since she'd looked just fine to him beforehand, but didn't bother to bring it up. Something told him she wouldn't take it well.

At last the train puffed up to its platform and stopped, and the foursome trooped out to the corridor to find a door, Ron with his hand protectively over Scabbers's pocket. He didn't want to take any chances with so many cats and owls around.

The stories his brothers told of Hagrid the enormously large gamekeeper, which Ron had dismissed as the twins' typical overblown silliness, took on a new light of seriousness as the impossibly tall, broad figure at one end of the platform bellowed out "Firs' years! Firs' years over here!" Ron started to shuffle in that direction, only to discover Henry and Mal were ahead of him, sliding between the streams of older students by some arcane art he'd never seen before. He stuck close to Henry's heels, Jean slipping in behind Mal, as they cut effortlessly across traffic and fetched up beside Hagrid.

"How did they do that?" he muttered to Jean under cover of Hagrid's next bellow.

"It's just a trick." Jean shrugged one shoulder. "My dad taught them how. He says it's all to do with how you think of yourself, and then how you make other people think of you. You can either make them think you're too important to get in your way, or you can make them think you're so *un* important that they shouldn't bother with you. Either way works."

Ron tried to parse this, but gave it up after a few moments, during which the remainder of the first years arrived at Hagrid's side. After a brief headcount, the gamekeeper pulled a large lantern from his pocket, lit it with a taper from one of the platform torches, and hung it on the end of a stick. "Foller me, then," he said gruffly, and led the way down a steep, twisting dirt path.

Halfway down, Jean's foot slipped, and she fell with a little cry of alarm. Hagrid was back by her side far more quickly than Ron would have believed such a big person could move, shoving his lantern into Ron's hands (Ron nearly dropped it but managed to hang on) and lifting Jean gently to her feet. "All righ' there, sweetheart?" he asked, brushing her off.

"I...I think so." Jean leaned heavily against Hagrid's shoulder, as if to find her balance again. Her lips continued to move for a moment after she'd finished speaking, but probably she was just catching her breath. And if Henry and Mal were watching her closely, well, who wouldn't watch their cousin after she'd fallen, to be sure she wasn't hurt? That was all that was happening, Ron told himself firmly. That was *it* .

He wished himself believed him.

Still, nothing else strange happened all the rest of the way down the path, around the corner from which they caught sight of Hogwarts castle (which was just as grand as he had always thought it would be, and filled him with equal parts exhilaration and dread), and onto the beach where a flotilla of small boats awaited. Henry steadied one while Mal helped Jean aboard, then stepped

into the seat beside her. Ron took the one across from her and studied her briefly. "You're all right now?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm fine." Jean dipped her fingers in the water and watched the drops fall back into the lake, her eyes sparkling in the light of the lantern which hung from the boat's small mast. "Isn't this exciting?"

Ron could have thought of a few other words for it, but held his peace.

"FORWARD!" bellowed Hagrid from his own boat, and they were off.

whydoyouneedtoknow
FanficAuthors.net

The Raven and the Writing Desk

Chapter 3

1 September
Hesperus Manor

Meghan lay on her stomach behind one of the chairs in the tan and blue receiving room, heels in the air, reading aloud to herself for a last few precious minutes before bedtime should be decreed. "Did you say pig, or fig?" she asked in a purring tone, then dropped into her own ordinary voice for the answer. "I said pig, and I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy..."

About to go on, she looked up at a knock on the front door. "I'll get it!" she called out, and leapt to her feet, brushing herself off and checking her appearance in the breastplate of one of the suits of armor as she trotted into the hallway.

"Welcome to Hesperus Manor," she began as she opened the door, then truly looked at the wizard standing on its other side. "Professor Dumbledore!"

"Hello, Meghan—nothing is wrong," the Headmaster forestalled her imminent question, smiling at her in a way she'd noticed few adults could manage, a way that said she and her opinions mattered. "In fact, something may be very right. But I should tell it to your whole family, if I may come in?"

"Oh, yes, of course! I'm so sorry." Meghan stepped quickly back to let Dumbledore enter the house. "Mama and Dadfoot were upstairs together, Uncle John was in the library, Auntie Danger's in the kitchen—I don't know where Aunt Cissy is, but I'm sure Dobby can find her—"

A very few minutes later, the adults of Hesperus Manor had gathered in the same room where Meghan had been reading earlier, a few bits of dirt still under Narcissa's fingernails and a streak of some dark, fruity-smelling liquid across Danger's sleeve. Meghan sat on the floor beside her parents, listening with all her might.

"Your daughter Jean contrived to get a message to me tonight, by way of telling Hagrid that she needed to speak with Minerva," Dumbledore began, smiling at John and Danger. "I should, incidentally, add that your children have all been Sorted into Gryffindor. Not without some hesitation on the part of the Hat, and I have no doubt lively discussions were going on—but that is neither here nor there. The message, as delivered by those third parties, was that your children's newest friend, Arthur Weasley's youngest son Ronald, has as his pet a gray rat with a missing front toe."

Meghan felt her father go very still, heard her mother's soft inhalation.

"The only actions I have yet taken," Dumbledore went on, "were to strengthen the Anti-Apparition wards around the castle, and lay further wards to prevent anything leaving our grounds without

permission, whether by Floo, broomstick, or simply walking past the boundaries. And I did this because—" He raised his voice only a little, but it was enough to stop Meghan's Dadfoot, who had started to lunge up out of his seat. "Because we are no longer in a state of open war, and evidence will be demanded before any charges can be laid. And at the moment, the only crime for which we would have evidence is the falsifying of a death."

"And even that could be explained away." John's tone was seemingly calm, but Meghan knew her godfather. His breathing was a little rapid, his knuckles white where his fingers were curled around the armrest. "He was, after all, facing the fearsome Sirius Black. It's cowardly, but not criminal, to have changed forms and run away to hide before that terrible curse could hit him."

"How, then, can he be brought to justice?" asked Narcissa from her wingback chair, plying an orange stick on her fingernails. "Since I doubt you would have come here only to tell us the situation is hopeless. What can we do?"

Glancing around the room, Meghan saw this same question reflected on the other adult faces around her. All but one. Danger was sitting stiffly upright, her eyes fixed on Dumbledore. "We've already done it, haven't we?" she asked softly. "We've sent the children away. Sent them to Hogwarts. We can't protect them there, especially not with him living practically on top of them—sleeping in the same dormitory, for heaven's sake! It won't last. It can't last. As soon as our scent on them fades, as soon as he gets enough of his human mind back to think past the fear, he's going to try for one of them, isn't he? One or all of them, to buy his life from his Master, remit himself the pains he won when he ran away..."

"You're mad," Meghan's mother objected, but Meghan could sense the tension running through her, the fear that her own words might be the lies and Danger's the truth. "How would he ever get them out of the school, let alone all the way to wherever his Master's holed up these past ten years? How would he even *know* that?"

"Unless he doesn't have to." Her Dadfoot's voice was hoarse, the rage and disgust in it clearly audible. "The Dark Snarker knows this is the year Harry Potter ought to be starting at Hogwarts. Pretty fair bet he'd try and get into the castle somehow, if only to see if Harry showed up, wouldn't you think? And if any of the rumors are true? Because His Evil Lordliness may know I never worked for him, but what if somebody who *did* work for him and *didn't* know that ran across us? They'd probably decide, screw it, Black's turned his coat again, kill me, snatch The Boy Who Lived, and raise him Dark anyway!"

"A certain Death Eater tried a variant on that very ploy, some seven years ago," Narcissa pointed out coolly. "And your children proved most effective at defending themselves."

A wave of snickers ran around the room.

"To add to that," said Dumbledore when everyone had calmed down some, "a most important item is currently being safeguarded at Hogwarts. Nothing less than Nicolas Flamel's Philosopher's Stone."

Six breaths sucked in simultaneously.

"Now I *know* you're mad," said Meghan's mother sharply. "What are you *thinking*, putting everything he could ever want into a single place like that? With the Elixir of Life and unlimited gold at his fingertips, and the one the prophecy named as his equal no more than a student—a very *young* student, barely beginning in magic, and occasionally stupidly brave despite all we could do, especially if his friends or family are threatened—you *are* crazy!"

"Crazy like a fox, maybe." Danger, though still stiff, had begun to smile. "Think about it, Carrie. No, I mean that—" This a bit more sternly, as Meghan's mother tried to speak again. "*Think* about it. This is *Hogwarts* we're talking about. A place of ancient and very strong magic, and all of it dedicated to goodness. To growth and life. To the education of children, leading them out of ignorance and into wisdom. Factor all of that into the equation—and don't let's forget, this is Albus Dumbledore we're speaking to, who has known these particular children since they were babies and would far prefer taking a spell on his own body to allowing them to get hurt—and *now* what do you see?"

"A trap." Narcissa grinned briefly, and licked her lips as though she were a hunting cat in anticipation of a fine chase. "All of this is designed to trap him. To bring him to a lure he cannot resist, and there capture and finally, fully destroy him. Yes?"

"Yes." Dumbledore smiled at Meghan. "Though it would not have been possible if your Pearl had not been willing to help me in my little quests throughout the years."

Meghan smiled back, leaning comfortably against her mother's legs. "Because when I was just a baby and could barely walk, I pointed and screamed when Dadfoot picked up a book he found in the secret compartment under the drawing room floor," she said, knowing this story well from the family's tradition of turning their most exciting or harrowing moments into tales to be retold. "And he put it down and firecalled you right away, and you came and took the book, and asked if I could sometimes go with you to see if other things frightened me that way. Once I was old enough to understand what was going on, of course."

"And so you have, now that you are." John frowned. "I've always meant to ask. What was that mysterious book, anyway?"

"A diary." Dumbledore chose his words with care. "One into which had been magically bound a... memory of sorts. A bit of the personality, let us say, of the young man who originally owned the diary. If the diary were again used for its proper purpose, to record the secret wishes of the heart, that young man could and would use those wishes against the one who now held his diary, to make the diary into an obsession never to be set aside, to twist that person's thoughts into evil paths, and eventually to gain entry to that person's mind and take their body as his own."

"I've heard of books you can't put down, but this is ridiculous," quipped Dadfoot, sending another wave of chuckles around the room. "What else have you seen that looks like that, Pearl? If she's allowed to tell us, of course," he added hastily in Dumbledore's direction.

"A ring with a big, flat stone that we had to dig up out of the ground," Meghan said when Dumbledore had nodded his assent. "A great huge golden locket from a dusty cabinet..." Carefully, she censored the bits about the elderly, foul-mouthed house-elf who had nonetheless obeyed her snapped order to *shut up already!* "This manky old tiara I had to find inside the room at Hogwarts where the house-elves put everything that gets broken, and a golden cup with two handles that was...somewhere else." Even to her own parents, she didn't think she should admit that she and the Hogwarts Headmaster had pulled off a successful burglary of a Gringotts vault.

"So my fictional choices had a certain validity, after all," said Narcissa thoughtfully. "How amusing..."

25 October
Hesperus Manor

"I know that you sometimes read for pleasure," Narcissa began, crumbling a bit of the bread she had been throwing to the fish ever more finely between her slender fingers. "Has a series called the Books of Broken Faith appealed to you at all? It *is* related," she added with a sidelong glance, quelling Severus's protest before it could begin. "If you have read any of them, most especially the first, you may already understand more than you know."

"I have read them," Severus admitted after a moment of internal war. "Read and enjoyed. The tales are well-told, the themes universal. Love and bitterness, justice and vengeance, betrayal and forgiveness. But the author's name is not one I know—Rosilla Brightstar—not unless you wish to tell me that your cousin writes also under a female pen name..."

"Would that not be funny?" Narcissa laughed lightly. "But no, spare Ryan's blushes. Broken Faith is not his work." She dusted breadcrumbs from her hands and turned to face Severus. "It is mine."

"Yours?" Severus allowed a bit of his surprise and awe to show. The series featuring the determined princess Cecily del Pianto, with her quest to cleanse her name from unfounded charges of murder, regain her rank and free her rightful principality from its tyrannical usurper, and find the missing daughter for whom her heart longed, had captivated him from its first few pages. "Broken Faith—from the name of Malfoy, perhaps? Given that Cecily is betrayed originally by her husband..."

"Yes. Precisely." Narcissa's eyes never left his face. "Tell me what you remember of that."

"Only that it was one of the more diabolical plans I have seen in fiction. Or in reality, come to that." Severus allowed himself to sink into the memory of a book so engrossing that he could lose himself in the fictional world it brought to life, forgetting his own troubles in favor of lovely Cecily's. "He was tired of the rule of law on which she insisted, and wanted to rule the land himself, by whim. Not to mention that he felt she had betrayed him by bearing him only a daughter. So he hinted that he would like a surprise party for his birthday, and used her wand, which he stole, to lay traps within the house where he knew she would hold that party. And as their friends arrived, he goaded her into an argument, until at last he triggered what he had laid."

"Laying waste to the house, and killing a round dozen of their friends. Thirteen, counting her husband himself, for no one doubted he had also been killed in the explosions, given the bloodied robes they found near Cecily." Narcissa nodded. "When in fact he had cut his hand to provide the blood, dropped his robes to the floor, and swiftly Apparated away from there."

"Leaving his wife to take the blame for his crimes, and vanishing into the new life he had prepared for himself, that of her cousin and heir who would put up a pretense of reluctance to take her throne and rule her land." Severus scowled, his fury and horror at the fate of the fictional heroine redoubled now that he sat beside her living counterpart. "If Lucius were not already dead..."

Narcissa raised a hand. "Not so fast, my friend," she chided. "Look at the circumstances again. Two who ought to trust one another, instead exchanging words of anger and hatred. Twelve innocent bystanders caught in the eruption of that anger and hatred. A thirteenth, one of the pair who had so fought, apparently also immolated by that blast, and the other of the pair the only living soul remaining there." She smiled slowly. "Does it remind you of anything else?"

Severus almost opened his mouth to say no. Then the topic they had seemingly abandoned some moments before blazed up within his mind, casting a fierce new light upon the numbers Narcissa had named. Two and twelve, become thirteen and one—but one of the thirteen was *not* dead, was indeed the instigator of all, and the one left standing was innocent of any crime—

"No," he said, as he had intended, but the word was a denial of something else entirely. "No—how can it be—"

"Peter Pettigrew was an Animagus," Narcissa interjected lightly, picking up another bit of bread and tossing it into the pond. A fish rose to snap it out of the water almost before it had landed. "His form that of a gray rat. Easy to overlook, especially in such chaos as a spell of mass destruction would cause. And it was Peter Pettigrew, not Sirius Black, who Kept the Secret of the Potters' home in Godric's Hollow. Or rather, who did not Keep it. He convinced them that no one would ever suspect the change, and that it would make them safer." A soft, sad laugh. "On one point he was right—even the fourth of their merry band found it hard to credit that such a change had been made—but on the other he was foully and deliberately wrong."

"Deliberately." Severus passed a hand across his left forearm, feeling as always the slight pull of the quiescent Dark Mark where it lay beneath his skin. "So, then, Pettigrew was my counterpart. The Dark Lord's spy within the Order's ranks. The one Dumbledore could never find. And Black faced him on that street, not as an unmasked traitor in a final spree of killing before his punishment..." The words left bitter traces on his tongue, but he could sense their truth for all of that. "But as a faithful friend seeking what justice he could for a cruel betrayal."

"Correct on all counts." Narcissa scattered a handful of crumbs, keeping her eyes fixed on the patterns the fish made as they darted about. "Hardly anything you wanted to hear, I imagine."

"Your mastery of understatement astounds me," said Severus dryly, and heard Narcissa's soft laugh in answer. "Not what I wanted on my own account, no...but for what else it means, I cannot hate it."

"Because it means the safety of a child for whom you have feared for far too long." Narcissa turned once more to face him, humor sparking momentarily in her eyes and the curve of her lips before it was replaced by a quiet purpose. "Are your questions answered to your satisfaction, then? The identity of Henry Black, and of his father Ryan, and how it can all be true?"

"They are, in the main." Firmly, Severus shoved aside the simmering hatred of his school days, reminding himself that the most important things had now been established. The son for whom Lily Evans had died still lived, and had not been raised to call his mother's murderer by the title of Master. He could not allow that feat to be overshadowed by his loathing, however justified, for the man who had accomplished it.

"A clever way to set it up, taking a wife and adding another child to the family," he mused aloud. "Anyone who knew only the common story of Harry Potter and Sirius Black would look for a man alone, with a single child, a son or nephew, of eleven years' age. A man happily married, with both a son and a daughter, would be eliminated almost automatically..." He paused, other faces making their way into his mental eye. "But who is Jean Gray, then? And her parents, her father and mother? How does Danger enter into all of this?"

"Danger began 'all of this', long before I was ever involved." Narcissa shaped a sphere between them with her hands, as though she were outlining a crystal ball. "Do you recall Cecily's guide from the second book, the young woman who visits her in dreams?"

"I do." Severus allowed his thoughts to wander back in time, to the words on another set of pages. "Kyla, I believe you called her, and posited that she had been born with latent magic, which did not manifest in the usual fashion but lay dormant within her until it was awakened by a shock. The death of a lover, in fiction..."

"In reality, the deaths of her parents, at the hands of my husband and his usual cohorts," Narcissa interjected. "Leaving her not only burdened by magic-born true dreams, but the sole guardian of her young sister, a Muggleborn witch of uncommon power. But I beg your pardon, please continue."

"True dreams." Severus contemplated this. "So I would wager that in reality, as in the story, Kyla was the bearer of the truth to those who most needed to hear it? Though obviously Danger does not lie in a magical sleep, able to exist only within her dreams, if she answers your door on a regular basis."

"Obviously not." Narcissa laughed. "But you are quite right. Kyla explained to Cecily what had truly happened—not that Cecily was unaware beforehand that she had been tricked and shabbily used, but Kyla was able to give her the mechanisms and timeline she had been lacking, as well as the knowledge of those magical items she would need to unmask her husband's treachery and regain her proper place in the world."

"The great golden cup to carry water to the thirsty dog which guards the way." Severus held up fingers as he named them. "The serpent-marked coin, held in a locket to keep her hands free, to pay the ferryman who will take her across the moat. The silver sword set with rubies, to cut

through the thicket of brambles, and the wand made of elder wood, along with the magical spellbook into which is bound the memory of its creator, to dispel the enchantment which locks the door behind which await her crown and the ring of her rank. And, of course, first and foremost, the magical child who can find these items among a thousand like them, the little girl with the golden eyes named Topaz." He paused, struck by a new thought. "Is Topaz perhaps—"

"Her lost daughter?" Narcissa applauded lightly. "Well spotted. And she can see such things because she is kin to both the one who hid them and the one who seeks them. But that is fiction, and I believe you still have questions to be answered about the world around us."

"Yes. Of course." Severus shook his head, trying to bring himself out of the moment of glee he had experienced on finding that his most cherished guess about his favorite book series was the correct one. "What did Kyla's counterpart do with her news? What could she have done, if she was, as she thought, a Muggle, without even the knowledge that magic was real?"

"A difficult proposition, to be sure." Narcissa nodded thoughtfully. "But one need not necessarily know that magic is real to locate a witch or a wizard. And Danger knew of one such wizard, from her dreams of the group called the Marauders, who remained both living and free to act, and who would have the strongest of reasons to help her."

"Ah." Severus exhaled in satisfaction as the last pieces of the puzzle fell into place. "Lupin. Or as it seems he now styles himself, Gray. Was that simply a pun on 'Black', or is there some deeper meaning?"

"'Granger' was the original surname of the sisters." Narcissa smiled sweetly at Severus's muffled groan. "Yes, it explains the nickname rather neatly, does it not? So they simply clipped that short, and altered those first names which might be remarked or remembered. Unfortunately, they could not so easily change what the children called them. And on an outing to Diagon Alley, approximately a year after Harry Potter vanished, Lucius passed near enough to a man carrying a little boy on his shoulders to hear the child address his seeming father as 'Padfoot'."

"A year?" Severus frowned. "I had thought it was longer. Or did Lucius manage to hold them captive here for some time before his death?"

"He lost sight of them, rather, and only picked up their traces a year later." Narcissa settled her hands in her lap. "When my Draco was four, Harry coming near to it, and Hermione—as her name was then—not quite five. But how interesting that you should bring up Lucius's death." Her eyes lost focus, seeming to gaze into the past. "No official question has ever been raised, but I have often had the feeling that a great many people wonder about that death. And yet, though it was not truly an accident, it was surely not a murder."

Trying to make sense of this, Severus tracked back through the conversation, and stopped at a rather unlikely trio of names. "The children?" he hazarded, ready to be told he was wrong.

Narcissa only nodded. "The children," she confirmed. "Lucius threatened to strike Draco, at which the others took offense." Her smile turned predatory. "Children of three or four may not weigh

very much, but they can generate a great deal of speed over a short distance. And force, or so I am informed, depends far more on velocity than it does on mass."

"This is true." Severus summoned the image of Lucius Malfoy on a collision course with a mantelpiece, courtesy of the impact of two small children against his legs, and found it very good. "But how did it happen that you invited them to stay?"

"I had not intended to." Narcissa's eyes grew misty. "I had meant only to ask them—beg them, if necessary—to take my child away from here, to raise him in the same strength their own children had found. When they learned that Lucius was dead..." She sighed deeply. "Danger and Carrie made the offer first. 'Let us stay with you,' they said to me. 'You deserve to find happiness too.' And they were right."

"They hardly lost by the bargain." Severus glanced around the pleasant little grove. "Who would expect to find The Boy Who Lived *here*?"

"No one." With a brief headshake, Narcissa brought herself visibly back to the present. "And if our hopes for the immediate future are fulfilled, no one ever will. You know the truth now, Severus, and you are already in place at Hogwarts. Will you help us defend our children?"

"Gladly—but against what?"

"Not what." Narcissa reached across and laid two fingers on his left arm. "Whom."

Severus allowed himself one brief, vicious oath. "When?"

"As far as we can tell, within the week." Narcissa smiled briefly. "Or do you not think he would find delicious irony in restoring himself to a body, and destroying the child who so nearly destroyed him, ten years to the night after such things first occurred?"

whydoyouneedtoknow
FanficAuthors.net

The Raven and the Writing Desk

Chapter 4

31 October
Hogwarts Castle

"He's faking."

Ron looked doubtfully at the very flat form of Professor Quirrell, then back at Mal. "How d'you know?"

"He went down wrong." Mal spoke in a rapid undertone to carry below the screaming which filled the Great Hall. "Too rigid. If he'd really passed out, he would've been limp. It's fake."

"But why would he fake passing out because of a troll?" Jean asked just before Professor Dumbledore's firecrackers restored silence.

Henry's eyes were half-lidded, his expression abstracted. Clearly he was thinking his hardest. "Either because there isn't any troll," he said under the noise of students getting to their feet and prefects calling for their Houses to follow them, "or because he's got something to do with it."

Mal shook his head as they joined the line of Gryffindor first years. "Can't be because there isn't one. It'd get figured out too fast, and too many questions'd get asked. So he's got something to do with it—probably he let it in himself—but why?"

"I don't—" Ron stopped, memories of some of his mother's tirades against the twins flooding through his mind. "It's a distraction," he said. "There's something else he wants, somewhere in the castle. He needs everyone out of the way to get at it. Students in their dorms, teachers in the dungeons—"

Jean gasped. "The third-floor corridor! He's trying to get in there! Whatever that dog is guarding, he must want it—we should get a teacher—"

"They'd just chase us off to the dorms." Henry glanced around. The line of students, with Percy and a sixth-year girl at its head, was just passing through a five-way intersection. "Perfect. Quick, everyone—"

Almost faster than Ron's eyes could follow, his friend darted out of line, towards what looked like a solid stone corner, where the sixth corridor would have been if one had existed—

Without a sound, Henry's hurtling form vanished through the stone.

"Guess one does," Ron muttered, and followed where Henry had led, Mal and Jean on his heels. A breath of cool washed over him, like walking through a ghost, and then he was in a narrow, dank passageway, Henry already several yards ahead of him.

"How do you know where all this stuff is?" he asked when he'd caught up with his friend. "The passages, and the kitchens, and I've never seen you miss a trick staircase..."

"My dad and Jean's loved exploring while they were at Hogwarts." Henry grinned briefly over his shoulder at his cousin. "They even made a map of all the stuff they found, and enchanted it to show where people are within the castle. Filch took it off them their seventh year, though... wonder if he still has it? We should check his office sometime..."

A flight of stairs, and then another, and the little party slowed to a walk, Mal peering through each slit window they passed, then murmuring a few words to Jean. "He's got better eyes than I do, and she's got just about a perfect memory," Henry informed Ron, who nodded. He'd known about the memory already, and the eyes should be obvious to anyone who'd ever picked up Henry's glasses by mistake.

Finally Jean patted her hand against a section of stone, and Mal put his shoulder against it and heaved. It grated a little, then stopped. Henry and Ron ranged themselves one on either side of the blond boy, and on Henry's count of three they shoved.

The resulting sound was very like one of the twins' explosions, Ron thought, but at least they'd got out of the passage safely. Besides, there was little need for subtlety now. The door to the mysterious third-floor corridor, through which they'd peeked in a nighttime exploration a few weeks ago, stood wide open, with growls in triple harmony coming from beyond it.

"Just what I wanted to spend my Halloween doing," he said under his breath, dusting off his robes and following his friends to the threshold. "Working out how to get past a big, nasty, three-headed dog..."

"That wasn't there before," said Henry, pointing to a harp sitting in one corner of the room, beyond the opened trapdoor over which the dog stood, its threefold growls rising in volume as six eyes spotted these new interlopers. "Wonder if it means something?"

"Orpheus!" The word wasn't one Ron knew, but Jean was beaming as if she'd found a thirteenth use for dragon's blood. "Mal, do you have—"

"Never travel without it." Mal reached inside his robes and drew out the slender wooden pipe Ron had seen him play a few times. "Let's see now, lullabies for puppy dogs..."

"Orpheus was the greatest musician of all time, in the old stories," Jean explained, drawing Henry and Ron back from the door as Mal began to play. "When he went down to the underworld to rescue his wife, he played his music to the dog that guarded the way—the *three-headed* dog—and it was so beautiful that all three heads fell asleep."

"But that's just a story," Ron objected.

Then he looked back into the room.

Two of the heads had already sunk to the floor, eyes shut, growls replaced by snores. The third was gaping, in the middle of an enormous, sharp-toothed yawn.

"Or maybe not," he finished weakly. "So what're we supposed to do, then?"

31 October
Hesperus Manor

For all that his life had taught him the value of waiting patiently, John Gray had never learned to like it. Far less did he like waiting patiently for the children he loved, the sons and daughter who had come to him as precious gifts, to walk into a deadly trap, to be used as its bait.

But the last nine years of his life had also taught him the value of his wife's most unusual dreams.

"Verse," he muttered, skimming his eyes down the parchment scroll he held. "Why did it have to be verse?"

"You would have preferred whirling colors and snatches of words?" asked Danger from her seat across the room, her hands busy with her knitting, her eyes fixed on a similar scroll which hung in the air before her. "Be thankful for small mercies. Like the fact that we still get these at all."

"I know, I know." John sighed and returned his attention to the cryptic lines.

Upon the night when ten years gone
A deathly spell went far awry,
The one whose life that night was won
Must win his own life—else, he'll die.
His friends may help him reach so far,
But those who're grown, and love him dear,
Must wait and watch, in case they mar
The moment which has brought him here.
Alone the raven may pursue,
Until the spells have all been cast—
Ignore this ban, that night you'll rue,
For He Who Lived shall die at last.
But if he stands as he's been taught,
And faces danger fearlessly,
The flight from death shall fall to naught;
Dark warrior goes forever free.

"One of the most emphatic 'stay out of it' messages we've ever received." John chuckled darkly. "I can only imagine how well Ryan's taking that. There's a reason you gave it to Carrie and not to him directly, isn't there?"

"Oh, absolutely." Danger echoed her husband's laugh. "Also a reason she took him over to their

wing of the house before she let him see it. And if I know her, she slapped some heavy-duty soundproofing spells on the room. Otherwise we'd be hearing him all the way over here."

"We still might, if he ever figures out who the raven is meant to be." John managed a stronger laugh this time. "'What do you *mean* , I'm supposed to trust *him* ?'"

31 October
Hesperus Manor

"What do you *mean* , I'm supposed to trust *him* ?" Ryan Black stared at his wife and his cousin in utter shock. "Since when is Sni—" Narcissa's glare cut him off mid-syllable. "All right, all right —*Snape*. Since when is *he* trustworthy with our children's *lives* ?"

"Since Albus Dumbledore says he is, and so does whoever sends Danger her dreams," Carrie snapped back. "And just in case you're forgetting, those dreams are also responsible for the fact that you are sitting here in your comfortable home, worrying about your children, instead of being stuck in a cell in Azkaban with no idea who two of those children even *are* !"

"I know, I know, I *know* —it's just..." Ryan groaned aloud, getting to his feet to pace. "This is *not* what I signed up for," he said to the far wall, pushing off it as he turned. "I wanted to protect them. Keep them safe. Not sit here and *be* safe while they trot blithely into harm's way!"

"If you will notice, we keep them safest tonight by remaining aloof until all is said and done." Narcissa rolled up her own copy of the prophecy and set it aside. "And since these prophecies have never yet failed us, I have the strangest feeling that something else is troubling you, cousin."

Ryan glared at her over his shoulder. "I should have known it was a mistake getting involved with you," he grumbled as Narcissa returned the glare serenely. "What gods did I offend to get stuck in the same house with not one, not two, but *three* women, *all* of whom can read my mind?"

Carrie laughed. "Better make it three and a half," she said when the cousins turned to look at her. "Pearl's developing her skills early."

With a laugh of his own, Ryan dropped down on the window seat. "True, she is. All right, then. Though it's kind of hard to pinpoint. It's just..." He shrugged. "If the prophecy's right, we're getting rid of the Dark Snarker for good this time. And once *he's* off the map, we can round up the rat without any trouble. But what happens next?" He spread his hands. "What do we do once we don't have to hide anymore?"

"I assume we stop hiding." Carrie frowned at the look on her husband's face. "Did you have another idea?"

"Not an idea. Not as such. I was just thinking about what it's going to do to the kids." Ryan shook his head. "None of them have ever known a world where we weren't hiding, except maybe Mal, and him only just. It's not fair to them, is it, what we had to do?" His mouth twisted in familiar,

bitter lines, like the expressions he had so often worn in the first year or two after his assisted escape, as he thought over what had happened to him and to his friends. "We've done our best, but was our best really good enough?"

"Ah yes, how these children suffer," said Narcissa coolly before Carrie could respond. "Clearly we dress some of them in rags and give them out-of-the-way corners filled with dust and spiders in which to sleep, while others have the finest clothes money can buy and sumptuous bedchambers for their very own."

Carrie snickered and took up the thread. "Obviously we make some of them work all day long, do every last chore around the house here, and the others never have to do anything. And you know how much we encourage the ones we like best to bully the rest of them."

"And we ourselves, of course, constantly project our ill-will towards their parents onto the unfortunate ones," Narcissa took over once more, inclining her head to Carrie in thanks. "Refusing them all knowledge of their families and their pasts. While the fortunate ones, in their turn, are constantly told of those families and those pasts as the impossible model of perfection up to which they must strive to live..."

Ryan cast his eyes up to heaven. "At the risk of repeating myself," he said to the ceiling, "why?"

31 October

Under Hogwarts Castle

Ron stared at the line of seven bottles, feeling a rising dread. He'd never been any good at the sort of puzzle Henry'd just read off the scroll. From the look on his friend's face, neither was Henry. Mal and Jean, he was certain, would both be very good at them, but Jean lay unconscious two chambers behind them, the sacrifice he'd had to make to win the chess game (at her snarled insistence when he'd objected), and Mal was a chamber behind that, having discovered when he tried to take off on a broomstick after the flying key that the Devil's Snare had cracked a couple of his ribs before Henry's fire, hastily conjured at Jean's shouted instructions, had frightened it back.

"What do we do?" he asked.

"Mum always says, just take these things slow." Henry unrolled the scroll all the way and sat right down on the floor with it. "All right, so here's something certain. The biggest bottle and the littlest one won't kill us if we drink them, so that means they're not poison. They could still be the go-ahead potion, the go-back one, or just wine, but at least we know one thing they're not." He glanced up at Ron. "Got a quill on you?"

"Somewhere. Let me look." Ron rummaged in a pocket, and only saw the movement on the small table out of the corner of his eye. "What the—"

He jumped back as one of the bottles tipped forward and smashed on the floor.

"What did you do—" Henry began furiously.

"That's not me!" Ron held his hands out to the sides as evidence. "It's something else—"

Henry's eyes widened, and he pointed. Ron turned to look.

The stone floor had begun to dissolve where the bottle's contents had splashed. Curls of steam were rising from the crater.

"I think," said Henry unsteadily, "that was probably one of the poison ones."

Along the table, a second bottle took the plunge, this one sending up a hissing sound reminiscent of a whole nest of snakes being disturbed at once. Ron edged back, away from flying droplets, and caught a momentary glimpse of something familiar scurrying behind the bottles. A long pink tail, a whisk of gray fur—

"Scabbers?"

A third bottle fell to the floor, going up in a burst of fire. Ron yelped and shaded his eyes.

When he could see again, two of the other bottles lay on their sides, sharp-smelling streams of pale green glugging out of them. Of the last two to remain upright, one, a squat vessel to the left of the line, had been shoved all the way to the edge of the table nearest Ron. The other, a tiny vial barely big enough for a few drops, had been pushed away from him.

Towards the black flames which barred the door leading onwards.

"Scabbers?" Henry repeated, standing up. "Did your *rat* just solve the puzzle for us?"

"I don't know!" Ron skirted the ankle-deep hole in the floor and picked up the tiny vial. "How would he even get down here? Or know which one was which?"

"Maybe he followed us," Henry suggested, though with a look on his face which said he didn't think much of his own words. "Or maybe you saw something else and thought you saw him. Who knows. Do you think this one's right, then?"

"Do we have a choice?" Ron weighed the vial carefully in his palm. "There's hardly anything in here. I suppose only one person's meant to go on."

Henry shrugged. "We've come this far together. Flip a Knut for who drinks first?"

Ron's call of heads, much to his consternation, came up on top, so that he was the first to take the tiniest of possible sips from the vial. A shudder ran through him as ice seemed to flood his veins, and he barely managed to hold onto the vial long enough to pass it over to Henry before he dashed through the black flame, praying the potion would last—

Magic caught at him and snatched him off his feet, pinning him against the far wall before he

could shout. "Well, well, well," said the voice he was half-expecting. "What *do* we have here?"

"A *spare* ," hissed a different voice, as Ron's eyes cleared enough to see Professor Quirrell, his face alight with unholy excitement, his turban slightly askew and vibrating in time with the words. "Not important. Kill him. "

"NO!"

Quirrell whirled. Ron collapsed, regaining just enough ability of motion on the way down that he landed on his feet rather than his face or his backside. His chest burned and he felt like he might throw up, but he fought the feeling down.

Silhouetted against the black flames, his fingers pressed against his forehead, Henry stared at Quirrell, his face unreadable. "No," he said more quietly. "It's not him you want."

His thumb sketched a complicated sign against his skin. A moment later, that skin began to change, turning paler and paler, like coffee into which more and more milk was being poured. The change spread outwards from that initial spot, spreading across face, arms, hands, until the black-haired boy whose green eyes had never left Quirrell was nearly as fair-skinned as Ron was himself.

He was also frighteningly familiar.

"It's not him you want," said Harry Potter, lowering his hands to his sides. "It's me."

31 October

Under Hogwarts Castle

In the shadows, Severus forced himself to stillness. It was one thing to recognize a look in the eye, a tilt of the head, a trick of handwriting, or to hear from Narcissa the tale of how a tiny boy had been rescued and disguised. It was quite another to see a copy of the face he'd hated above all others, dominated by the eyes he'd loved so dearly. And what he would now have to watch ranked high, as it always had, on his list of personal nightmares.

But if the words of the prophecy-poem were to be believed, this was the only way to victory. To watch, and wait, and allow this child to face his own dangers. And to that end—

He stabbed a Silencer onto Ronald Weasley as the boy struggled upright, then Summoned him across the room, adding a lift to the spell so that no skidding heels would give the game away. "Stay still," he said in his lowest tones as the boy arrived at his side, adding a grasp on the shoulder tight enough to enforce his edict. "He must do this himself."

Quirrell was unwinding his turban now, turning to face away from Harry. Ron's mouth fell open as what lay beneath that turban was revealed, and the words his lips shaped made Severus thankful the Silencer was still in effect. He felt none too steady himself at the sight of his one-time Master,

but found strength in the feeble twinges sent out by his Dark Mark. Voldemort's continued existence was a blow, yes, but the Dark Lord was incredibly weak in this form. One strike, at the proper time, and the horror would be finished forever.

"Courageous, but foolish, Harry," Voldemort whispered, his red eyes fixed on the face of the boy before him. "Stepping out of concealment this way, showing me how you have been hiding all these years. I had wondered, when dear Quirrell crossed my path and brought me up to date on the news from home, what could have become of you, how you could have been kept out of sight so well. But now I see—a simple change in skin tone, with so-called parents to match—"

"There's nothing so-called about my parents," Harry fired back, his eyes blazing up.

"Then you deny that you are the son of James and Lily Potter?" Voldemort's tone was light, almost playful, as if he were teasing Harry from across a schoolyard. "You deny what they gave you, their lives, their deaths?"

"No." Harry's hands were fisted tightly in his robes. "I've always known who I was born, and what that meant I might have to do. But I also know who I've grown up to be. And I think my parents—all my parents—would be proud of me for that."

"Perhaps you are right." Voldemort nodded Quirrell's head, giving Snape a momentary glimpse of his colleague's face, eyes shut, mouth slack. Beside him, Ron shuddered briefly, but the boy's wand was in his hand, though Severus doubted he knew many spells which would be useful here. "And in their memory, I believe I shall allow you to live. Provided, of course, that you do me one small service." A pale hand swept towards the back of the room, indicating the standing mirror located there, with the carved letters marching around its top. "This is the Mirror of Erised. It shows each person who looks into it their heart's true desire. Hidden within it at the moment is a small, insignificant object—a stone, translucent red, of a size to lie in your palm—"

"That turns things into gold and would let you live forever," Harry interrupted. Voldemort raised the place where an eyebrow would have been, and Harry snorted. "I have cousins," he said shortly. "They like to read, and they like to talk. And even if they didn't, I still wouldn't do it. The answer's no."

"You refuse?" Voldemort's voice had gone to its softest, most persuasive tone, which Snape knew as the Dark Lord at his most dangerous. "Such a simple favor, and you refuse?"

Harry squared his shoulders. "Someone doing a 'simple favor' for you nearly ruined my entire family's lives," he said, staring disdainfully into Voldemort's flattened face. "It killed my first parents, it sent my dad to Azkaban when he hadn't done anything, it left my mum and my uncle all alone in the world. And that's not even mentioning the person who did the 'favor' and got it blamed on my dad instead, who's been hiding as a pet rat for ten years because he had to fake his own death to make it work the way he wanted it to."

Severus felt rather than heard Ron's inhalation of shock.

"People doing what you wanted wrecked my aunts' and my cousins' lives too," Harry went on, warming to his topic. "Oh, not always in the same way, sometimes not even in a way that would show, but they *did*. And things only ever got better for them when the people who followed you, who did what you wanted, your 'simple favors', were gone. I may not be the brightest person in my year, but I can tell the difference between a good idea and a bad one." He lifted his chin, his eyes bright and clear. "I won't help you."

"Very well." Voldemort flexed Quirrell's wrist, bringing his wand into his hand. "On your own head be it."

Time seemed to warp, slowing in one spot, speeding in another. Severus could watch the wand rise onto its target, could see the thin lips opening for the first of the two words that would cause Harry Potter's death, all while his muscles refused to respond to his desires and his thoughts raced uselessly around their track in his mind—*such a stupid child, a brave one but stupid, this gets us no closer to our goal—*

"*Avada Kedavra* ," hissed the voice of Lord Voldemort.

The Dark Lord will simply find another to give him the Stone, you could have cooperated and then held it hostage against your own life—

The green bolt of light burst forth from the wand's tip, accompanied by a sound like a great rushing wind.

Why must it all be for nothing?

As the Killing Curse flung Harry backwards across the room, Voldemort's red eyes rolled upwards in his head, and Quirrell staggered a step—forward, not back. "Master?" he said in tremulous tones. "Master, what—"

Severus's paralysis ended. "Now," he breathed to the boy at his side, snapping off the Silencer, and bolted out of hiding.

He might not have been able to save Lily's son, but he could, at the very least, avenge him.

whydoyouneedtoknow
FanficAuthors.net

The Raven and the Writing Desk

Chapter 5

31 October

Under Hogwarts Castle

Ron wasn't sure about anything, except that he couldn't be sure about anything. Henry, who'd always been so disdainful of the whole legend that had grown up around Harry Potter, now turned out to *be* Harry Potter—which probably meant his 'dad' was Sirius Black, but that didn't make any sense, Sirius Black should have raised Harry Potter to be Dark and Henry manifestly wasn't—and a face on the *back* of Quirrell's head, underneath that stupid turban, well, that would explain why he never took it off—a face that, judging by the things Henry-Harry had said to it and it to him, must be You-Know-Who himself, hanging around as some sort of ghost that could possess people —

Spellfire and shouting woke him from his momentary trance. Snape and Quirrell were dueling furiously, Quirrell whining for his Master between spells, Snape's face set in a mask of anger the likes of which Ron had never seen. Half the time he wasn't even bothering to speak his spells aloud, simply slashing and swiping his wand in great circles and lines. Dimly Ron recalled the speech Snape had given on the first day of class—funny he should be so dismissive of wand-waving, when he was so good at it on his own account. Quirrell, unfortunately, despite the frightened face he'd shown to his students, was holding his own in the duel, might even be a hair the better of the two.

"I have to help him," Ron muttered, barely aware he was speaking aloud. "But how? I don't know any decent spells, I barely even got levitation to work—"

Movement by his foot drew his eye downward. A hand-sized ball of gray fur waved a paw frantically at him.

"Scabbers," Ron breathed, dropping to one knee to pick up his pet—or was it? Doubtfully, he raised the rat to eye level.

"Was that you he meant?" he asked, flicking his eyes towards Henry-Harry where he lay crumpled on the other side of the room. "When he was talking about someone who did You-Know-Who a favor, and got it blamed on his dad, and then ran away and hid?"

Scabbers winced, but nodded. Then he rose onto his hind legs and made a motion with his maimed paw which could not be mistaken, even without a tiny wand to go along—a swish and flick as textbook-correct as if Jean had been the one to do it.

"You want me to—to levitate you?" Ron stared at his erstwhile pet. "What good will that—"

Between one word and the next, he understood.

"Ready when you are," he said, standing back up.

The pointed gray head nodded hard.

Ron took aim and concentrated. *It's Le-vi-OH-sa*, Jean's voice recited inside his mind, *not Le-vi-oh-SAR...*

"*Wingardium leviosa*," he whispered, executing his own perfect swish and flick.

With the tiniest of squeaks, Scabbers rose into the air.

Edging along the wall, careful never to come into the line of sight of either of the duelers, Ron waved his wand cautiously back and forth, wafting his rat towards them, aiming for the top of Quirrell's bald head, between the two faces. One more moment—just one more—one more—

Now!

He snapped his wrist, ending the spell. Scabbers plummeted from his height, squealing madly, and landed directly atop a pallid expanse of skin, paws already scrabbling. Quirrell screamed at the unexpected contact, lowering his wand for an instant to claw at whatever had just dropped onto his head.

An instant was all that Snape needed.

"*Sectumsempra!*" bellowed the Potions Master, and Quirrell collapsed without another sound as a massive gash appeared across his throat and chest, gushing blood across his robes and the floor.

Ron bolted back into the shadows to be noisily, thoroughly sick.

The inevitable miserable interval later, he became aware of hands on his shoulders, holding him clear of the puddle of sick on the floor, hands with a surprising strength in their tiny, slender fingers. "J-J-Jeanie?"

"This once, you get to call me that," said Jean, easing him back to lean against one of the stone walls and handing him a cup of water. "Rinse your mouth and spit, and then drink a little when you feel ready."

Obediently Ron rinsed and spat, and sat back cradling the water in both hands, looking his friend over doubtfully. She seemed much the same as ever, except for the lump visible on her forehead just below her hairline. "Are you," he began, lost his nerve, and finished with a cowardly, "all right?"

"Aunt Carrie says I will be, and she's the Healer." Jean touched her head with a rueful smile. "Though maybe I should have let you find some other way to win that game after all. This *hurts*. Still, it worked, so it wasn't entirely stupid."

"Right." Ron took a tiny sip of water and let it soothe his throat. "But what I meant was..." There

wasn't, he discovered, a good way to say it, only more and less bad ones. "Are you really Jeanie? Jean Gray? Is that who you are?"

"Yes." Jean settled herself on the floor beside him, her brown eyes steady on his face. "It is. That isn't the name I was born with, any more than Mal's is—" A small motion of her hand indicated her cousin, across the room, gazing into the standing mirror You-Know-Who had pointed out earlier. "—but it's the name I have now, and it means the person who I am. And who I am is your friend." She looked away for a moment. "If you're still willing to have me, after I've been a part of lying to you so much. I am sorry for that, Ron, truly I am, we all are, but we didn't have any choice, it could have meant all our lives if anyone else had known about us—"

"It doesn't matter," said Ron, and found as he said it that it didn't. "Not when Henry, Harry, whoever he is, not when he's—" His voice squeezed off before he could utter the final word.

"I'm not sure he is, though." Jean pointed. "Look what Meghan's doing."

Ron looked, and then looked again, and felt his throat tightening once more, but this time, instead of sickness or sorrow, it was hope. Little Meghan Black was leaning over the boy who had been, who *was*, her brother, and inch by inch, moment by moment, was lifting him into a sitting position, was talking to him as though she expected him to respond—

Black-lashed lids fluttered, lifted, blinked once or twice, and green eyes focused painfully on Meghan's face. She grinned and reached over to one side, coming up with a pair of round-framed glasses, which were taken from her with great care by a pale-skinned hand.

Harry Potter was alive.

31 October
Under Hogwarts Castle

Severus wasn't sure he had ever experienced so many emotional shocks in so short a period, not even on the day he'd seen his dearest friend Sorted into the House he loathed above all others. First to find out Harry Potter lived, then to see him, apparently, die—to kill his killer with the help of a barely-trained boy and a rat, and then to discover that such vengeance had been unnecessary after all—

"Excuse me, sir," said Mal's voice at his elbow. Severus turned to discover the boy holding out his cupped hands, in which rested a glistening scarlet crystal. "Would you take this?"

Momentarily immune to further shock, Severus simply nodded and slipped the Philosopher's Stone into an interior pocket of his robes. "So you have no wish for gold or everlasting life?" he said, moving over slightly on the bit of fallen pillar he was using as a seat, inviting Mal without words to share it. "That was the criterion placed on the Stone's enchantment, you know. Only one who wished to find it, but *not* use it, could receive it from the Mirror."

"Gold, I've got. Two family fortunes, Malfoy and Black, both of them at my fingertips whenever I want." Mal grinned briefly as he sat, a hint of his mother's wicked sparkle lighting his eyes. "Not that Mum would let me do anything stupid with it. And everlasting life... wouldn't that get boring, after a while? You'd run out of things to do, and start looking for new ones, and that's how people go bad or mad. I'd rather just live *my* life, thanks. Especially without Moldy-snore to bother us any longer."

Severus had to lean back against the chamber wall to support himself through his fit of laughter. To hear Lucius Malfoy's son calling his father's Master by the most disrespectful of nicknames, to see him unwilling to fall prey to the most common temptations of the world, would in itself have made a fitting ending to this night of wonders, to say nothing of the rest of what had already occurred.

"Besides," Mal added casually. "If I really want a Philosopher's Stone, I'll make my own."

"Not if your grades in my practical classes remain at their current level, you won't," Severus countered immediately. "Do not think I haven't noticed you checking Miss Gray's work to see how closely yours matches."

Mal looked stung. "But Professor, I thought teamwork was supposed to be a good thing!"

"Teamwork, Mr. Black, is not another word for cheating..."

From across the room, Narcissa watched them with a small, fond smile.

31 October

Under Hogwarts Castle

"You did it, love," said Carrie, helping her son sip from a goblet of potion she'd conjured—or *should I be Aletha now, and think of him as my foster child? So many people, so many choices...*

"Yeah, but that means it's going to start." Harry leaned back against the comfortingly furry form of Padfoot the dog, eyes half-shut, complexion paler even than his natural tone (which looked, to her unaccustomed eyes, distinctly unnatural, especially compared to Meghan, who was cuddled against his side). "Everything we managed to get out of, get away from, it's all going to start up now, worse than before. All that rubbish about The Boy Who Lived, or maybe The Boy Who Lived *Again*, or whatever stupid nickname they decide to hang on me this time, and I don't *want* it—"

Padfoot barked once, looking up at John, who sat down beside him and eased his arm behind Harry. A moment later, Ryan—or *is it Sirius again?*—had emerged from the canine shape. "So why should you have it?" he asked, grinning in the insouciant style which had captivated female hearts throughout his years at Hogwarts. "Why should any of us? Cissy, Carrie my love, I finally got that thought of mine to hold still, and it's a doozy."

"Enlighten us," said Danger in her best imitation of Narcissa's most languid pureblood tones,

making Narcissa herself cover a smile with one hand. "If you would be so kind."

"Why should we stop hiding?" Carrie's husband spread his hands wide. "Why should we ever stop?"

"Because this isn't who we really are?" hazarded John, but Carrie could see him thinking under the words.

"Who says?" Ryan snorted. "Come on, Moony, you're not going to tell me you turned into a different person just because you've finally got a name that doesn't sound like somebody pulled it out of the listings of Werewolves R Us! We've been building the lives we have now for the last ten years. We've got friends, and a good home, and work that really matters, that makes a difference in the world. What have Harry Potter and Sirius Black and Remus Lupin got? A whole bunch of notoriety and reporters hammering down their doors. Poor sods."

"So we would continue as we have been." Carrie examined the idea and found it good. "The Blacks and the Grays, and the other Blacks." She glanced at Narcissa, who was nodding slowly. "Living at Hesperus Manor. Doing our jobs. Raising our children, or visiting them at school." Another glance located Mal, in earnest converse with—*well, well*. Her courtesy nephew was apparently debating points, and holding his own, with one Professor Severus Snape. *We'll have to see what that comes to, if anything...*

"And as far as the rest of the world is concerned, nothing happened here tonight," said Danger, turning to smile at Ron and Jean, who were making their slow way forward, listening with every evidence of interest. "People already think Voldemort's been dead for the last ten years. I see no reason they should ever have to know anything else."

"You mean—" Green eyes lit up with hope. "I can still be—"

Carrie leaned forward, kissed his forehead atop the lightning-bolt scar, and traced a symbol on it with her thumb. "You are my son, Henry James Black, and let no one tell you differently," she said as the wash of warm brown spread outwards from that spot once more, making Meghan squeal with glee. "Only *how* did you learn that counterspell, young man? I'm sure no one here taught it to you."

Henry grinned. "I'm the son of a Marauder," he announced proudly. "We have ways ."

"A Marauder?" asked Ron, sitting down between Carrie and Danger. "Fred and George have this thing they call the Marauder's Map..."

John and Ryan exchanged looks.

From an interview with Narcissa Black, published in the issue of Witch Weekly dated 9 August, 1992

"I was very happy, of course, to see the confession written by Peter Pettigrew and owed to the Auror Office made public this past autumn, but it was old news to me. I've been in contact with my cousin Sirius for several years now, most recently when he wrote to congratulate me on my remarriage, to an old schoolmate of his. He found himself a pleasant little rabbit hole to dive down, and he's been raising Harry Potter as James and Lily would have wanted—safe, happy, and above all, free.

"I have sometimes asked Sirius if he and Harry would consider making a public return to the wizarding world. The politest answer I have ever received is, 'When a pack of Exploding Snap cards plays croquet with Fwoopers and knarls.' Even now that the truth about his actions of eleven years ago is known, I fear my cousin has been too badly injured by the readiness of the public to believe the worst, and has no desire to subject himself and his godson to an endless siege of reporters.

"So, to answer the question that was asked: No, I don't believe I'll be seeing Sirius Black or Harry Potter strolling through my door any time soon—Henry Black, you wipe your *feet* when you come into this house, and the paws of that great monstrosity you call a dog as well! And tell your Uncle Severus and Aunt Carrie to find a stopping point for whatever they're brewing with your cousins, Danger says dinner will be ready as soon as your Uncle John gets home—I beg your pardon, where were we? Oh yes, Sirius and Harry. To tell the truth, I wouldn't be surprised if no one in the wizarding world ever heard from them again."

And no one ever did.